ROBERT HOLCZER
January 10 & April 29, 1996; March 17, 1999

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Tape 1, Side A

Q: This is Arwen Donahue. It's January 10th, 1996 and I'm here with Mr. Robert Holczer in Paris, Kentucky and this is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview tape one, side A. And Mr., Mr. Holczer, if we can just begin by you telling me your name at birth and the place of birth and your date of birth.

A: I, my name is Robert Holczer. I was born in Budapest in 1929, August 31.

Q: And, will you tell me something about your mother and your father, their, their names and their family backgrounds?

A: My father was, my father's name is Lajos Holczer. He comes from a very poor working class family, a Jewish family that was almost totally assimilated into the Proletarian environment. They lived on the outskirts of Budapest in a tenement without any water and electricity. My grandmother was practically the sole supporter of the family until the children got a little bit older because my grandfather was a, what you would call a *lumpen proletary (ph)* person who did not really care too much about father responsibilities. The, so my father was the oldest one who made it into adult life, there was somebody else ahead of him but died of tuberculosis. And he has always been a great support to his brothers and sisters. He was a working man, he has always worked for other people. Eventually, he became kind of a, an amateur druggist, worked for companies but he did not have a formal education and after the war, he joined a co-op. He rose to kind of a mid-level managerial position but he basically was always just a working man. He never went beyond the second grade and he taught himself how to read and write and everything else. He had exceptional qualities in math and law. My mother[1] comes from a small northern Hungarian town, Vacz. This is where the Danube turns suddenly south and she comes from a middle class family, Orthodox, very religious. She had a brother and a sister, both of them who died in World War II. The sister was deported, the brother died in labor camp. Her entire family from Vacz were, was deported to Auschwitz and died there. My mother never had to work, basically, my father was always making enough money and she enjoyed just being a housewife. Anything else?

Q: Did you say how many brothers and sisters your father had?

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1 Cornelia Oestreicher

A: My father had thirteen brothers and sisters, yes, and he was the oldest one to survive, to grow up, because his older brother died, very early. So, the burden of supporting the family was always on him. So he was the provider type and my mother had no basic responsibility. She was basically what you would call a petit-bourgeois lady and I always admired my father's values more than my mother's but that doesn't mean I didn't love my mother. My mother also survived the war with me.

Q: How did your father and your mother meet?

A: My father and mother met, so that, my father was working for a wholesale drug distribution firm. By drug I, we mean a cosmetic supply firm, but in Hungary they were called druggists, making cologne water, things like that. It had nothing to do with what we call drugs today. It was not a pharmaceutical company. And my, at that time, in Hungary and in Europe, it was the custom of middle-class families to send their daughters to secretarial school and then have them work for a few years for some firm, hoping that they're going to catch a husband. And my mother caught my father there, which was very much to the dislike of her family because my father, they felt, was much below their class and they made him feel that way in all his life. Of course, I cannot really say what would have happened after World War II because my mother's entire family was wiped out, practically. Only a few people who lived in Budapest remained. So, but I resented them for a very simple reason, that they looked down on my father who I thought was a, was a very, was a man of integrity and, and hard-working, a good human being.

Q: Were they, how did they treat you as a child?

A: I had a very strange relationship with my mother's family, especially my grandparents because they were very religious and I was born irreligious and whenever I had to visit with them they forced me to wear a hat even in the middle of the summer and eat a certain kind of very strict kosher food, go to the synagogue every night and pray and, and in general, they considered me some kind of a, what they call in Yiddish a *shaygets*, somebody who is kind of just an outsider because I never really went along with their, with their religious rules. I also resented the fact that my grandmother was kind of a, of a, of a very angry person. I felt that, that the way she treated others and the way she treated my grandfather, I resented that. I didn't like to go there and my mother, of course, always wanted me to go and visit and I have, I just finally decided to take my revenge so I would not have to visit anymore. And one day, this was, I must have been about eleven or so, I went to a butcher shop, got a huge ham hock and got out and when the people went to the synagogue Friday night, I was eating it without a hat and pretty soon they were reporting it to her and they were coming and that was my last visit. They immediately sent me back to Budapest and I never had to visit again.

Q: Was your mother angry with you?

A: Yes. My mother was very angry, but my father and I, we always had some kind of an understanding. Even when he scolded me for something that, that had something to do with religion to go along with my mother, I sensed in his voice that it was not serious, that he just did it for my mother's sake. And I also found out since, between 1948 and 1950, I went to Israel, I was in Israel which we will come back later, when I came back and I spoke Hebrew, I realize that my father doesn't know how to pray, that he just mumbles the words. He has no idea, what really, how to even pronounce them and he did this all for, for the love of my, my, my mother and I appreciated this, that he put up this pretense but it was an interesting discovery for me, that. So he never, he never really scolded me and he was practically influential after the war to put down his foot and say, forget about kosher anymore, let's just eat what is available. And so we did not have a kosher household anymore.

Q: Now was your father's entire family not very religious, then?

A: Yes, yes, they weren't. They were Jews, they never, they never doubt their Jewishness. They knew they were Jews but they were secular Jews, you know? And interestingly, quite a few of them survived because of the place where they lived. Since they lived in a Proletarian tenement of—city tenement—that was given to people under a certain income who had too many children and not enough income, there, the Communist Party, the illegal Communist Party had a very strong hold on this area and when, then, the World War II came and the Nuremburg laws and everything else, some of these Communist leaders, Communist members, came and actually rescued members of the family. I have an uncle in Hungary and he, for example, was a very good friend of a past Communist prime minister who just died recently because they practically lived side by side. So a great deal of the Hungarian leadership, Communist leadership, came from this tenement. So that helped rescue them. The Communists were the only, the only group you could really turn to, during those terrible years that, that would help you.

Q: So, was religion mainly only recognized in your household on holidays, or . . .

A: Yes. Yes. My, my father always talked to me and said go, you know, to the synagogue, your mother wants you to go and all this and that, but he never really did anything to force me to do whatever with religion. He just asked me to respect my mother's wishes and so I had Bar Mitzvah and that was the last thing that I did. After my Bar Mitzvah I never probably went to synagogue again unless it was a tourist attraction, I just, wanted to see what it is, inside. And, but I never denied my Jewishness so when my grandchildren especially ask me about religion, I say I am a Jew but I'm not Jewish. And they ask me, "How can that be?" And I said, "Well, it's easy."

Q: Did you have any sort of, any sense of faith?

A: No, not really. It's a strange thing that I have never been somebody who believes in the supreme being and so maybe, eventually, my lot, this is going to be difficult, but because they say people who have faith, they die much easier than the ones who don't, but I always

just associated with people who practically felt the same way and it never caused any problems so far in my life, in my sixty-six years. But I can't remember when I really honestly believed in a supreme being. And then of course, the war probably wiped out, if I had any doubts.

Q: Will you say something about your relationship with your father?

A: My relationship with my father was always very good. I [indecipherable], I considered him always my, my example, my hero, and I was very very upset when in 1942, he was taken away and sent to a labor camp in Yugoslavia. And when he came back in 1945, he, of course, I was overwhelmed and in my memory too, even though I spent more time with my mother, a lot more than with my father because he was also a traveling salesman for a long time and I only saw him on weekends, somehow my memory is much more blurred when it comes to my mother than when it comes to my father. My mother, one reason it might be that my mother died in 1970 and my father died in 1980, so he survived ten more years and since we lived in Europe from '74 on, at least for six years I had a lot more contact with him than I would have if I had stayed in the U.S. I always considered him an absolute statue of integrity and, and honesty and he was always looking out for my interests and I, even though when I as an American, had a very nice living, I made a very nice living and I didn't need any, any material, he was still saving and collecting things for us in Hungary and was always giving us a lot of things when we went to visit him and we kept telling him that he should spend it on himself. He, he was just one of the most unselfish people I have ever met in my life.

Q: And you felt this way from the time that you were a small child…

A: Yes, always, always. He was always that way. Just a very simple, very simple man. Very, extremely intelligent, uneducated but a true human being. And with my mother, I always had a little bit of my doubts that she's not as straightforward as my father. And there were little incidents that kind of, as a child, it's amazing how it gets engraved in your mind and you cannot get rid of it. And the thing that I was very, very bitter about, that I could never forgive my mother for, was that while my father was in concentration camp in Yugoslavia, she took a little job and she worked for a drugstore in the center of Budapest. And next to the drugstore was an antique store. Mr. Klein was the name of the man who owned and he liked my mother. My mother was a cute little creature and everybody liked her and so he would wait for her when she closed this shop to escort her home because he lived the same way and I didn't see anything wrong with this, but they noticed how jealous I am of my mother and it's not that I wanted to possess my mother, I just, I was protecting my mother for my father and so he put his arm around my mother and they were looking at me and laughing at how annoyed I became and this picture is constantly in my mind. And I could never forgive my mother for this, that, that she did not realize how hurt I was by playing this silly game. And she was, still she was a good person, she did everything possible to give me a good education and, but, she had a very petit-bourgeois thinking and another thing that somehow stood between the two of us was piano. She decided that I'm going to be a great

piano player and I decided that I have no interest in playing the piano and she would sometimes get so annoyed that I did not practice that she would take a rug-beater and run after me and try to beat me but I was much faster than she was so we were running around the table and then eventually she just broke down and cried that she couldn't catch me but she had this obsession with, with, with piano playing and so again, ever since in World War II, our piano was destroyed. We gave it to somebody for safekeeping and they claimed that the, the bomb got it, whatever, I was glad. She wanted to buy another piano and I said no. When I, when we came up from the cellar after liberation, I said, that's it. I am now a man. I basically rescued my mother more than once during World War II and I said no more piano and I never sat down to play the piano. Never. I never had the urge.

Q: You talked a little bit about your relationship with your mother's family and I was interested in hearing your relationship with your father's family.

A: My father's family was my favorite side of the family. I had a grandmother, a typical Proletarian woman with thirteen children and not much of a husband. And I remember going out and loving every moment of spending time with them because here I came, I was the, the, the second grandchild in the family. There was one older one who, unfortunately, during the war, was killed. So I was kind of the sweetheart of everybody and they were pampering me and taking me to places and my grandmother, I remember, had a tremendous knowledge of how to make beans in at least fifteen different ways. There were beans every time I went out, they had beans, beans, but she was just a marvelous woman, a very warm-hearted, a typical country woman. She came from southern Hungary from a very small village and after raising thirteen children during the day, she left them in the care of my father and then went from door to door selling silk stockings just to add a little bit to the, to the income. The, my father's brothers and sisters were, of course, some of them are only just a few years older than I am, so they were almost like brothers and sisters to me at that time and since there was no money at all in the family, they resorted to somehow, illegal things. I remember I loved ice skating and they said, oh no problem and they took a huge scissor—pair of scissors—and cut a big hole and pushed me through the hole into the ice skating rink, nearby, so we always went ice skating. A lot of things were solved not by very legal ways, but as a child, this was life to me. There were a lot of children in the tenement constantly horsing around and nobody, nobody was constantly bothering me and, and, and disciplining me and getting ahead or going to the synagogue, nothing. It was a great freedom and I just enjoyed it very very much.

Q: Did you have a particularly close relationship with any of your father's siblings?

A: Any of my father's brothers or sisters?

Q: Mmm-hmm.

A: Let's see, did I? No, I really had a very, very good relationship with all of them, with practically all of them. And I cannot really say that one or the other, I liked one particularly

and interestingly, I spent the least time with him. He was a, just kind of a very outstanding figure, a tall, very mascular [sic] man who went to Czechoslovakia during the War, World War II and somehow worked for a shoe factory, which was a very famous shoe factory all over the world, Bata, got married there and came once to visit us and I still remember his visit. I was so impressed with him, with his, there was just an air about this man that impressed me a great deal and, unfortunately, when there was the big uprising, there was a big Slovakian uprising against the Germans in 1944, and he was an officer in the, in this uprising, in the Partisan Army, and they caught him and he was hanged. So, we knew this for sure because his wife survived the war, he was a Gentile and he has two children living in Switzerland today. One, I'm sorry, one, the other one is a stepbrother. He has one and I met him and so I knew the story. But, this, this was the man who, to me, was an outstanding representative of my father's side of family. But, today, there are only two men and one women [sic.] left of the thirteen. I mean, they're in their late seventies, so, but on my mother's side, no brothers, no brother, no sister, practically. I only have one cousin left on my mother's side in Budapest today. He's younger than I am, so, that's.

Q: What were your, did you have particular interests as a child or special things that you liked to do?

A: I was an avid cyclist. I loved to, I loved to bicycle. I would come home from school and immediately take off and go, there was a big park, we lived near the, the, we lived on the Pest side and there was a so-called rose garden in the center of Pest and that's where I met with my friends every afternoon. And we were comparing our bicycles. Bicycles were the same as cars today for us. I mean, it was, it was a thing and we admired the one who had the custom-made one or had just even custom-made parts, and so we had big races on bicycle and then that was it, so I was heartbroken when in 1944, one of the first things we had to take in when the Germans occupied Hungary was the bicycle and the radio. And I lost it. I also belonged to an underground Boy Scout group, I was an avid underground Boy Scout. The reason I say underground because we couldn't be legal Boy Scouts. The Boy Scout movement, which was based on brotherhood and equality of all, declared that Jews are not equal and therefore all Jewish Boy Scout organizations were disbanded and Jews were also thrown out of those Boy Scout groups that were not affiliated with some Jewish school or something. I belonged to the so-called Three-Hundred Ten, number Three-Hundred Ten Jokay Mór Boy Scout group. Jokay Mór was a famous Hungarian writer, a humanist. He was not Jewish but he was a humanist. And we met illegally, sometimes in the basement of synagogues and then we had to split up later into smaller groups and it was in, in homes, in one, the small groups consisted of about ten, between ten and fourteen people and so we just rotated and did all kinds of things, besides hiking, we were building model airplanes and did what, what Boy Scouts usually do, otherwise. I have always, always dreamt these days, I had always dreamt about one day having a uniform. The uniform was unbelievably important for me, like most kids of my age at that time. And I was always dreaming about it and at school, I just looked at my classmates who were, of course, Christians and could wear the uniform and just, I dreamt about that one day, I'm going to have a uniform and the sad thing is that after the war, when we met for the first time, those who survived in our group,

and we went to get the uniform and we put it on and all of a sudden, to most of us, it didn't mean anything anymore. We were, it's hard to say, either we were too old or too cynical by that time to really attach any importance to the uniform, so I never wore it again.

Q: Did you attend a secular school?

A: Yes, I have always attended a secular school, except my first fourth grades were in a, the Jewish orphanage ran a school, it was basically a secular school, but the Jewish orphanage was in charge in order to have enough money to raise the orphans. So the orphans lived in a dorm while we who were coming from the outside, we had to pay tuition. And it was nearby, I spent four years there and then, middle school. I went to a secular state school, middle school because it was exactly next door to my house. And then, of course, came the… 1944, and 1943-44, I couldn't go to high school. There's one incident in my middle school that I felt had very, very important consequences for the rest of my life. We were, as basically innocents abroad, to the point where I really didn't pay much attention to being Jewish or not Jewish until this incident happened. In fifth grade, it was an art class and my art teacher was drawing something on the blackboard and we had to copy it, exactly. And then color it exactly. And he came by and for some reason, I used a different kind of color or something and he always walked around with a huge cane, which was not unusual in those days for teachers because teachers…

End of Tape 1, Side A

Tape 1, Side B

Q: This is tape one, side B of an interview with Mr. Robert Holczer. And Mr. Holczer, I was just asking you about your education and you were going to tell me about an experience that you had that you said was very significant.

A: Yes, in fifth grade, the, the idea of art was for the art teacher to draw on the blackboard and then for the rest of the class, class to copy it and color it. The, teacher came around and made sure that everybody's following his instructions and just to emphasize that he means business, he had a big cane in his hand and for some reason, I missed a couple of the colors and used something different. He became absolutely just, angry, unreasonably so and started to beat me to the point where I began to bleed through my nose. And I also became frantic seeing the blood coming from, from my nose and all this so I ran home. I mentioned before that I lived next to the school. The other house was where we lived, apartment house. And I ran up to my mother's, into my mother's arms and asked her to clean me up and come and basically what I wanted is justice, I could not, even at the age of eleven, I couldn't believe that this is going to be the way it is. And I wanted her to come in and do something about it. And after she cleaned me up she said, "Now you must understand, a lot of things that you cannot understand now, I cannot go in and do anything, yes, except apologize for your behavior." And I said, "What, what behavior, what did I do, used the wrong color," and she said, "Well, you don't understand just now." [Clocks chiming] And the reason, what I left out was a very important thing. The teacher was yelling at me as I was running out of the class, "I hope you go to Palestine to sell oranges. That's where you belong." And so when I told my mother, this is when her reaction came. So she came back to school with me and instead of demanding some kind of a remedial action for this, apologized to the teacher. And I thought that was, that was a very strange thing. I didn't understand at that time. I did understand it, years later, that this was the only course she could, she could take. Obviously, she was afraid that maybe they will kick me out of school if she does something else. And every Jewish family, of course, wanted to have their son finish middle school. And that incident somehow frustrated me to the point, it created a mental block. I never drew or never painted in my life since. I am such idiot when it comes to, to do anything with my hands that involves drawing or painting that it is pathetic. When we play some games, for example, with my friends, when I have to draw something, they can't believe that, they think my perception is that of a mentally retarded person and it is, it is just a, just a block. However, I appreciate art very much. I never fail to go and see an exhibit of paintings and drawings. I just don't want to do it and I cannot do it myself. Now it's possible that this can be unlocked in time but by that time I won't be alive. So, I rather just leave this.

Q: Did you father care about this incident?

A: No, my father was not around anymore. He heard it after the war and of course by that time, I could, I understood the whole situation better.

Q: Was that the first instance of anti-Semitism that…

A: …Hit me for the first time? Well, the first one, I remember was when I was six and I was playing marbles with, with kids and I won. And one kid said, threw the marble down the gutter and said "I'd rather throw it down the gutter than to give it to a Jew." And I went home and asked my mother, "What, what does it mean?" So, that really was the first time that something like this hit me. And since I went to a Jewish school for the first four years, I was not really exposed to things like this. But the minute I switched and in fifth grade, everything started. Luckily, there were some teachers of course, in our school who tried to make up for this. And I remember a couple of them. Unfortunately, they're not alive anymore but they did everything possible to, to make our life a bit more civilized. And one of them was even fired because of that. But not everybody was like this.

Q: He was fired because he was . . .

A: He was very protective of, of Jewish children and he was also fired because we had a special subject called, how would I, how would I translate this, Defensive Studies, which meant, basically, kind of a ROTC type, except it was sheer propaganda. We had to, the book contained sentences that were so revolting as far as Hungary's neighbors were concerned. For example, the Romanians were described as monkeys on a, on a tree, their intellectual level and, I mean, for every nationality that surrounded Hungary, they had a very derogatory term. And, actually, the book was preparing you that one day we will get even. And what he was, among other things, he was teaching this subject, and he said, "Put the book away and let me tell you what life is about." And it was a very, very human, humanistic lecture that he would give us every day. And, after the war, to our great satisfaction, but not surprise, he was named as the first director of the Hungarian Academy of Physical Sciences, so, he, they recognized him. And he was then, I talked to him later and he was in the Illegal Social Democratic Party, so that also helped him. But, there were teachers and I had a teacher, I don't even know if he had any political conviction, but he was a human being and he always tried to mitigate any law, anything, but, but as a child, for example, even, even in middle school, I had to go once a week to three hours of, of labor, battalion practice. This was one of the most humiliating experiences that anybody can have. They had the scum of earth in charge of us, it was not teachers or any… we had to report either at school or somewhere on the outskirts of Budapest to a practice ground where these hired instructors that were a lot worse than any drill instructor I have ever seen in any movie, any American movie, because it's not that, it was not just the physical, the physical abuse can be tolerated, but it is the mental abuse, but that was so, so bad, the way they called us everything, a Jewish this and a Jewish that, and these were people hired to do this job and besides of marching and, and digging and building, constantly, we were abused and constantly even physically so. Many times they beat us and all this. And we had to go there about three hours on a certain day. The Christians then went to three hours of practice of what you would call today ROTC. They had, they had marching drill practices and all this. But ours was completely different.

Q: What year did that start?

A: What year? Well, I was in fifth grade, right, so it was about 1940 when I entered the middle school. It was about 1940.

Q: By that time, had any of the anti-Jewish legislation, I know there were a few things that Hungary had adopted, was that affecting your family at all?

A: Well, yes, in a sense, that some people in the family, such as my aunt, who was very young, one of my father's sisters, and, was married also to a young, twenty-one or twenty-two year old man. He was called up to go to the eastern front and, and he go into labor battalions, in '41, I'm talking about '41 because that's when Germany declared war, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. Immediately, the very young, I think twenty-one old Jewish men were called up. They had to go to a certain place in their own clothes. They didn't get any uniform, anything, and taken to the eastern front immediately for mine, got to, to pick up mines, okay? And many of them without any previous experience and, and, and any schooling as to how to do it, of course, blew up. Now, the reason I am mentioning this because my father's sister who was very young and married to a young man, interestingly, when he was taken to the front, for some reason, somebody made a mistake and his unit was issued Hungarian army uniforms.

Q: This is her husband?

A: Her husband, yes, okay. And he then went to the photographer for something and just had a picture taken, proudly posing in a Hungarian military uniform, he sent home. By the time, the picture arrived at home, he was dead. He was blown up on a mine. And this picture initiated a whole avalanche of events in our family because my aunt who was an extremely shrewd person, used this picture to start, to basic… declaring herself first as half-Jewish, which was an exceptional position then. And as the Nuremburg laws were tightened more and more so, she took one more step and one more step and one more step in pushing this whole idea that she's not really under this category of the Nuremburg laws. And it, the whole thing accelerated to the point where the last, when the only way she could be declared an exceptional person, as they were called, which means that you're not considered Jewish, was to take my grandmother down to the police station and that was a scene I remember: her taking my grandmother down and my grandmother had to, under oath, sign an affidavit that she is an, she was an illegitimate child because my grandmother was cleaning house for a lawyer, a Christian lawyer who was dead by that time, a bachelor. And she signed this affidavit which made her a, a Christian. And with a husband who died in military uniform, so he was obviously a Christian, with her mother signing this affidavit that she was illegitimate, and the father was a Christian, she practically cleared herself and then set out to save the rest of the family. And, as I mentioned to you before, she did an excellent job up until 1944, October, that was the point where nobody could do anything anymore because hell broke loose in Hungary and the scum of earth, the worst elements, the so-called Arrow Cross Party took over and ruled from October 15th until January 18th when Pest was liberated.

Q: Back in the beginnings of the war, when there were, did your, did your family experience economic hardships when there were economic restrictions on Jewish . . .

A: Yes. Obviously, everybody experienced this because the men were away and there were very, very few employers who would feel obligated to compensate the family. And so a lot of people were actually either starving, or the mother had to go and look for a job, or if the children were old enough, they had to go and work and do something. We were in a very good position, my mother and I, for a while, because my father's employer felt obligated to send us part of his regular monthly salary, so we did get money.

Q: Let's come back to that and first, if you would, tell me how your father was taken away and when?

A: Okay, my father was taken away several times. You know, Hungary was kind of a strange part of that Nazi area because the Hungarians, the Hungarian government has always been in the hands of the aristocracy, Hungarian aristocracy, and the Hungarian aristocracy had no taste for Jews but also had no taste for killing or murdering Jews. They were above this, and so therefore when the dictator of Hungary, Admiral Horthy, had to appoint a government, most of the time that government would not eventually do everything that the Germans wanted them to do. So it was almost like playing musical chairs, I mean, Hungary's a very small country and you don't have that many politicians, aristocrats to go around, but almost the same faces somehow appeared, if not as prime minister then maybe minister of interior, or something. So we really, up until 1944, we had a great deal of anti-Semitism, we had a great deal of persecution of Jews but we were not in fear of our lives. Because somehow that was below the dignity of that class. Not only that, some of those aristocrats were very Anglophiles and had, during the war, connections with the British. And so in between, it depended on which aristocrat was in charge of the country. Some of them were a little bit more German-oriented than others. And when, and more German-oriented came into the picture because the Germans didn't like the one who was in office, then he ordered that so and so is going to go and serve in, these Jews will be taken to the labor battalion. My father was in the labor battalion before he was taken to Yugoslavia but he was inside Hungary so we could visit him, we could take food for him and eventually, when a new prime minister came, he declared that anybody over let's say, forty-five can go home. So there was no fear of being killed just because you are, you're a Jew. Up until 1944, March, when the Germans marched into Hungary.

Q: So when your father was called to be taken away . . .

A: To go, yeah, we knew where he was. I remember, he was not far from Budapest for awhile, for a few month, and then almost every weekend we took food down, we talked to him, he was released, we could walk around a little bit. And so it was not the same thing as taken away to a faraway country where we had no idea what would happen to him. Now, there, there, then in 1942, he was taken away for, for good. For some reason, and I cannot really

remember exactly what happened and why. We had, probably, a more radical prime minister who yielded to the Germans and let this contingent of Jewish labor battalions go outside the country and he was then taken to Yugoslavia. I remember, even then, they, they were told which railroad station are they going to be going through in Budapest and they allowed them to be there I think half an hour or an hour where we had a visit with him so we could talk over a few things. And that was the last I saw him, then, for a couple of years until he came back after the war.

Q: And he, where did he go exactly?

A: He went to, he was in a copper mine in Bor, B, O, R which is I think the nearest is Niš which is Serbia today, the Serb Republic in Yugoslavia. And he was there, he was always telling me about what was, what was interesting, the various people who guarded them. They had Croats, they had German, they was all SS, Croat, Croatian SS, German SS, Hungarian, not SS, but Hungarian, and I think that they had something, I've forgot what, but anyway, various nationalities were guarding them and probably Bosnians. And he mentioned when he came home, interestingly, he said, "Son," he said, "we never, we never really worried too much about anyone else guarding us except the Croatians." He said, "We had never seen such beasts as the Croatian SS was." They called them Ustašas, you know. He was there and I think, I, this is probably much better written than in my memory, I think about one hundred fifty thousand were in this particular area where he was and what happened was when, when the Tito partisans were really pushing them back, The Germans decided to march them back toward Germany and in, in what is northern, what was northern Yugoslavia at that time and previously back before 1918, was southern Hungary, they set up these slaughterhouses, where those who survived the concentration camp _____ were killed and my father was in the last six thousand being marched and they were captured by Tito's partisans. And then he was given a choice whether he could fight with the partisans, he could work for the partisans, or they would allow him to go into an area that was already liberated and live there and they would supply him with enough food to survive until the war is over, they said. And he was a very strong man and very grateful that they saved his life and he volunteered to work. So he worked in a flour mill somewhere around and came home with all kinds of documents and, and little medals that testified to the fact that he was a good worker and did his share. And he was very proud of it, and when Stalin decided to eradicate any of the memories attached to Tito, unfortunately we had to burn everything and we had to throw away his medals because it was very dangerous to be in the possession of anything that connects you to Tito. People were hanged all the time without not much reason, let alone if they find something on you. So, he was very bitter about this, and this turned him against the Russians so in all his life he was very anti-Russian and very pro-Yugoslavian. He would have been heartbroken to see what happened to Yugoslavia had he lived today.

Q: Let's stop.

End of Tape 1, Side B

Tape 2, Side A

Q: I would like to ask, you were just describing your, your father's experience in Bor and I wonder if when he was taken away to Bor if that, you and your mother and your father were recognizing that this was going to be the big one, as it were and if you can recall that separation and what happened.

A: Well, of course we were always afraid that he would not survive and we had no doubt that physically he could survive but we were afraid that, that he would get killed. But an interesting episode was that, [cough] excuse me, I asked him after the war, what, why did he survive if so many people died? And he had a little, just a short little anecdote, he said, "Son, there were two kinds of people in the concentration camp. We got a canteen of water every morning. The one group drank the water immediately and the second group, such as myself, drank half of the water during the day and we used the other half to wash ourselves." And I said, "Half a canteen of water would make you clean?" He said, "No, but I felt like a human being, I was still caring about myself." And he said, "And later on I understood a lot more about this whole attitude that I'm not going to lie down here and gulp down everything, I am, even though I am full of lice, I'm still caring about myself." So that, basically, that was the attitude that saved, I'm sure, that was who survived. And of course luck, because even with this attitude somebody could have shot you if they didn't like your face or the way they moved. Yes, we, my mother maintained of course like most wives that he's going to return, and she was right because even though we have not heard from him for a long time, especially the last year when he was there, of course by that time, we couldn't have heard from him because he was already in the liberated area and we were in Hungary still, in the battlefield. It was, however, just that, that deep feeling that he will come home. And he came home in 1945, I remember late spring, it must have been April, May, probably, and he did not just stop by and said, "Here I am." He was afraid that maybe we would faint or something like that. He sent a friend up. A man came up and inquired about my father and very slowly kind of asked, "When did you hear from him?" and all this, and "Do you think he's alive?" and all this, and slowly he said, "Well, I have a feeling that he is alive," and slowly he led us to this. I remember him coming up on the stairs with a rucksack. The rucksack was full of sausage and potatoes. And he knew that we were starving and so that was it. Now, just to describe the situation in Hungary at that time and how you needed to be, to stay a human being, the, we did not live in our apartment, we were moved, because you could not stay in your apartment. You had to move to first, to so-called Jewish houses that had a big star on them and, eventually to the ghetto. And because of the history of this house, we did not move into the ghetto but this house Zichy street One, was designated as a Jewish house first. So, in the meantime, we moved out of, of our apartment in, that was 1944, summer when you had to leave your apartment. We, the neighbors came, some of them, and said "We will keep this for you, and keep this for you," and needless to say, that not one thing eventually survived again. Or resurfaced again. They all, either the Russians took it, or the bombing or everything. It's all disappeared, and what could you do about it? You said okay. But people were in a way like vultures, they were just circling around and see, you know, what they can take. And then the apartment was given, all these Jewish

apartments were given to bomb those people whose… Gentiles whose houses were bombed and they couldn't live in anymore. And I had no idea of course what happened to our apartment. We lived in a street called Rottenbiller Street, 66[2], and I, my first thing, we were liberated on January 18 and the first thing I went back to see, what, what happened to our apartment because we left, believe it or not, a few boxes of linen there, just when we left. We just, we couldn't do anything with it, so. And when I came, when I went up there, I had this tremendous chip on my shoulder that I'm going to show these people whoever are there, that within two hours, I said I'm going to give them two hours to get out of here. And here I was a sixteen year old kid, barely sixteen, fifteen really, and telling them, here was a family and I was telling them to get out of here. And the family consisted of a mother, father, a daughter and two sons. And they were tailors. And the old man was quite old, the father, was telling me, he said, "But, but, where can we go?" And I said, "Why did you come here?" And he said, "Well, we have, we have no place. Our, our house was destroyed, and I mean we knew that this is, this was a Jewish apartment, but still it was between this or living in the street, in the cold snowy January," so he said, "Could, could you do something, could, could we somehow come to some kind of an agreement?" And so my mother came up and she said, "Why can't we just divide the place between us?" And here it was a two room apartment with their family, four people, five people in their families and two, my mother and I, and we decided that after looking at them and listening to them and all this, there was just something that all of a sudden hit me. My chip was gone and so we decided that yes, we were going to, we'll, we'll make it. And so we lived there under the same roof and we became very good friends. And when my father came home in late spring, the new government, Democratic government, devised this plan of each block had to elect a kind of a small council and the head of that council was quite powerful in deciding if there was an empty apartment or, almost like a Justice of Peace. They had certain tasks that they can perform, temporarily, they were deputized. And my father was appointed to do this because he was always very much respected by the people there and the fact that he was now good, you know, with the new regime. And next to us, an apartment was full of old, old women who died one after another. It was a, like a Salvation Army place. They, they rented it and it became empty, so my father got the apartment for them and they moved over there so we could get our apartment back, we lived there, but they could never really thank enough and we, we kept this relationship for a long time and I'm sorry I lost contact with them. But then, we had an apartment and then we faced something else because then the Russians were coming around and trying to find places for their soldiers and so they, they got, they got two old Russian soldiers from Siberia who were quartered in, in our apartment because two rooms were too many for three people. So, and I remember, they were very cute old men, we had no, I mean we had sign language, we didn't speak Russian and the only incident I remember is that my mother, of all these sufferings, had one little symbol in her possession: a bottle of very expensive cologne water that she kept. And she said, "I am going to start using this after the war, when we are all together and we live in peace." And so, and she kept it and she had it with her all the time. And so now, when we moved back, she, we got a temporarily, kind of an armoir and she put it way back between sheets. Now one day we

[2] When Robert lived there, the street number was 39. It was later changed to 66.

came home and my mother said, "This, this place smells like cologne water, very good cologne water," and she rushed to her cologne water in the armoir but these two Siberians, Russians were very hard pressed to get alcohol, anything, they would drink. I mean, there were stories that I can't believe, that they went to the museum and drank alcohol out of these scientific lab experiments and—including embryos—but I never believed those stories, but this is true. They drank my mother's cologne water. They were so, so hard pressed for alcohol. And that was about our only experience with Russians in our house. Otherwise, most people lost their watches. They were very hard pressed for watches. It was a time when nobody in his right mind would walk around in Budapest with a watch on his wrist. They just, they were fascinated. They stop you and they took your watch. That was their, their, their thing. Well, anyway, okay, ask.

Q: So the Russians had moved into your apartment then . . .

A: Yeah, two.

Q: During the German occupation, this was before. . .

A: No, no, no. This was during the Russian occupation.

Q: Oh, after. [talkover]

A: Oh yes. I'm talking about after, this all happened after. Oh no, there were no Russians during the German occupation. I wish there were. No.

Q: I wanted to go back just a little . . .

A: Yes.

Q: …bit, I had, I had wanted to ask you about when you were younger as a child and you were in school, were your friends mostly Jewish . . .

A: Yes.

Q: Or did you share . . .

A: Yes. Mostly Jewish. There were a few Gentile friends who never, ever mentioned religion, never really made us feel inferior, just a few. And after the war, I made it clear how much I appreciated it. So, I'm glad that I could do that. Now, I also have to say that not many of my classmates survived because my Jewish classmates were in a labor battalion and they were working outside Budapest on the day when the deportations came to that village. And the gendarmerie had an empty boxcart and they decided not to let them go home but deport them. So very few Jewish classmates of mine survived. Gentiles, again, the war, the army eventually, everybody who was fifteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen at the end of the war, the

last few months, the Arrow Cross people, they forced children out into the street with a gun. So quite a few of them did not survive. I really had very few contact with, with, with the few that survived but there weren't too many.

Q: And you had mentioned that your father's employer was helping you and your mother out.

A: Yes. Yes. Yes. And my father was very grateful to him and worked for him again after the war.

Q: And so the help that he gave you then during the time that your father was away was enough for you and your mother to… [talkover]

A: Yes. I also took a job. I was a messenger boy up until 19… until the yellow star came into existence… '44 March. I was a messenger boy for architectural firm. Because of the bicycle. I could bicycle around then, so I was delivering messages and things. So, that supplemented also, my father's salary which wasn't a full salary, just part of it.

Q: And as the war progressed, was the next significant event then, would have been the German occupation?

A: Yes. 1944, March, if I remember it, 19th, is when the Germans had serious doubts apparently, that Hungary is not a trusted ally anymore, that Hungary probably entertains the idea of getting out of the war because by that time I think Romania was ready to jump and the situation in Italy was very shaky so they decided to occupy Hungary officially and put in a very right-wing government which was still a lot better than what came in 1944, October. That will be the other stage. But let's take a look at what happened when the Germans marched in, the yellow star had to be worn within a few weeks, or… So, the labor battalions were more intensified. Now everybody who was eighteen had to go, that was now, they lowered the limit and the deportations started. So, unfortunately, that was the worst thing, the deportations. They started in the countryside, eventually coming to Budapest. They were supposed to come to Budapest, you know, by the fall.

Q: You mentioned that your friends were deported one day.

A: Yes.

Q: How did you manage to avoid being deported yourself?

A: That was just an, a coincidence, that my aunt, the one who gained this special status, said to me, "Please, I just have some very bad feelings, I don't want you to go today out and work. Stay home, stay with me." She took me to her apartment and that was the day when it happened. It was just a, just a miraculous instinct that she had. And that is what saved me.

Q: Did life take a turn after that, after the German occupation did you feel, were you able to

feed yourself and your mother adequately?

A: Well, what I did was, I gathered, I was always quite street smart and so I somehow found that the best way to do this whole thing is first to get some papers that would qualify us—at least to those who don't know us—as Christians. So I took my mother's jewellries, sold it, and bought papers. And the papers were blank and you had to fill it out. And I did that. Also, I got some papers and I fill it out with the same name from a cousin of mine who was adopted but had birth certificate and everything else that pertained to the fact that he was a Gentile. And his parents gave me his papers too so I had kind of this double insurance, moving around, in case I needed it. For a while, I did not use these papers. I waited until, you know, we got the point where it was necessary. Also, there was a danger that until the Russian troops did not cross the Hungarian border, it was a matter of a telephone call to find out if you had false birth certificates. All they had to do is call the principality, you know, and that, that municipality and check, okay? And so, actually, we waited until practically the first village fell and, after that, it was much easier to fill it out, to a town or a village that had, that was already occupied under occu… Soviet occupation because they couldn't check anymore.

Q: And after that point, did you use those papers?

A: Then, then, then we used the papers for awhile, but it was a, it was very confusing period when we were moving a lot. First, my wife, my mother and I moved to the, the apartment of one of my father's friends. They were Seventh-Day Adventists. And they offered their place but soon they learned that Seventh-Day Adventists are just in the same danger as Jews so after consultation, we left. Then we were, we went to a, I was always on the street, hearing, feeling, looking, what can happen? Then I took my mother to a Jewish high school which was designated as a clothing supply business for the Hungarian army and it was really a refuge for, for Jews. They were sewing uniforms for the army and it was established by old Hungarian Jewish army officers who wanted to save their skin and their family and hired fake guards in uniform to come in and out of the place, putting on a show and inside they were actually really making, sewing uniforms and delivering it to the army and, and, so I was always, it was just constantly you had to change your position and you had to always look at what seems safe at the moment. And it is possible that something that was safe one week became unsafe the next week because somebody recognized one person in that place when he was walking down the street, going into places, "Here is a Jew, doesn't wear a yellow star, what is he doing?" And so, your life depended on nuances, those days.

Q: So you just took off the yellow star?

A: My aunt is the one who just ripped off the yellow star and said, "You stay with me," and then my mother came there, too. And this is how we got to this house in Zichy Jeno Street, One, in the Fifth District of Budapest.

Q: Now, I think before you even moved into that house, there had been a lot of Allied bombings

. . .

A: Yes.

Q: Had there not? Of Budapest?

A: Yes.

Q: So where were you during that time?

A: Well, we, whenever there was a, up until we had to leave our own apartment, when there was a bombing we lived in the cellar, you know, sometimes for hours. But usually, the bombings came at night, so, I, one thing that war taught me how to be very organized because there was no light. You couldn't turn on the light. No, that was a major offense. If they saw any light, when the sirens went off, they, they considered you collaborating with the, with the enemy, you know, giving signals. So, I had to lay out all my stuff and in the darkness I could pick every one of my clothes and still do, to run down. We had seconds to run down in the bombing, started. Usually, there was no really intense bombing of Budapest. Most of the bombers, many times, Americans, were flying over to Romania, to Ploeşti, to bomb the oil fields. There was really not much to bomb in Budapest, was not very badly bombed. Budapest was, Budapest was mainly destroyed during that siege from December until January 18. That was the main reason for the destruction. But before that, there was not that much.

Q: So, when was it that you moved in with your aunt?

A: It was late fall, in 1944, you know. Late fall that… when we felt that that place was the best place to be. And then it turned out to be a very fortunate choice because in that house, there was a famous Hungarian psychiatrist. Psychiatry was, in Hungary, at the very, very early stage. This man became very famous and since there weren't too many, a great deal of his clientele were famous politicians, actors, actresses, writers. So he was well-known all over the place and he had this idea that he is going to save his family and friends by number one, contacting a fascist officer and I've no idea how he did it, who wants to save his skin and is willing to play this game of declaring the house a clinic and, and do everything possible to save the people inside the house and then he found this man and his name was Jereczian Ara George. And this is in reverse order because Hungarian names are in reverse order. The last name is what we consider first so in English you would say George Ara Jereczian. The, I remember him, a very handsome man, a very, kind of a man of stature and a fascist uniform, hand grenades hanging from his belt. I mean, he was intimidating to anyone. To, with us, he was very kind. The, I suppose, looking back that we about three hundred doctors and families in that apartment house jammed, absolutely jammed. While we could still live upstairs, probably there were at least five to ten people to a room. When we lived in the basement, no one is to tell, we were just side by side on mattresses because when the siege of Budapest started, you couldn't live upstairs anymore. So this man moved in with a few of

his men who apparently were loyal to him and his girlfriend and they set up their headquarters there and they were practically like a, a, a support group. The clinic had its official emblem there and the whole operation looked like it was a legal operation to save anybody who is injured. 'Kay? Now, we're at the end?

Q: Why don't we pause here? I'd like to ask you some more . . .

A: Okay.

End of Tape 2, Side A

Tape 2, Side B

Q: Okay. We're on tape two, side B of an interview with Mr. Robert Holczer. And if we can just go back a little bit and I'd like to know something about during the, you mentioned that you stopped going to school at a certain point and I wanted to hear about what you did with your days at that time. When was that exactly?

A: It was, it was in 1944, [coughs] excuse me. After I finished what would be eighth grade here, it was the fourth grade of middle school and I was supposed to then go to what they call gymnasium, which is high school in Europe. I could not get into a high school and so it was not a long period but between 1944, I have to figure this out. Let's see, 1925, 40, right. So there was a year, '43 because I was, I left the school, '43 so I had one year when actually I didn't do much except odd jobs. My father was away, so, as I mentioned before I delivered, worked for an architectural firm and delivered blueprints, whatever I can find but I could not get into high school. The higher four grades of high school, the gymnasium. And so my mother suggested that we hire a tutor so by the time I would be available for high school, I wouldn't miss much. And this is why I had a private tutor. I was studying especially Latin because everybody suggested that that would probably create a problem when all of a sudden I, war would be over—we were always optimists—and I could go to, instead of the first form to the second form and Latin would create the biggest problem. So for Latin and Algebra, I had a tutor, somebody in, in my mother's distant family, who lived in Budapest. And this is how the year went by. There was really not much else, a little work and a little study.

Q: At that time, was, were you and your mother aware of the so-called Final Solution and what was happening to Jews elsewhere in Europe?

A: Yes. My mother somehow, well, first of all the BBC, of course, unfortunately told us what happened to the Jews who were taken away to concentration camps and death camps but by the that time it was well known in Hungary too, what the deportations, how the deportations end up. So my mother was extremely upset, for understandable reasons and I really had to kind of keep her spirit up and, constantly reminding her that there are certain things we can't change and she still has to live for her own little immediate family. But yes, we were very much aware, very much aware. And even though it was very, very difficult to get BBC and up until 1944, March, or April when the radios had to be turned in, we could still get BBC. And I learned from my father, I was six years old when I learned from my father that there is more to news than just the Hungarian papers and the Hungarian radio. He would close the shutters at certain times, he always changed the times, of course, he would lock the doors and he would listen to BBC. At a very early age and would tell me that this is the truth. Eventually, it became very dangerous because the Germans would have a device that was on top of a car, similar probably to what radar is today, that would circle and try to find people who listened to foreign broadcasts. And it was punishable also by going to concentration camp.

Q: And yet, despite your awareness of what was happening elsewhere in Europe, you and your mother remained, or at least your mother remained optimistic enough to find you a tutor and to . . .

A: Yes. Yes. [talkover] Well, I think this is in the Jewish nature, if you consider the fact that people in boxcars going to Auschwitz were still running schools, right? It's just that, this part of the, of the optimism and the fact that you have to learn, learn and learn. That was with us. That kind of a feeling never left us and we never really gave up.

Q: Was your tutor Jewish?

A: Yes, yes, yes. She was. And she was just a distant cousin of my, my mother and she, I eventually met her when I was in Israel, again. She emigrated to Israel.

Q: And, were, well let's just go forth to the, okay, let's go back to your, your home with your aunt that you had moved into several months after the German occupation and you had begun to describe to me this house, and the man who had been a member of Arrow Cross who had established it as a clinic. And as, as it was established as a clinic, did the same people who had been living in it before, did some of them move out or have to leave or just more people came?

A: No, those who were in the house, they were allowed to stay, which is obvious, I mean, anybody who would have been tossed out would have had to go to the ghetto. And it was, to most people, it was clear that eventually the ghetto is going to be annihilated. There was no other way, since Budapest was surrounded by then by the Soviet forces, what else can you do with it? They built a huge wooden wall around the ghetto and, according to the rumors, they would just detonate the whole thing or burn it down or, but they would not let the Jews survive if the siege had lasted another week or so. The lucky thing is that they just ran out of time. I, of course I was never in the ghetto, but no, those who were in the house, they could stay, and a lot of other families moved in, practically all of them connected to famous Hungarian doctors.

Q: Before the house was established as a clinic . . .

A: It was a Jewish house.

Q: It was a Jewish house . . .

A: Yes. It was a Jewish house. It had, it was a designated Jewish house.

Q: And who was living in your aunt's apartment with you?

A: Well, about at least ten other members of our family. Some other aunts and brothers of my father, my mother, of course, and I. I say, and it was a, about one and a half room apartment

and there were plenty of people in it. But that was the, the least of our problems, really, you know. We could, we could sleep very well. There were a lot worse arrangements in Budapest at that time. There were, there were people in Swedish-protected houses in, near the Danube, where, I understand, people couldn't even sleep. They just were, you know, practically back to back in a room, there were so many people jammed in. This is the one that Wallen… what was his name, the Swedish diplomat, Wallenberg, the one, that was his little area, Raoul Wallenberg. But I never, I went a couple of times by, but I never went up but I noticed that there just, there were just lots of lots of people.

Q: And then this house, before it was established as a clinic, were there non-Jews living as well?

A: Yes. Yes. And interestingly, I can remember that a couple of non-Jewish families stayed there. They just stayed there. By that time, perhaps what went through their mind is, that, since the war inevitably is coming to an end, it's not a bad idea to be here when the Soviet troops come. So that must have been their reasoning. And it was not, not impractical, actually. At the same time, even in the last week, we were in danger of being taken to the Danube, that was the, the most common way of getting rid of Jews who were discovered outside the ghetto, marched down and shot into the river. It was a cold, bitter, snowy winter and the Danube was red and full of corpses. But I remember that even the last week, somebody from the neighborhood reported us to the fascist authorities and they came and tried to disarm Jereczian Ara George's own people in the house, the bodyguards. And he seemed, he almost seemed helpless. We were already lined up and then he again arrived there, amazingly, he did this more than once, with some paper from a very special higher authority that said, "Clear out of here. This is a protected territory and we do our job for the government and leave us alone." We confronted the man after the war. I know that. He was caught, the one who reported us because he was stupid enough to show up the last week before Budapest was, Pest was occupied, and pointed fingers. I also remember another man who was a fascist officer that lived a couple of houses across from us who was also quite antagonistic toward us and we were worried about him. And also the last week, they brought him in with a head injury. He was shot in the head in the street fighting. There was tremendous street fighting and he was just left there to die. And I don't know, I was just fascinated by, by this man that, that everybody was always afraid of and here he was, basically a nothing anymore, you know. And in spite of my good judgement, I watched him, kept going back to him, as a young man all night, watch him how he was dying. And I can't, I still cannot explain this fascination, because ever since I couldn't look at another human being, even an animal that is dying. But somehow, there was a mixed feeling in me of revenge and satisfaction that this scum is, is not going to be here any longer and I wanted to see how he was going. And my mother, I remember scolded me for this and constantly was taking me back to our place, where we, our sleeping arrangement was. But, there, there were incidents like this and it was a very, very strange period for a fifteen-year-old boy. My job was basically to take legs and arms up that were cut off, operated on in the so-called operating room which was a, a dark part of the basement and kind of arrange them on the, in the courtyard. And when in, when in January 18th, we went up, upstairs, everybody was

horrified. There were huge piles of limbs just piled up on the courtyard. And most of it, I had to pile up because I was the one who was always sent up with these. The doctors operated without any anesthesis [sic], anything. There were, there were, there was nothing and it, of course, the survival ratio probably was minimal, you know. But that, whenever I look into that house, that always comes to my mind, how these houses survive. We die but they keep their secrets.

Q: Had any of the other people who were living in your aunt's apartment, did they have papers, false papers?

A: I have a feeling that most of them did because my father's brothers wore the uniform of a military police and again, because of their, their origin from this working, workers' neighborhood, they got papers and they got uniforms. They were supplied with everything, both of them. So.

Q: Were you using your papers at the time?

A: I was, only when, when on the street, they stopped me and asked for papers. That was the only time I used mine. And, by the last, I would say the last few weeks it didn't mean anything if they stopped a man because they didn't even ask for papers. They asked for you to drop your pants. And since in Europe, only Jews are circumcised, it was very easy to detect who was a Jew. And I have to thank, I mean my life was really saved by a man who, amazingly appeared at the time when I thought that this was my last moment on earth. I was sent out to get something, I think, if I remember correctly, I was sent out because a horse fell on the street from shrapnels and we needed some meat. And the only kind of meat, whenever we had meat, the only meat that we could get was horsemeat. And of fallen horses, horses that were shot on the street, usually by airplanes. Airplanes flew very low and they were just machine-gunning anything that moved. And I always ran out and I also crawled out to get water. There were certain areas where a faucet was still intact and you could get some water. And a patrol came and caught me and they said, "Okay, here, come, come into the doorway of this house," and they were shouting, yelling, "This looks like a Jew and took off your pants, take off your pants," and they give me the order and I was kind of snow-white probably and shaking and all of a sudden another man with a much higher rank came and said to the guys, "Look, I see four, five Jews on that corner. Go immediately, see, catch those, I take care of this idiot here. And so we went under the doorway and I was unbuttoning my pants and kind of shaking and he said, "Listen," he said, "are you crazy?" He said, "I don't know where you come from, do you have a place where you were staying?" I said yes. He said, he said, "Go back and I don't ever want to see you again on the street." And we came out and he was hitting me and beating me and just and he said to these people, "This idiot, he's not a Jew," he said, "he's an idiot, a young idiotic kid who wants to be a hero apparently. Go back to your mother and don't ever leave the house." And I told my mother this story and of course, she never let me, the last week she never let me leave the place, under no circumstances. And interestingly, about four, five weeks after we were liberated, I went to the UNRRA, the UNRRA was the U, N, R, R, A, that was the, the joint

committee of the Jewish Relief and you could go there and you could get some emergency supplies, food supplies, they were bringing them in. And who was at the door letting people in? I recognized this man. And I walked up to him, he had a huge, a big flag emblem on his lapel, the flag of what today is Israel, at that time it was a Zionist emblem. And I said to him, I said, "Hey, you know, you saved my life?" And he looked at me, he said, "You too?" He said, "There were many more." And turned—he didn't really want me to elaborate or nothing. And there were many people like this. Now who they were, I was very curious and I went to find out and most of the people who were doing this were Polish Jews because a lot of them had very fair complexions. They were blond and blue-eyed and so, and they came to Hungary early, 1939 or so, and in four, five years, they learned enough Hungarian, and good Hungarian so they had very little accent and they could pass as, there were other people in the Arrow Cross movement who had accents, so quite a few of them were in the Arrow Cross movement. And in the Zionist Underground so, that was a lucky, a lucky accident for me.

Q: How did you get food during that time?

A: During the siege? Well, during the siege . . .

Q: Well, I'm sorry, not only during the siege but during the time of the establishment of the clinic.

A: Oh, well they, they did it, the, the man I told you who saved us, he had good source of supply. So, there was always a center of supply. The only thing that we could not get was of course, what did we get, flour and beans. These were the two and soya. People made, there was incredible things out of soyabeans. I have great respect for soyabeans. They made sausage, they made, you name it, and it all tasted like real sausage or soyabread was marvelous. And they made bread of rice and just invented all kinds of things that they had never eaten before. But the, the big thing was meat. Everybody wanted to have meat so we always watched out, looked out for horses, horses. And you should have seen, when a horse fell on the street, ah, everybody was running with huge knives and carving it out and running back into the basement because . . .

Q: People wearing the stars at that time? [talkover]

A: No, nobody in, nobody, nobody in this house wore stars. Okay? Nobody, that was a taboo. No. And that was his order. 'Kay? We were exempt, because a lot of things that he told us, it was not true, it was just to boost our confidence but by that time there was such confusion everywhere, in higher government places that who, who knows what was really the truth and what was not? Only he can.

Q: So he would distribute the food and then everybody would take it back to their apartments…

A: No, no. We did, we had pretty good organization. No, he was the one who secured the food

by, you know, sending a contingent of people to, to get it and then we brought it back and then we, we divided it. He had his little place there and he was just, these are all intelligent people and very disciplined people. He did not have to go down personally and do anything, really. All we needed him for is to, to, to help us survive, to, to protect us from the outside world. But inside, we organized everything ourselves.

Q: Was everybody who lived in the building in some way involved [talkover]

A: Some way, yes. Yes. They had to. They had to, they did something. Okay, at least, if nothing else on paper. My mother was a nurse, for example.

Q: And your only job was to take these limbs?

A: Well, I was, what they called, I was a messenger, you know, I was an errand boy. I was fifteen, and so, that was, I had a little uniform and a gray overall with a, kind of a military cap. But I was in charge of taking the, the severed things up.

Q: Did you have any friends in the building?

A: I, did I have, yes, I had a friend. And it was the first time in my life that I really felt a sexual attraction toward a woman. And I was kind of a cute little kid and she was a lot older than I. And I think under different circumstances, probably, we would have been much cozier but it was, there were too many people around. I liked her. She was a, believe it or not, there was a, among other things, there was a famous Hungarian Jewish comedian who also ended up in our, in our place. Alphonso. And this was the other half of his act, a young woman. And we became good friends and I had all kinds of fantasies about her and maybe she, too, about me. But my mother was around and too many people and so our attraction never really came to anything else, but just that. But we spent a lot of time together and, and, and it was just a nice puppy love, I think, that I've had for the first time in my life with an older, somebody was at that time older, not too old. I think she was in her early twenties or so, but I was just fifteen. And the, I also had a strange relationship with an Italian girl. The Italian government of Badoglio *(ph)*, that was his name, his Air Force chief I think, or Air Force minister had a Hungarian Jewish wife and when things got very hot in Italy, he brought her back to Hungary because he felt that in Hungary she has a better chance of survival, being the wife of the famous Italian Air Force general. In Italy, everybody knew that she was Jewish and they were afraid of deportation. So, and he had a daughter, and somehow I had a lot of friends in the Italian school in Budapest, the Italian embassy maintained a school. And I fell in love with this girl. And the stupid thing, the reason this ties in with this story, the stupid I did was, during the terrible, during those terrible days of siege, whenever I had some food like horsemeat or something, I would walk, they lived about a half an hour from our house and I would walk on the street, of course walk, try to run from one block to another, very close to the walls to deliver food to this girl and to her mother. And, and I felt that this was my obligation and it was a stupid thing to do.

End of tape 2, Side B

Tape 3, Side A

Q: This is tape three, side A of an interview with Mr. Robert Holczer. Am I pronouncing your name correctly?

A: Holczer.

Q: Holczer. Holczer. I'm interested in hearing, you were just describing some of your friendships to me and I'm interested in hearing what you did for entertainment, how you, if you managed to find any games to play or ways to have fun?

A: Well, if I remember correctly, we did not play any games because the day went by with constantly watching out to survive. We watched the streets, we listened to the radio. I remember that I was terribly concerned with the expression of adults around me, I watched their faces. I always suspected that they know more than what they would tell me and somehow, in the last few weeks, I just became obsessed with, with this business of survival. I couldn't think of anything else and my uncle, who is, the one who is still alive, reminded me that my constant question to him was, practically hourly, "How long will this last? How long will this last?" This was my constant question. I was just counting the hours. We knew that the, that the streetfighting between the Germans and the Russians cannot be more than a couple of city blocks away. We saw German soldiers, injured, moving down the street and we heard, practically, the gunfire as if it were next to us. Some people came in injured who reported that just a couple of blocks from us there were already Russian soldiers so it was that, that, that tension that kept me from doing anything else except just waiting for that final onslaught when I can see that our area is liberated. There was just no mood for playing. We were not children. None of us were children. We were, all our conversations, I remember, with the, with the kids of my age down there, all, everything was always revolving around survival.

Q: So even before the, the actual siege you didn't have?

A: No, before the actual siege, yes, I, i still contacted sometimes my old Boy Scout comrades, they were the ones that I kept up with. But once of course, the siege started then, there was no chance to, to go out and do anything like that.

Q: So some of your, your Boy Scout comrades had escaped the deportation?

A: Oh yes, well, remember these were not school, these were not school people, I told you that. No, these are all from various, the Boy Scout group, the membership consisted of people from anywhere in Budapest and for various areas and quite a few of them survived. So, even after the war, of course, we met for awhile and then we decided there is nothing in it for us anymore and that's when I joined the Zionist Movement. That gave me a lot more important goals than the Boy Scouts.

Q: The, the Boy Scouts, your friends from the Boy Scouts weren't in the ghetto then.

A: No. Some of them did go in, you know, some of them did go in. But others weren't. And so we communicated and visited with a couple of, who were outside.

Q: You would go to each other's home?

A: Yes. Yes. Strictly, you know, strictly so. We didn't want any conversation, any, any public place that can be overheard. Because our main concern was the kind of topic that others shouldn't hear.

Q: Such as what?

A: Well, where are the Russian forces? What did you hear? All this. What did the radio say? We didn't have any radios, the Jews, right? But those who were hiding, and were perhaps with a Christian family, they could still listen to BBC so that was the, the entire existence was the war and the topics were just that.

Q: Now the, the clinic, what, who were the people that the clinic would treat? Was it just anyone who would happen to be injured?

A: Well, theoretically, we were supposed to treat fascist officials according to all the papers and the, the permit that our leader, you know, had. But there was such chaos in the last few weeks, you know, when the siege of Budapest started, that we treated everybody who came in from the street who was injured. And it was pathetic, sometimes, that people would come in with some very minor problems and leave the clinic, and within minutes they were brought back with, with practically their guts out. In other words, in order to reach us, they went through such danger that they lost their lives, eventually. We had, we had no medicine left, we had practically nothing. So we couldn't do much. Anybody, anybody was treated. And doctors are doctors. I was always interested in, especially when there was a fascist official, what did they do to him? Would they take advantage of the fact that here we are, you know, lost all family members and all this, but I talked to, this interested me and I talked to some of the doctors and they said there's no such thing, a doctor cannot do that.

Q: Did the clinic work with any of the other rescue organizations in any way?

A: No, we didn't. By that time, there was no contact, nothing. Everybody's out for, for itself. There was, there was just, everything collapsed. The streets were ruled by twelve year old children with submachine guns and disenfrised [sic], uneducated laborers who never amounted to anything, and this was their way to get their revenge. They were shooting first, truly and asking questions after. It was, it was the, a total reign of terror.

Q: What about before the siege, siege?

A: Before the siege, it was already leading up to this because they, as soon as the Arrow Cross movement took over on October 15, the, they started. It was just as bad. And the minute the admiral who was the head of Hungary, Admiral Horthy finished his speech in which he announced that as far as he was concerned the war was lost, at that moment, you know, hell broke loose. He was arrested, his bodyguards were arrested.

Q: And you, as soon as that, that date, October 15, you just didn't go outside anymore?

A: No, well, we, that was the date when the house, the story I told you began to get, take shape, okay? This was when we kind of put our heads together and we learned that this psychiatrist is taking steps to bring this man in and all this. We had to act very quickly because events were really coming to an end. The Russians were approaching Budapest rapidly and we knew that again, that gives the, these guys very little time to kill all of us. And they were getting more and more vicious, amazingly. Instead of saving their skin, they became even more violent.

Q: Okay, so, before the siege, and you were sometimes going out . . .

A: Yes, yes.

Q: You would deliver messages?

A: Right, right. I had, you know, the uniform and the ID and all this. I was sent to get our rations, you know, I was sent to pick up some papers or pick up medicine. Yeah, I was just a . . .

Q: But you had no contact with the Red Cross or with the different legations.

A: Well, the, the Red, if I remember correctly, we had some, some very vague contact with the Red Cross, I probably picked up medicine from them or something for the, for the organization. But personally, I had no as a, as an individual, I had no contact other than with the, just with the Swiss Embassy. I told you I had a Switz, Swiss *schutzpass*, that by the time the Arrow Cross movement started, meant very little.

Q: How did you, how did you get that *schutzpässe*?

A: Well, you could go to the Swedish Embassy or the Swiss Embassy and they would, put you on the list and eventually would give it to you. And it was really just a, kind of a, a smokescreen. There was not much, if you were lucky, they respected it and they let you go. If you were unlucky, they just tore it apart and said, "Step into the wagon," you know, and you were gone. You could never, never know. It, those embassies issued this in good faith but the people who looked at it, you were at the mercy of those. And I just happened to go to the Swiss one, but the Swedish did it and then probably you heard the story, the Japanese, it was a Japanese in, in, not in Hungary, I think it was in Lithuania or somewhere, did the

same thing.

Q: Yes.

A: So, in Hungary, it was mainly the Swedish and the, and the Swiss and I think the Vatican too. There was some, even though that the Primate of Hungary was almost like a collaborator. He did not really act very courageously under the Nazi era.

Q: Do you remember when the siege began?

A: Yes. It was in December, if I know, December 20th or something, very close to Christmas. That's when it… really, it just, all of a sudden we were shot at from every direction. We knew that Budapest was totally surrounded. The airplanes were just coming day and night. They were called ratas, R, A, T, A, these small Soviet airplanes machine-gunning anything on the street that moved. It was very dangerous to get out on the street. And of course, then, when it came to night, anybody was moving could have been also shot by the fascists, by the Arrow Cross people, 'cause they were also moving. And it, it was a lot of noise, a lot of injuries, a smell of, of the stench of, of gunpowder and, and corpses came closer, you know? War has a certain smell, a very very unpleasant smell that you can really honestly feel. And as a child, I learned that. That's, that's all I can tell you, but . . .

Q: Now, so the entire building then moved down into the basement?

A: Yes, the entire Budapest lived in basements. Some of the newer houses' basements were clean, perhaps dry, you know. And you could make it with a little effort to become temporary living quarters. But those built in the 19th century, they were damp, dark, they were just awful. Cold. And luckily, that this house, this Zichy Jeno Street was a fairly, fairly new house. And the basement was livable. Now where I lived, where I lived before, in most of my life, back, that basement was such that I, oh, I wouldn't have wanted to spend any time right there because it was a damp, old typical, what you see almost in Dickensian, you know, movies or read about Dickensian novels. Also, there were rats, loved this kind of a moist dark environment. But here, I remember our basement as quite civilized in, in this house. So it was, the hardship was not really bad and so many people, the heat, I think, of the bodies made up for the cold outside.

Q: How many people were there?

A: Oh, I would say we were a few hundred people in that basement, yeah?

Q: How big was the basement?

A: Oh, it, it would be like a floor, an entire floor of the house, because it was, usually the basements were what you can consider a low floor. So, it's, I cannot really describe it in, in square footage because at that time I didn't even, I didn't even know about that, but it, it was

a good size apartment house floor, okay, just picture it. And there were mattresses down, and everybody brought the mattresses down, and there were people very closely situated and, was in a way, it was kind of a warm place.

Q: Were there separate rooms?

A: There were a few, but mainly the separate rooms were, were given to the doctors for operation, operating rooms and, and supply rooms and things like that. Most of the people lived in, in these big open areas.

Q: So the treatments continued, then?

A: Yes, yes, yes. Up until the, practically the last minute. And then the liberation, January 18, is when we heard the emergency wall of our basement. We heard a knock and by law, there was a, an emergency entrance to every one of these basements between two houses that consisted only of one layer of bricks. So, and there had to be a pick next to it. So we heard that a pick was working, breaking through. And then, must have been about four o'clock, five o'clock in the morning and all of a sudden the furred hat half of a young Russian soldier, Soviet soldier, came through first and then the whole body. And this was first time, I think, that he got a hug from people because, and he couldn't understand why, he was absolutely bewildered because, of course, the Soviet soldiers were not welcomed with great enthusiasm anywhere since most Hungarians were hoping for a German victory and we, we were just hugging and kissing him.

Q: Before we go forward, you, so the treatments continued but so, somebody was actually was going out onto the streets during that time and . . .

A: We were, yeah, bringing in people from just the vicinity, okay, very close vicinity. And people would come in on their own too, you know, with a, with a shrapnel or something in their leg or a small injury.

Q: And was somebody going out to get food?

A: Well, we had beans. We, we, I remember that we practically had beans every day. Beans, beans and beans. As long as you have beans, you can really survive. And water, yeah, water was dripping but still, we could get at enough water to, for drinking. Nobody took a shower, that's for sure. There was no way.

Q: Was there a place to cook in the, in the basement?

A: Yep. People had these little, you know, stoves. A lot of people had little stoves and they shared those, whole families. There was, amazingly, it was a very peaceful environment because we all, we only had one important thing in our mind, to get out of there, alive. And people shared.

Q: So everybody managed to get along [talkover]?

A: Yes, nobody, there was no such thing as leaving somebody starving or leaving somebody without fuel, or, I remember that everybody was doing their best. And of course, there are small little skirmishes mainly a couple of old people who just didn't understand the situation completely, and had unreasonable demands or something and we had to step on their toes, and… But no basic, no, no big problems.

Q: How many doctors would you say there were out of that . . .

A: It's hard for me to look back but I would say we had at least thirty doctors there, at least. And we are talking about the cream of, of the Hungarian Jewish doctors, you know? Really, they went out and famous professors from universities so this man, this Doctor Völgyessi[3] who was the psychiatrist living in the house originally, he had a very large circle of friends, and so he managed to gather the ones that he could and brought them in. And there were many other people, I don't know how they got there. I just read a few years ago that the chief architect of Budapest, the main architect of Budapest today, was with me in the basement in this house. I… somebody sent me, I think, a newspaper article or while in visiting in Budapest I saw it, he gave an interview about it. Because it was the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Budapest this year.

Q: Was Jereczian still in, still with you at that point, at the point of the siege?

A: Jereczian?

Q: Yeah.

A: Oh he stayed, he stayed all the time, he stayed, he never left the place. Yeah. So, no, he was there all the time. And if he had to leave for some reason, he made sure that he left enough people there to, to protect us.

Q: So he had made just a complete break from the Arrow Cross?

A: Yes, apparently, apparently and why he even joined them and what was his job there, I don't know. I don't know. Since I left in 1948, you know, and I think that probably it took a few years to write about these things and clear up this thing and I was not there in these, from '48 to '50. And after I came back, you just didn't want to, those were the worst years of Stalinism and you didn't want to get involved with anything because you didn't know what he was doing at that time and so, no questions asked was the best policy. But, later on in the sixties and seventies, I heard that he was a concert impressario and that he took certain shows back to Budapest. And I even saw his name and I am, I really regret that I didn't go

[3] First name: Ferencz

to see him. I should have looked for him somehow and talked to him. So I feel so strongly about this whole thing that if I knew today that he is still alive, living, I would probably go to Vienna. That's where he lived and, and, and just thank him again. But I know that he received a great deal of recognition from people. But I know, I don't know exactly what, if he's alive today. He was, I would say, about ten, at least ten, fifteen years older than I, so it's hard to say.

Q: Well, let's go back to the, to the liberation. So there's a Russian soldier who broke through and you all embraced him and then, and then what did you do?

A: What did I do after that? Well, I did what probably is a natural thing to do. I went with the Russian soldiers and whenever they broke into a store and they broke into every store that still had anything, I went with them. And after they were through and took what they wanted to take, I took what I wanted to take. In other words, I did what we called *zabralny* which means to confiscate things. I was full of hate, I was full of frustration and I thought this, this was the way to get even, probably. And, I had a little store at home, a kind of a little supply of all these stolen goods that I got from shops that were just there, most people wouldn't dare to go in with the Russians, but I put back my yellow star and I went with them and unless I bumped into some Ukrainians, who were famous anti-Semites and beat the hell out of you, the, the others, they, they were welcoming you. They said go ahead. Also, we had a, a little Jewish domestic from Romania with us, who joined us and helped my, my mother and she also spent the last few months with us in this, in this basement. And she was from Romania and with the Russians we had Romanian troops coming in. And she was a beautiful young girl, nineteen, and the Romanian officers were just, just absolutely crazy about her. So she took me by the hand and she said, "Come with me." And she went with these Romanians to all the jewelry stores and she amassed a fortune within days in jewelry. And then said goodbye to us and disappeared. We never found out what happened to her. She had a fiancee in Romania, whether she found him or not, we suspected she eventually ended up in Israel like most young people of that time. But I went with her and Romanian officers, I went with Russians. I was kind of a street urchin for awhile. I enjoyed the fact that nobody, nobody can really give me any orders. And my mother could not control me either, you know? I was now a man and I was just intoxicated by this, and so I had a little store there, that, with all the stolen goods, and my father saw this when he came home and found out, asked me what happened and I told him. And he was absolutely just horrified that I would do something like this and made me take everything back to the stores where I got it from. It was interesting, he got a little cart for me, we put everything on it and he came with me and he stayed outside and I had to deliver it back. And I tell you, some of those people could not believe that this happened. And today, of course, I feel very good about this but not, not at that time. So, in, it took me only a year or two to realize that I, my real emotions that I'm not a Hungarian, I never had a Hungarian passport, you know? I never had any, any identity, Hungarian identity. They, I was always being denied of being a Hungarian even though my parents were born in Hungary and practically everybody back generations born in Hungary and so I joined the Zionist Movement. And in 1948, the, the, the Communists completely took over the government. They called it the Year of Turn.

And all other organizations except for Communist youth organizations were banned. So again now I was in the underground Zionist organization.

End of Tape 3, Side A

Tape 3, Side B

Q: Okay, so this is tape three, side B of an interview with Mr. Robert Holczer. And will you describe to me your father's homecoming, what that event was like for you and your mother? And your father?

A: Well, I told you, before, that, it, we knew because of an emissary that he had sent ahead of him who then by small dosage made us aware of the fact that he was alive, that he was coming, but of course, it was a tremendous emotional experience for him to appear there and, the fact that he immediately understood why there are two families living in the apartment and, and, and accepted our decision, it was just a very nice homecoming. Because number one, we saw him, number two he brought food, which helped us to have a little feast then, and number three is that he, we knew that that's what he would have done, he would have split the living quarters and would not throw a family of four, family of five who were out of their own, well, problems, housed in our place. We… naturally, we were totally just overwhelmed by emotions for awhile and then, set out to see the rest of the family. He wanted to see his brothers and sisters and, and, that's, this is what happened.

Q: So you had left, when did you, let's go back a little bit again.

A: Yeah.

Q: You had left the, the house on Zichy Jeno Street.

A: Yes. Zichy *utca*. Yeah, I left it practically the day after we were liberated and went back to see what happened to our apartment. And that's where I found that family living in it. 'Kay? And, then shortly we moved back with my mother and so after a few months, I think it must have been April or May when my father finally appeared.

Q: And you, during that few months, food was very scarce?

A: It was, very scarce. But again, this aunt of ours, of mine, who played such an important role in saving all of us, again, she and I, we teamed up and went, which was very customary then for city people to do, took jewelry and possessions of the family that we thought farmers might like to have and we could put on our body, and walked about, I would say, thirty, forty kilometer, about twenty miles from Budapest, and exchange it for food. We also hired a person with a horse to drag it back to Budapest. It was mainly flour, lard, necessities, but of course, a horse was immediately a red flag in, in the eyes of the Russians because they confiscated every horse, everything that could be used for transporting their goods. And we were caught midway between this place and Budapest, coming back, in a small Danubian village. On the other side of the Danube, there was a battle going on. And we knew that it doesn't affect anything, because the Danube is a very wide river and the Germans didn't have any means to get over and why would they come over, but there was a battle over there because Trans-Danubia was not liberated yet. And so the Russians were very edgy and they

confiscated the cart, they confiscated the food, they confiscated the horse and then, they also incarcerated my aunt and myself. And I have no idea what happened, but the next… my aunt was with me in the room and the, the Russian captain came in and took her out and she came back a few hours later and she said, "Don't worry, everything is going to be fine." And the next morning, we were given back the cart, the horse, the man who was the owner of the horse and cart and the food and everything else and let go. And I can only guess what was the price. The only thing I regret is that we heard that after delivering the stuff to our home and sharing it with the family, when the, the farmer whose, who had the horse and the cart went back, eventually, was caught and lost both. So yes, if you had still some belongings that farmers would appreciate, you could have food. Because the farmers always have food.

Q: How long did that cartful of food last you?

A: Ah, probably, a few weeks and then, the, the UNRRA, the American Jewish organizations were also sending packages and, and would supply us regularly. So that helped too. We were not really, you know, in danger of, of starving to death.

Q: And did you go back to school?

A: Yes, I went back to school, to high school, and eventually finished practically, my high school at the age of eighteen. And just a few weeks before, practically, of finishing, my Zionist Organization give me signals that it was time to go to Israel because they couldn't guarantee that we would have more time. The Communist Police was and the border guards were really closing everything very tightly. So, I, my instructions were to say goodbye to my family and get either an instrument or an instrument case, that was instruction number one. Then I was called by my Zionist leaders and, and asked if it is true that my mother comes from this northern Hungarian town, I said yes. They said, "Do us a favor. Go to that town, introduce yourself as, so they can recognize that you are, your mother is related," and all this and that, "and ask them if they would like to have a high school orchestra to play a concert in town. And if they say yes," —which probably they would, they said, because which little town doesn't like a free concert— "go to a printer, here is money and have nice posters printed." And they give me the date. I went, I talked to the mayor, he was overwhelmed, I went to the printer, I had all the prints made and I didn't realize at that time that this was the alibi just in case we would be caught because this town is on the way to the border, my mother's birthplace. On a given day, we boarded the bus, the bus was a state-owned bus by that time from a state-owned company. We were all either holding an instrument or having an instrument case so people thought this was a high school orchestra and while singing Communist songs, we took off for the border. On the border, when we got close to this town, we kept on going and the bus driver said that he was hungry, we were hungry too so we stopped in a, in a certain pub or so and this was in 1948, February. We were eating there and getting something to drink and a woman began to flirt with the bus driver. And we were horrified because that would, everything would cause a problem, we, we knew that we had a definite plan. And soon the bus driver said that he would like to take

about a half an hour rest and my, our leader argued with him but he said, "All right, go." And as soon as he disappeared, he gathered us and he said, "Go across this field and there is a barn there and don't ask any questions, just get into the barn." That's what we did. They closed the barn and around midnight, or so, or later, we were marched down to the Ipoly River which is the river between Czechoslovakia and Hungary and to our great amazement, who was leading us?—the peasant woman who was in the pub. She shed her twelve skirts or so because those women still wore many, many skirts, this was the, the thing. Now she had a leather jacket and blue jeans and she spoke Hebrew with our leader. She was a, an Israeli army officer, born to Hungarian parents who spoke perfect Hungarian and this was her job, to distract. And she led us down to the river, everything was supposed to happen so that on the other side of the river, this was Czechoslovakia and the reason we had to go to Czechoslovakia and not to Austria because the border between Austria and Hungary was already closed and tightly controlled but the Czechs were still kind of in between this Year of Turn and the Democratic regime that was there before. The, the end, at the end we crossed the river but instead of getting into the trucks, the border guards stayed and started to talk right there which was odd and very painful because there was snow on the ground. It was very cold in February, we were wet and we had to lie on the ground for about a half an hour when they finally left. Then we couldn't find a truck, the truck left, too, who was supposed to wait for us. So it took us about a half a day to find it and, finally, we were taken to Bratislava, where the gendarmerie was paid off. We were nominally arrested by the gendarmerie and he put into a warm place in the synagogue, there was straw on the floor, I remember, and the next morning, we were taken to the railroad station, put in boxcarts [sic] and within about a half an hour they opened. We were in Vienna, in the American section of, of, of Vienna. At that time, Vienna was divided. So this was my, my great escape to Israel. And from there on, of course, we were taken down and eventually ended up in Israel.

Q: You mentioned how you had joined this Zionist organization that you realized that you, you were not really a Hungarian citizen.

A: Right.

Q: Was it the desire to have a place that led you to join the Zionist Organization?

A: Yes. I mean, they, they, they, I felt that I was among brothers and sisters and I felt—at that time remember it was the last few weeks of the war—that I was, if I fought, I was going to fight for, for the Jewish homeland. And I already associated myself more with that than with Hungary. That was, every young person needs a fatherland and that was mine, even though I'd never seen it before. So, it was an emotional thing and I stayed in Israel for two day, two years.

Q: How did your parents relate to your decision, to . . .

A: Of course, they were very, very upset and very sad. But I said, "You can come and, and join me," you know. And we agreed that they would but of course, they couldn't, because after

we left, it was impossible to, to leave Hungary for awhile. So, I corresponded and this was, this was one of the reasons why I returned eventually, in 1950 to Hungary, 'cause I realized that I needed to make up for the years that my father was away. So I returned to Hungary and it was the worst of the Stalinist era. It was like *1984*, it was terrible.

Q: Did he, did your father identify himself as a, did he feel a Hungarian nationalism in any way?

A: No, my father never really made an issue out of this. He never made an issue out of this, you know? One way or another. Just, he, he, he loved his environment, Budapest. He loved to go to the coffee house and play cards with his friends and drink coffee and, and, probably gossip or whatever, politics. He loved that. And he told us a cute little joke. They always asked him why doesn't he follow me, when he was already alone, after my mother died and he, he said, "I tell you a joke." He said, "Mr. Kohn sits in this famous Hungarian coffee house"—it was called Hungaria, it's a very famous, or New York, it had two names. New York before and after the German occupation, called Hungaria because you couldn't give a place New York. Anyway, Mr. Kohn sits there and people say, "Mr. Kohn, it is now the 1940s, we are after the war, all your friends are gone. They're all in New York, what are you doing here alone in the coffee house?" And Mr. Kohn said, "Look son, what would I have done had I also left for New York? I would have arrived there one day and the next day I would have looked for my old friends and I would have found them and the third day we would have sat down to talk, about what? The good old days in the coffee house." He said, "Look son, I am already in the coffee house." And my father always said, "This is my coffee house." In other words, this was his life, this was his environment. You know, he was always on his feet, he was always going around in Budapest and he was also working almost up to the last year just before he died. He was, he just couldn't be without work. He was a workaholic and he knew that in this country, you need language. And he had very poor language facilities, he would have never learned English. So, it was a realization but we, we saw him as much as we could.

Q: What did you do when you arrived in Israel?

A: Basically, I spent most of my time in kibbutz, living in a kibbutz. I learned to work with the tractors at that time, and then we, with a hundred other Hungarian, young Hungarian youth, most of them from my old organization from Hungary, we received land near the Jordanian border by a town called Afula and started our own settlement. So, I was really working the, as a farmer, kibbutz.

Q: Did you play any role in the War of Independence?

A: Very little, almost none. I got there very late, remember, so I do not claim any, any real major role at all. No.

Q: And then you decided to come back in 1950?

A: In 1950, then, it was part of a homesickness for my parents and part of stupidity on my part, that I believed that things are the way Communist papers describe it in Hungary. I decided to return, perhaps temporarily, perhaps not. And when I arrived in Hungary, I realized that it was a fatal mistake.

Q: Had you found any of that sense of home that you were looking for when . . .

A: No.

Q: when you went to Israel?

A: No, no. I found my parents, but other than that, it was, it was a terrible period for any human being, especially people who came from the West. It was the worst for those, because you were considered unreliable and especially coming from Israel, even more so. The reason was, that by that time, Stalin was very paranoid and Zionism was one of his main targets. So, it, it, this is, this is something that is not much to do with the Holocaust anymore. It was just very hard for anybody to live under Communist rule at that time, but especially for Jews. Well, I don't know if you know that in 1953 when he was dying, he looked up and he saw some Jewish doctors around his deathbed and he said, "They are poisoning me, they're against me." And he said, "Arrest them." And practically hours before he died, they arrested Jewish doctors and I was just at the University in Hungary, studying and that was my state, the time of my state examination. And Hungary had to follow everything that the Soviet Union did so they were looking for anybody who had anything to do with Zionism. And they found me at the university and I was let go, weeks before my state exam. So, it, it was difficult but of course that has nothing to do with the Holocaust anymore.

Q: When you had been in Israel, had you, do you feel, did you feel that you had found some of what you were looking for there? Was your intention to go?

A: Yes and no. Yes and no. I had some very deep feelings about the country as such and then again, I was still a young man, eighteen, and I was also influenced by a great deal of these revolutionary Marxist ideas. And there were many things that were not to my liking, that I would have loved to see differently. And so when I left Israel, I did not just leave it with nostalgia. I left it because I thought that finally, somehow, in Hungary, I'm going to find, find that utopistic state, that, that is, is justice and equality for everyone. And, I was just a little bit too stupid, to, to think that way, but I did. So it a was a, a double reason to return. A, a totally unfounded idealism and homesickness.

Q: What did you do for work when you returned home?

A: I couldn't work for awhile because I was unreliable, anybody who came from the West, especially from Israel. Finally, with some great connections, I was hired to sweep and clean a garage, a state-owned garage. And that would have been my future for a long time, had it

not been for a, just a, a very fortunate incident when the Party secretary of my, my company was sick and a substitute Party secretary was there. And I appeared at her office because there were big posters, they wanted workers youth to go to college because they figure that some of the middle class and the former upper class that sends its sons to college and I asked if she can recommend me and she said, "Well, I don't know you but why don't you dictate a recommendation to my secretary?" And so that was the big first hurdle that I went through because the regular Party secretary would have never written that letter. So, with this, I went to a university forum, but the trouble is you had to write your autobiography, and the minute they got to a point of Israel, which you could not in those days just stay silent about two years of your life, when they found out they said 'Thanks but no thanks,' and again a strange thing happened. One of the faculty members who was on the committee, cause the committee that interviewed people consisted of faculty member, Communist Youth Organization, the Communist Party, the union, various organizations. He came after me and he said, "Holczer, Holczer," he said, "was your father from the suburb of Budapest?" I said yes. He said, "Was there a soccer team in which he and four or five of his brothers played at the same time?" I said yes. He said, "I played with your dad." He said, "Come back in September," he says "You were a minor when you left Hungary. Let's see if the minister of education can exempt you," you know? Amnesty you, pardon you, whatever. Well, anyway, I went back in September and nobody knew who I was, nobody, they had no idea, go away. So I looked for him and he went in to the Party secretary and he came out and he said, and he said, "I am happy to inform you that the minister of education give you a dispensation. You can enter the university." And he said, "This is the last time you and I ever talk to each other." He said, "Don't even greet me." He said, "You don't know me." And that was it. This is how I got in. Yeah. So it was two coincidences, very lucky ones.

End of Tape 3, Side B

Tape 4, Side A

Q: This is tape four, side A of an interview with Robert Holczer. So you entered university, what year was this?

A: 1950.

Q: And you stayed, you studied what?

A: I studied, my major was geography and my minor was history.

Q: What were you interested in doing after you gained your degree?

A: I wanted to be a geographer. I wanted to work for the Geographic Institute of Hungary or teach geography. I love geography. And, in Hungary, it was a very important subject at that time. But in America, it was no subject at all. I, when I arrived here, people were just looking at me and they said, "No, this is, unfortunately, we are not teaching geography here." It was incorporated into what they called social studies in the high school.

Q: So, after you . . .

A: So, I switched and I made, I went back to school here in 1959, and switched and had a history major, 'kay. And I left geography just out there, I didn't touch it anymore, so I got a master's degree in history and my secondary credentials, teaching credentials.

Q: After you graduated from, from college while you were in Hungary, what did you do?

A: Then I taught in a junior high school in the suburbs of Budapest, working-class suburb in Budapest until 1956, when the Revolution broke out and I left.

Q: Did you play any sort of role in the Revolution?

A: Just a very minor one. In the 19th district of Budapest, I was asked to form the New Democratic Teachers' Union. And I had very ambivalent feelings about the revolution because I was afraid that the same elements, the same kind of elements who came up in 1944, October 15, eventually will dominate it. I just did not trust the revolution so I stayed away from it. I understood the anger of the people and I sympathized with the, with the desire to have a free country, but I didn't trust some of the groups that participated in it. And what, what really precipitated my departure is that a few days before I left, I saw some groups with Arrow Cross armbands, and that did it. I realized that I would never be able to live here anymore. There will be absolutely no, no peace for somebody who is either a human being or, or has a Jewish background or favors a peaceful living, lifestyle.

Q: Had you experienced directly any anti-Semitism?

A: All the time. Hungarians are with the Austrians and Poles, probably the three most anti-Semitic countries in Europe. I felt much less anti-Semitism frankly in Germany in my nineteen years that I recently spent there than in Hungary or in Austria.

Q: So you decided to leave Hungary.

A: Yes, I decided to leave Hungary and in 1956, November, I started to walk toward the border with a cousin of mine who just graduated from high school and was always in political trouble with the police for his outspoken attitude, so, he followed, he came with me, and we then crossed the border after, I think about six, seven days or so. And arrived in Austria.

Q: Was it difficult to leave, did you need any exit visa or any . . .

A: No, it was totally illegal. We were walking usually from dawn to dusk and whatever the conditions were, you know, favorable, we didn't really like to walk in broad daylight but of course we couldn't walk in the darkness either because we didn't know the terrain. We slept in, in haylofts, the farmers were quite kind. They felt probably a little bit guilty for not participating in the revolution and slowly approached the border this way. And then before the border, it was then a little bit difficult, and we had to have, we had connections because a third person joined us whose relatives lived in a border town and they helped us to get over.

Q: And then your parents were still living…?

A: Yes. My parents were still there and I told them definitely that this time I want them to follow me, eventually, when they can come legally. Because I didn't want them to, they were by that time, the age when you don't just chase somebody across snowfields. So, we arrived in Graz, that was the first Austrian town, and you had all the opportunity to go then anywhere in the world. Every country opened its arms. [dog barking] Lie down, Gelsey.

Q: So you arrived in, in Graz.

A: And the world was then open to us and I intended to go to Sweden. I wanted to stay in Europe, and I just thought that Sweden would be a good place for me to, to be. But my cousin got away from me while we were staying in Salzburg, in, in a hotel which was one of the gathering points for the Hungarian refugees, and left a note for me to come and follow him. And I promised his mother that I would take care of him so I followed him and this is how I ended up in the U.S.

Q: You followed him all the way to the U.S.?

A: Yes. Well, of course, it was very easy. All I had to do is go and tell the authorities there, the, the ones who were in charge of the Hungarian refugees that instead of Sweden, I changed my mind and I want to go to the U.S. Not only that, they already, they already had

some messages from the Red Cross saying that if I show up, and the reason I was away, because previously he had asked me to go to Vienna and arrange for him to stay with his relatives in Vienna who were not my relatives, but he wanted to go to school there. He was totally intoxicated by the, by the light, western lifestyle because he had never been to the West. And by the time I came back to Salzburg, he was gone. So, but he left messages. So the Red Cross sent me to St. Louis, Missouri to be reunited with him.

Q: Did you have any idea why he would have done such a thing, of just leaving?

A: No, he, he was just, he was a very unpredictable fellow, you know? You could not really, he was, he was a just a restless person and I think he figured, well, why not, I want to see the U.S. and, and his message to me was, "You can always go to Sweden from the U.S. You will have the money and opportunity, but maybe you won't have the opportunity to go and see the U.S. if you live in Sweden." Little, little did he know about economic conditions in the eighties and nineties that, I think, more Swedes can travel much easier and come here than we in Sweden.

Q: Why did you prefer to go to Sweden?

A: You know, I am a romantic. And I just felt that I would not want to leave Europe. Europe, to me, was always my home. I loved the old towns, and I always loved clarity and that, the Scandinavian purity, maybe, that I have seen too many, I had seen too many Scandinavian movies, Swedish movies. But they just appealed to me, the lifestyle. And I liked the fact that the social security, that people have in Scandinavian countries, especially in Sweden. And just a lot of things appealed to me about Sweden, and I knew that I would be treated fairly, so, that was it.

Q: And you had, yet you had enough money to just travel to the U.S. instead and . . .

A: No, I had no money. We didn't need any money. [talkover] No. Nobody had any money. All you did was as a refugee, you appeared at, when, when we finally were picked up and taken to Graz by the Austrian police, they were very well organized there, there, you found every religious denomination having a booth, who welcomed you. You could go and say that I am a Baptist, I am a Catholic, made no difference and then name the country where you wanted to go to. And, and it was very simple, you didn't need any money. Then, next step was each had a place in Austria where they temporarily would house you, even give you a little pocket money and there you waited for your transportation to go to that country. And that so, I did not really want to be attached to any religious organization so I went to a very independent one called the Tolstoy Foundation. It was founded by Tolstoy's daughter and, using I think the, the royalties of Tolstoy's books, and so they are the ones who brought me to the U.S. It was all gratis. I came over, the American military and the Air Force is the one who flew all Hungarian refugees over. MATS, Military Air Transportation, the, the stewardesses and almost everybody involved with us were of, of Hungarian origin, most of them from Cleveland. Cleveland is the second largest Hungarian city in the world after

Budapest. And, and so here, they then, then I was handed over to a Jewish organization because my cousin came through a Jewish organization. So in St. Louis they were waiting for me. If you were a Hungarian refugee those days, you had no problem because the world, the whole world felt very guilty about not helping the Revolution and so they did everything possible. I mean I was so embarrassed. I never, I was never in my life treated this way, I thought, you know, I was some dignitary or something. They were waiting for me at the airport and I was just… But first I had to spend, like most Hungarians, some time at Camp Kilmer in New Jersey which was a screening camp for people. They screened out the sick, the U.S. did not take, I think, people with TB and some other illnesses, they went to Scandinavia, the Swedes did, and also Communist Party members and such. I don't know what the criteria was, but they looked into your background a little bit. And so this is how I ended up in St. Louis. My cousin stayed with me for about no more than two months, not even that much. He found some relatives in Chicago who would help him to go to Champagne, the University of Illinois, and he just left. And we were housed, we were taken by an American family who had very good intentions but the man was a manic depressive so you could never figure out for one second to another how he would react to you. And, apparently, his wife felt that maybe taking Hungarian refugees in would, would somehow remedy the problem but it didn't. And they had a mentally retarded child, so it was not a very ideal situation for a newcomer although she was very nice to me and I stayed there for a few months and then eventually, I met a professor of Hungarian ancestry and origin at the University of, Washington University in St. Louis who had in Aspen, Colorado, a house, and he and his family spent every summer there because he was a member of the music festival. And when they heard… I hated St. Louis, I just couldn't find anything redeeming about that, that city, and when they heard that I was very unhappy and all this, they took me to Aspen, Colorado and they said, "You can always work here for a dollar an hour, too." And I loved it. I stayed there for almost three years. And most of my friends and connections and everything in my American life practically comes from that period. From my Aspen period, people who helped me to get ahead in, in more ways than one. So, I am, I was very lucky again to end up there. Of course, those days Aspen was not what it is today, you know.

Q: Were you teaching there?

A: I was, no, from Aspen was a place where I collected my money and, and, you know, saved enough. I wanted to go up to Alaska for one summer. I went up to Alaska and worked for the Forest Service and then came to Fresno, California, which offered me a loan. I couldn't get a scholarship because they didn't know much about me. My papers did not arrive from Hungary. So it was, but at least they offered me a National Defense Loan so that helped me to start school. And I stayed in Fresno for two years when I got my teaching credentials and my master's degree in history. And I, those were, scholastically speaking, they were good years. I had very good instructors and, and good friends and sponsors and, I did not regret it. And then I ended up in the Bay Area where I wanted to be. And met my wife there. And I was teaching in Marin County.

Q: Were you in touch with your parents throughout this . . .

A: Yes. All the time. And I, almost every summer I went home to visit, okay?

Q: Were there plans for them to come?

A: Yes. They, once I got married in '67, they came to visit and they enjoyed it very much and then in 1974, when, see I married my wife with three children. They were tiny, their, their father abandoned them, he was alcoholic. And so, my wife and I raised them. And by the time, 1974, I get an offer from a friend of mine in Switzerland to come and help him, he was a director of a school in a children's village in Switzerland, Pestalozzy, very famous children's village, Pestalozzy Children's Village. Do you speak German?

Q: No.

A: No. Okay. And so, and I loved the mountains, I loved the Alps and I wanted to get back to Europe. And since we had only one child at home by that time, and he was willing to come so we went over. We, we resigned our jobs and we went back and the job fell through. Because in the meantime, the Swiss had the law, not a law, a plebiscite about not hiring foreigners unless they can find a local person for the job. And after years of advertisement for this particular position, they couldn't find anybody, a couple came just as we were being interviewed. So it fell through and in 1964, no I mean 1965, before I got married, I came over to Europe to teach for the Army, just for a year. I just needed, I was a very confirmed bachelor, and I needed a year to think about whether I want to marry somebody with three small children and here a confirmed bachelor. So I stayed for a year when I decided yes, but during the year, I got to know a lot of people in the system, in the Department of Defense School System. So now that the job fell through and we basically gave up our jobs here in the States, I had only one, you know, opportunity here, to go over and see if any of our, our, any of my former colleagues can be found and if I can get any help to get a job for my wife and myself. And not only that I found some but they were now in very, very high positions and they said, no problem. And both of us, within a year, started to teach. My wife got a job even before me, because it was more difficult for high school teachers than elementary. So she started out and we lived in the Frankfurt area and we stayed for nineteen years.

Q: How did you meet your wife?

A: We, when I left school with my credentials, I wanted to, I had a girlfriend in the Bay Area, also from Aspen. She was a schoolteacher and she wanted me to get a job there so we can be close and we were there. Now all of a sudden, she said, oh, at that time it was very, by that time it was very difficult to get a job for a teacher, in the early sixties, and the only job available, finally, was teaching special ed classes. And I said, children are children, I don't care. I had to sign a paper that I would go to school and get a credential. And the man who hired me was also a Holocaust survivor so it, it really helped. I told him very honestly why I want the job and I said, "It doesn't matter why I want the job, I will, I will do a good job, you can, you can bet on that." And I hope I did. So, he hired me and this is where I met my

wife. She was also teaching special ed classes, and but she stayed only for a few years and then when I came back in 1965, then I went into special ed for the county, for Marin County, and I stayed for almost ten years, nine years. So that's how we met. And then I switched. With the Army, I switched back to teaching political science and, and history.

Q: What was it like living in Germany all those years?

A: Well, it was much more pleasant than I had envisioned, frankly. I found that there is a very large segment of a new German generation that is, is absolutely appalled, okay, of the past. And I met a lot of intellectuals who had a very good vision of the past, and not only that, they spread the knowledge around. Naturally, there is an element in, in Germany, that is, you know, that is the scum of earth, but frankly, they are very much the minority. And I, I could live in Germany much easier, probably, than I could ever live in Austria, where it doesn't take more than a few minutes to hear somebody making an anti-Semitic or fascist remark, especially if they have a couple of beer. You know. So, there is, there is a new Germany. Now, with East Germany joining, it is a problem. But West Germany itself, was, I would say, a pretty civilized state. Okay, now the East Germans, that's a different, that's a, that's a tragedy right now, that they had not been instructed by the proper history teachers, and, there are big problems in East Germany because the East Germans said, "The Nazis, oh no, they live in West Germany. We, we are good Communists here, we don't have to worry about the past." And this attitude then led to what is happening nowadays in Germany with the skinheads.

Q: Was it difficult at first for you to accept that Germany was so, that you could really get along with some of these Germans?

A: Well, again, you know, I followed my father. He came to see us in Germany once and while he was there, our landlady's son was killed in a motorcycle accident, a young seventeen year old, a young man. And we had to go to the funeral. And my wife said to my father as she look around, "Grandpa, look, all these men of your age. Do you sometimes think of all the ghosts that are around here behind these men?" And my father said, "You can't live with hate." He says, "There are ghosts everywhere. There are Indian ghosts in America, too. You have your own ghosts." And that's just the way that, you can't constantly think of that. And we befriended Germans who were a lot more even liberal than, than we are. And so, I mean, you can find all kinds of people. That, but there, Germany, I don't really worry too much about Germany as much as I worry about Russia and, and Poland and Austria and there you can find a lot of fascist elements and Hungary too, probably.

Q: We've got a few more minutes. So, is there anything, what made you decide to return to the States?

A: Oh, when, the, the military was in a, is, is a drawdown situation where they were pulling out quite a few troops from Germany and we reached, my wife reached the point where she just said she wanted to be close to the children. We have four grandchildren. She, this house

which didn't look like this at that time was a small little place, this was one end of the house and that was the other end of the house. A partner of my brother-in-law lived here, a veterinarian, but it was a very small place. It was available. They bought it and he called us and my wife said, "Look, I stayed in Europe for nineteen years with you, now I would like you to stay where I would like to be and it is so nice to be so close to family." Our son is only four hours away, in Nashville, with a little baby. And oh, and she gets along with her sister very well and we all get along, we never had an argument. So, that was an ideal situation so that's how we got here.

End of Tape 4, Side A

[NOTE: SIDE TWO OF TAPE 4 IS BLANK]

Tape 5, Side A

Q: I'm Arwen Donahue and I'm here with Robert Holczer in Paris, Kentucky on April 29, 1996. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview. And first to… ask you a couple of questions about the issues that came up in the last interview. I just wanted to get your aunt's name, for one thing, the aunt whose apartment you stayed in on Zichy Jeno Street, what was her name?

A: Her name was Aranka, that is Goldie in English, you know, Aranka, and Teply, T-E-P-L-Y. She's still living in Hungary at this date and probably it would be very difficult to communicate with her because she is number one, old, and number two, I think that she has some mental problems that she developed since the war and, but she certainly is the heroine of the whole story and my survival, so I try to keep up with her but it's very, very difficult and I'm very, very sorry about that. But she has a son who lives in Switzerland so at this point she's still alive.

Q: I didn't quite understand how just go back a little bit, when you lived in the house on Zichy Jeno Street, before it became a clinic, it was a Jewish house.

A: Right.

Q: And yet there were some people who lived in the house who were non-Jews.

A: Non-Jews, yes.

Q: And I suppose your aunt was considered one of them.

A: Yes.

Q: But before the house was designated a clinic, if anyone in the house were to be liquida… were to be put into the ghetto, would they have gone apartment by apartment, or would they have taken the entire house?

A: They would have gone apartment by apartment and, of course, if you could prove that you are a gentile, and that was very easy because every concierge had a list, years ago this was a law in Hungary, that every concierge had a list and that had nothing to do with Jews or non-Jews way back, because when you change your residence in Europe, you have to go to the police and report it. In other words, every European country, they know who is at that point where. And so this list existed, all they had to do, come and talk to the concierge and all the concierges were basically serving the government, they were in my estimate, what I call the common man, and their attitude changed regarding of what the government was doing and they were lackeys and so there was no big problem, they always could tell who were the gentiles and who were not by just showing the list. But there were gentiles still living in the Jewish houses who had a nice place and they just didn't want to move, you know? And so

when, for example, at one time we were lined up because the house was discovered and this George Ara Jereczian was not there with his guards. I think they went to buy, get some rations for the house, and so we were really without any defense, and we were lined up, then the gentiles who are not down there be also lined up because they, apparently they had known what was going on and could identify themselves.

Q: But you were lined up although you lived with your aunt?

A: We were, yes, we were lined up, we were lined up. And then in the last moment, a lot of things happened. This aunt of mine, for example, she was also out, most people who could go on the street were always out looking for something to eat and bring home and when she saw her mother, for example, in the lineup, she just went up to her and started to kick her and said, "This stupid slut. Just, she is so stupid. Every time people say line up, she lines up, she's not Jewish." And all this, and in front of those Arrow Cross people, she just dragged her mother out of the line up and she had a personality that nobody argued with her. So they assume that she is a gentile, therefore her mother is a gentile, too. And then we were saved because George Ara Jereczian came home and immediately, his men immediately went to these punks and said, you know, "Clear out of here in short order, papers and everything else. And if you want, you know, we'll call the Ministry of Defense." And so, they knew their job and threatened these people who then left.

Q: You mentioned that there were about ten people living in that apartment with your aunt?

A: About ten, yeah, yeah.

Q: And some of them were her brothers and sisters?

A: Yes, they were, they were, I start out with my mother, then my father's three sisters, okay? Among them this Aranka, Goldie, and eventually my father's two brothers, too, joined us. They were also under some kind of a disguise as policemen or this and that in whatever uniform they could get, but when things were really tough the last, I think, ten days or two weeks, they joined us, so they were there, too. Then there were some husbands, my, one of my aunts had a husband and a boyfriend. It was a triangle that the family just tolerated because the boyfriend was a much nicer person than the husband, everybody, so there was even humor then. And some children. So we might, it's possible we were even more than ten and that was very fortunate, a lot of apartments have a lot more than just ten people because this was, it sound like, it seemed like a safe haven and of course, all the relatives were coming and you wouldn't want to throw out your relatives and so... a lot of very famous doctors were there who then went on and came to this country and elsewhere and the whole family was there, so.

Q: What about her other brothers and sisters, other than those who were in the apartment? Where did they… were they at the time?

A: Oh, my aunt's other, well, we were all together in the same apartment, it was her apartment and because ordinarily a gentile would not have had anything to do with Jews, but this was an extraordinary place because we, she knew that if they really stormed the house, the Arrow Cross people, and if they really eliminate George Ara Jereczian and his guards, then everything is lost, it doesn't make any difference, so... and inside the house, of course, there was absolutely no other rule except you made up your own so nobody cared. Yes?

Q: But she had, there were thirteen all together, siblings, right?

A: Yeah, right.

Q: So...

A: No, no, no, no, thirteen, my father had thirteen brothers and sisters and some of them were already dead and others were elsewhere. One was in what was Slovakia at that time and participated in the Slovak uprising against the Germans and was hanged, was captured and hanged. My father was in Yugoslavia, so there were, another was in a labor camp, we didn't even know where he was, so they were dispersed. The women were together, the women we could get together and, but the men, only two of them. So there were altogether five, five of the thirteen, right there.

Q: Also, what was the name of the psychiatrist, the famous psychiatrist who...

A: Völgyessi, Völgyessi. He was the most famous Hungarian psychiatrist of his, of that time.

Q: Would you spell his name, please?

A: V-O, and there is a double, what the Germans call, what is it, well, anyway, two dots.

Q: Umlaut.

A: Umlaut, yes, two dots on the O, then L-G-Y-E-S-S-I, Völgyessi. And he, he was a very influential man and I, if I remember correctly, I heard, at that time as a child, that he was the main reason that this whole setup was the way it was. That he had the connection, he knew George Ara Jereczian and he is the one who brought him in and suggested that let's do this.

Q: Do you know what became of him after the war?

A: He was in his, I would say, late 50's in 1945, but he had a son and two daughters and a relatively younger wife, so I assume that they are somewhere and I also assume that they are not in Hungary, that they are probably in the U.S., so if ever there is a reunion, I will see them. As a matter of fact, I would like to see them because I was deeply in love with one of the, the little Völgyessi girls. I was a young kid then, it was just a puppy love.

Q: Who else of the group that was with you in the apartment on Zichy Jeno Street survived? You and your aunts and your mother?

A: Well, in 1945, we all survived, okay? But, oh you mean since? Who's still alive?

Q: So everyone went through okay, went through the war?

A: Oh, we went through the same experience and nobody... in that house, the only people who were taken away were a man between eighteen and, I think it was eighteen and forty-five or eighteen and fifty-five, before, before October 15th when the labor, when they truly were just going to a labor camp, labor organizations, that is when all the men, so there were no men until October 15th, between eighteen and fifty-five in that house, they were all taken away. So, some of the families who lived there, for example, their father was not with them by that time. And, I don't know of anybody who survived. In other words, unfortunately, most of these people were then in a forced march toward Germany at the end of the war and somewhere in, probably western Hungary, they were just either killed or died of typhus.

Q: Did you keep in touch with anyone else from the clinic after the war, other than your family?

A: No, no, no. You know, I was fifteen when the war ended, and I regret this very much, but outside my family, my family is the only one, and there are only two members living in my family and they are the only ones. I tried to ask them if they can make some contact, I am now really very much interested in keeping up with some other people, but they, they just, they never really bothered and they are not very good letter writers so, and if I go to Hungary, maybe I will look for it, I would like to and I'm going to ask, perhaps, if I can get to the, to any, perhaps to the synagogue in Hungary, if they have some knowledge of, is there a group that still comes together, because there were kids of my age and I'd like to know what happened to them.

Q: When you returned to your apartment, you described, in our last interview, about returning to your apartment after the war and finding that there were other people who were living there.

A: Mmm-hmm.

Q: Were your things, were you furniture, any of your belongings still in the apartment?

A: Yeah, interestingly, well, there was very little left in our apartment, what was left, a couple of boxes, and I don't know why they were left there, this family never touched. And that, to me, was immediately, I give them some good points for that. But when I opened it, our apartment got a direct hit when the siege of Budapest took place and so a lot of the... and most of these boxes contained tablecloth or sheets or something like that, and so they all had big holes in them. And, however, a very beautiful embroidered tablecloth and the napkins we had for a long time until they disintegrated. My wife mended them and we used them.

And now, what happened to the furniture? A lot we give to neighbors to say, "If we come back, okay, hopefully, you will give it back to us and if we are not, then it is yours," so, and they took it and now not one of them had a piece left that they can give back to us. They all said the same thing: the Russians took it. Now, this was the most illogical, stupid thing to say, because the Russian soldiers had two hands, what are they going to do with a piano? What are they going to do with a table, what do they need it? The Russians only went for one thing. Watches. They had watches up to their ears, it's as if they had never seen watches before, that was the only thing. They stop you on the street and that was the only question, "*Davay chasi*!" That means, "Give me your watch." Nothing else, I mean what can a, a foot soldier who is going on and on and on across Europe, what is he going to do with anything that takes up space and has weight? And so it was ridiculous, but nothing, absolutely nothing was returned from the neighbors.

Q: Did any of your friends from before the war return afterwards?

A: Any of my friends? Well, as I mentioned before, my class, junior high class, was practically totally taken and deported under those very unusual circumstances, so I had to look for the kids who were not my schoolmates, but, or either lower or higher classes, and also the ones that I used to play with when I went to the city park which was not far away from us. And I would say that about half of them I found, but the other half perished, you know, either because of the fires, you know there was bombs, or because they were killed during the Arrow Cross era, after October 15th.

Q: You, in our last interview, had talked a little bit about meeting up with some of your friends around Budapest and that you would talk about the war and that was exclusively what you would talk about. When you met up with them again after the war, what did you talk about then?

A: Well, when I met my friends after the war, number one, we were so full of hatred, we were looking for some kind of an outlet, some organization that we can join, and we found it. And part of it was they give away shirts, we found a Communist Party. Imagine, we were fifteen year olds and we saw that people were walking around in red, flaming red shirts. And we found out that the flaming red shirts come from parachutes and these parachutes were supply parachutes that were dropped by the Soviet forces and the Hungarians got the material and the Communist Party made a kind of a campaign and made it into shirts and would give them to anybody who signed up. And I think this drew us a lot more than anything else, the four very close friends of mine, whom I knew from the illegal boy scout organization and, luckily, we all survived, we all went and signed up with the Communist Party and I think this is the first, or almost the last time, I ever went to the Party because, now we went to a couple of meetings and we were just bored to death, this happened to American communists, too. Signed up or something, I mean it was the most boring thing, so we never really considered ourself truly Communist Party members because we were, I think, members for a month and then we never paid any fees or we didn't do anything after that, but this was, our first step was to go down to the Communist Party headquarters and sign up with the Communist

Party, which was understandable because we felt that the Communist Party was going to be the one that revenges all these atrocities and whatever happened, and then we saw that almost everybody who was in the Arrow Cross movement is also in the Communist Party because people easily turned, that's obvious, you know, a lot of books and essays were written about how anybody who is an extremist in one way can become the extremist in—on the other side. So we found that and that was disgusting, absolutely. And the Communist Party knew about it and they defended it and we didn't like that, their terminology, and so we quit. So then we went back to, and kind of regrouped as old boy scouts. But our heart was not in it because now, I mean for so many years we could not do anything as boy scouts except go out and hike in nature, we couldn't even wear a kerchief. And so now we could wear a uniform and some of us really bought a uniform, and then we just, we just lost completely our lust for boy scout life and that didn't work. Then, you know, this was, another year went by and I, of the four, I broke away from the other four and I joined the Zionists. They just, there were a lot of things that appealed to me, the fact that, finally, I am going to have a homeland, finally, I am going to have a passport, there was adventure. Immediately, they send me up in the mountains and I had to go through a certain instruction, more than one, on more than one occasion. And they, I advanced, I was pretty eager and good at learning things, and I became a youth leader in the movement and I loved to be with young people. And so that, to me, was a, was a very happy period of my life. My only conflict was with my parents. Since I was an only child, of course, they wanted me around as much as possible, and I reached that rebellious teenage period, I was not too rebellious, but rebellious enough to move out of the house at sixteen and go to a Zionist children's home where first I was just a, a resident and I liked being with my peer group. There were many, there were many in Hungary, a lot of the survivors, young people of my age, just chose this as a lifestyle. And what we were doing there, we received a lot of instructions in agriculture, in the language, Hebrew language, in Jewish history, to prepare us when we go to Israel. And my parents, of course, didn't like for me being away at sixteen and I felt really sorry for them and once the rebellious period ended, in about a half a year or so, I moved back home and one of the reasons was that life was too free on these, it was the perfect kind of thesis, anti-thesis, that we were so restricted, now everything was free, I mean, and I was a little bit of a, I was a strange kid because I didn't grow up very quickly to become a man, and I did not like the fact that here were girls of my age who wanted to sleep with me and all this and that, I just, I always pictured myself more of a, an individual, a man who has things to do and I don't, I'm not going to spend a lot of time with, with sex and all this and my mind was not only on just women, let's put it this way, even though I already had sexual experiences and the whole, and because of this, they considered me a little bit of an eccentric so that happy, I moved back home to satisfy my parents, but I didn't stay there long enough because I got an offer at the age of seventeen to go and be a resident advisor in a home for Jewish orphans. That was on, it was called Tarogato Street in the Buda section of Budapest where I found a man who became a very good friend of mine, the man who led the institution, a marvelous man, also a Zionist, by the name of Spitzer[4] and his family, and they were very good to me and I felt very much at home, plus I got a nice salary and all my needs were taken care of

[4] First name: Imre

there. Even I had a girlfriend who was also a resident counselor there, so happy, really, they were very happy days. And in the meantime, I also participated very actively in, I changed organizations and left, I was in a, I would say, kind of a petit bourgeois Zionist group and I went over to the Marxists because that suited my philosophy a lot more and I stayed with them and eventually they were the ones that helped me to then immigrate to Israel, that was after, but we'll get to this. Now I want to talk just a little bit about school because all these times I went to school, too. Right after the, 1945, as soon as the school started, my mother was determined that I should go to the School of Commerce, the high schools were specialized, and there was one that was called, the Special High School for Commerce. Can you stop it for a second because I want to close the window. So as I said, my mother was determined that I should go there, of course, I had no desire but I was still a good boy and I started at that school and the fact that it was the middle of the year, basically, and I missed the first half of a year wasn't a big problem because anybody who was a, a Holocaust survivor at that time can just about do anything. So this was no big problem, the big problem came when I noticed how many of my teachers are outright anti-American, anti-Russian, anti-Semitic, they haven't changed their attitude and there were some other Jewish kids in that school and I got together with them and I asked them if, if we should tolerate this, if they think this is correct and everybody was kind of lying low, the usual way, and I said, "No, I am not going to do that." There was specifically one teacher who had, I forgot, had a German name, a very small man who not only was anti-Semitic and anti-Russian and anti-everything and very pro-German, but agitating. He was not just making statements, he was really agitating and in a very emotional way and I was, I just, I reached a point where I just couldn't take it anymore, not after what happened, just, you know, in the last few years and my boy scout commander, and at that time I was still kind of hanging on with the boy scout movement, my boy scout commander was now a member of the new Hungarian Secret Police and he was an officer and he escaped from the labor camp and went over to the Russians and all this and came back with the Russian troops already and was one of the organizers. And I went to see him and I said, "This man should be removed from the school." And they did take him in and somehow they went down the list at school and found out that I was the one who reported him because it was obvious since I was constantly arguing with him, arguing with him in class and so. . .

End of Tape 5, Side A

Tape 5, Side B

Q: Okay, this is tape one, side B of an interview with Robert Holczer.

A: I just had to quit. And then I continued my studies, I did not want to have the same experience again and I went to the Jewish, the Jewish rabbi school, really, what it was, it was a school to educate future teachers, but it was a high school still. Just like my previous high school was specialized for commercial jobs, this one was, basically, a teaching gymnasium, a teaching high school, which meant by the laws of Hungary at that time that once you finished—and it was instead of four, five classes, so you were nineteen when you finished the school—you were then an elementary school teacher at the age of nineteen without any college education. I was there at this school and, of course, as far as any kind of a bad experience, I didn't have any. Now I was among my own people, there were some very, very good friends, I liked the school, it was nothing special, it was not challenging me, the only aspect most of us didn't like is the religious aspect, which we didn't take very seriously. So actually, I was still in that school in my eighteenth year when eventually, and we will go back to this, I emigrated, emigrated to Israel, and so I never really finished my high school. But out of deference to what happened and all this, I got a diploma. So I had a high school diploma which, of course, my parents got later because I needed one and… so these are the two schools. Once I reached this level of the, this, the Jewish teaching high school for, high school for future teachers, whatever, it's very difficult to translate into English, perhaps Lyceum is a good name for it, once I reached that, then as far as my experiences after the Holocaust, there was no problem, you know, it's obvious. Now, going back, of course in the meantime, in the Zionist movement, a lot of changes took place because we had to go practically underground. As the communist regime established itself in Hungary and in 1948 the famous turn, Year of the Turn came about, which happened in every Eastern European country, and the Year of the Turn is an expression when the communists took control, complete power, because until 1948, we had democracy in Eastern Europe, those countries that knew what democracy was. And Hungary had some very able politicians and was really on its road to become a democracy, so was Czechoslovakia, and probably Poland, too, of course, Romania was very different. But, in 1948, everything has changed, we became, again, just like with the illegal boy scout group before 1945, I found myself belonging to an illegal organization, Zionism was outlawed because all of a sudden Stalin and company found Zionism, of course, a tool of the imperialists as they called it. So we were doing, basically, the same things that we were doing before, but now very cautiously, illegally, and meetings were held usually either in some far away synagogues, basements or in some Jewish orphanages where it was not very obvious if, let's say, twenty, thirty people came in and out because there were hundreds of people living there anyway. The, many times we paraded as young communists, if we wanted to have a larger meeting somewhere, singing communist songs when somebody came by, but otherwise doing our own business. By 1949, early 1949, the situation almost was intolerable and, basically, they wanted to have the whole Zionist movement leave, not the communists, but the Zionist movement wanted to get as many people out as possible, fearing that if Czechoslovakia is going to turn also completely communist, that there will be no way from Hungary to go anywhere. By that

time we could only go illegally across the border. And I think it was in February, 1949, that I got an order from my Zionist leadership to go to a little northern town, Vacz, V-A-C-Z, my mother comes from that town and they knew it. My job was to go to the mayor of the town and ask him if he would like to have a high school orchestra give a, an evening concert on some given date. I went there, I mentioned to the mayor that I had been to Vacz many, many times because my grandparents, cousins, aunts, I had a lot of relatives and my mother was born here, and of course, he was overwhelmed that a high school orchestra is coming to play. I then went to a printer, this was one of my instructions, and had all kinds of posters printed advertising the date and the concert. Went back, reported it and the next command was that on a certain day, I would have to go with an instrument or with an instrument case to a corner of Budapest and there would be a bus there, a state bus, by that time every bus company was nationalized, and I have to board the bus with a lot of other people and I have to pretend that I am a member of a high school band, whatever instrument I am playing, and do, not to talk about anything, Zionism or Israel, anything like that. And just wait for further instructions there. And of course, I was notified that this is it, that we would be going to Israel and I bid farewell to my family and got an instrument case, boarded the bus on a certain date and time and I saw all my fellow Zionist members, the ones who were in my group, and we started toward the Czechoslovakian border.

Q: Can I ask a few questions before we go on?

A: Yes.

Q: I wanted to, I'm interested in hearing how you felt about Marxism, why it was that Marxism appealed to you as far as the type of Zionist organization that you were involved in and hearing a little bit more about how you felt about the politics of the time and the communist takeover.

A: I had very ambivalent feelings like a lot of those Jews who did not come from the upper middle class or upper class. I came from definitely no better than the middle of the middle class or rather, perhaps, the lower middle class. My father came from a very low class proletarian family which was very unusual among the Jews of Hungary. My mother came from a little petit bourgeois family from the northern Hungarian town. They thought they were middle class, but it depends on how you classify this, as far as I'm concerned they were kind of a pseudo-petit bourgeois people, the kind who, it's very difficult to define them, but there was not much work and a lot of complaining. Now, because I never had a very, let's say satisfactory and wealthy life, naturally I had some sympathies with, with the Marxist movement, it's obvious. Second, I had a very definite sympathy with them because they were the most adamant about taking the war criminals and punish them. They were the most anti-fascist and all these things appealed to me. I was, you can consider even though I was not a member, really after my one month experience, I was not a member, at least I didn't consider myself a member of the Communist Party, but I certainly was sympathizing with a lot of their goals, even though I was in a completely different game by that time, knowing I would go to Israel. But, this is probably why I changed my affiliation and went from a

bourgeoisie Zionist organization to a Marxist Zionist organization where I felt very much at home. And there were, of course, ugly things happening, the communist takeover in Eastern Europe was not a very pleasant occasion. And one only had to think a little bit clearly and rise above all this emotion to see that the communists used very nasty methods to eliminate anyone who disagreed with them. And the more power they grabbed, the more vicious they became. And of course, eventually I, the Zionists suffered more what anybody who was considered a Zionist or anybody, like my father, who could have been executed if they discovered that he was with Tito, so if you were an enemy for one reason or another, there was no law. The communists created their own laws, the secret police had free hand and, of course, I began to become very disappointed in that. My father, he was always a Social Democrat, and he never, never approved what the Communist Party was doing in Hungary. And he was very courageous because when the Communist Party gobbled up the Social Democratic Party, he sent in a postcard and said, "Excuse me, but I don't want to join you." Which was very courageous because from there on, you could have been watched. The fact that he comes from a working class and was a very little fish, I think saved his life. But if he had been a name, probably he would have been killed then. And so, politics, yes, I kept my eye on politics all the time and this helped me in 1949 to just go, because I figured there will never be peace here, there will never be peace here. And, do you have any other questions?

Q: Mmm-hmm.

A: Okay.

Q: As far as, you had mentioned that there were some serious anti-Semitic incidents at your school and I am wondering if you had any expectations after the war was over that some of that would be ameliorated and that anti-Semitism was not going to be as much of a problem any more?

A: Yes, I was very naive, really, at the age of fifteen, for some reason, I thought that a better world is coming. And I was deeply disappointed when I heard that there were even pogroms in the countryside where a few Jews dared to come back to a village or a town in Hungary, in Poland, in Slovakia, I think the Czechs were the only ones who acted in a very civilized way, but then they were always civilized and the most civilized in Eastern Europe. That disappointed me, people were killed, survived Auschwitz, came home and killed in a pogrom in Hungary and in some other Eastern European countries, two years after the war. And that made me very bitter and my idealism and my naivete really evaporated.

Q: Did you experience anything directly, any anti-Semitic incidents?

A: I have not been directly in an anti-Semitic incidence because I avoided, I avoided them, I avoided any kind of such thing. I associated mainly with my own kind because I saw that there is no hope. Now, this interestingly must have changed to a certain extent because almost every one of my cousins is married to a gentile in Hungary, I think with the exception of maybe two, but every one of them, and the marriages are very solid. So I, and it's not,

they are still not what you would call a truly middle class family, that most of them still stayed in, you know, auto mechanics and this and that, that part. Now, the ones who are up there, went to college and became dentists and those, they are all married to other Jews. It's a very interesting phenomenon. But I have not experienced anything except when, right after the war at school. Okay? I heard people constantly yelling anti-Semitic slogans, especially at soccer games, but I knew that I can't expect anything else any more.

Q: And you, when you joined the Zionist organization, did you have, did you really have dreams of being in Israel, or that this, that this was something that you felt very strongly about?

A: Yes, I had dreams and that was probably a, a, just a marvelous high of my youth. The whole, the Zionists did a, a fantastic job in catching the spirit of young people and really giving us what we wanted to have. We had a relatively free life, we had, we had a picture of a heroic future for us, whether we are going to be still serving in the army in Israel or just working in a kibbutz as farmers, almost everything about it had a kind of a super human touch that I'm going to be better than all these people around here who are running around like ants on the cities of Budapest, I'm going to lead a very healthy life, and finally I'm going to have a country, I have a home, I will have a fatherland and it was, it was a marvelous feeling. And also, the whole, the whole setup, the whole organization, you know, until then, until 1946 or so, most of the picture that we saw of Jewish people is, is like sheep going into Auschwitz. And all of a sudden these people come from Israel, they are beautiful looking people. And not only that, they had courage, the way they carried themselves and they were teaching us a lot of things, you know, Israel sent a lot of, they called them *Schliahs*, people that, those who are sent, I think, literally. And they were in charge of all these camps where we had to go to where we were taught self-defense and, you know, we lived on a tree in one camp, I think what, for forty-eight hours, we were given a piece of rope and a knife and we had to stay up, and sleep up there and make our bed and all this. I mean, which young person doesn't like this? The whole image of the Jew has changed in our mind and we said, "God, it's beautiful." And when we were in danger, they were the ones who led us out of danger. I remember once I was up in the Börzsöny mountains in Hungary in a self-defense camp for a week and somebody betrayed us to the police and the police surrounded us and there was a creek, not deeper, I don't think it was deeper than maybe twenty inches, and guess who is the one who escaped from the creek in order to do something, not to save his own skin, but he was immediately telephoning and all this and that and eventually we were released. The Israeli whatever, diplomat, I can't call them, the diplomat is not the right word because you picture somebody, you know, with a tie and suit and all this, but they were just, I, messengers or whatever, leaders. And he escaped, he escaped in that creek, crawling in twenty inch of water, you know, getting on something that blend in with the, with the rocks, I mean they were unbelievable, unbelievable people. And women, you know, it's, it's, okay, after them the women came and, I mean this is a completely different Jew. I mean, and when I took my wife to Israel, she understood that, that there was just something about those kids. And so this, this, of course, was, they were idols and it was very easy to follow them. And they were, they were not really demagogues, I remember quite a few of them who got

quite introverted, they were not giving you big speeches or something, but by personal example, they were leaders because we followed them. So the, the bus going back to my escape from Hungary, the bus eventually reached Vacz and, needless to say, it didn't stop there. Beyond Vacz, it became quite dark and our leader suggested to the bus driver that we stop somewhere and eat and there was a roadside pub where they also served food. We went in and we were given money and we could order something, and in that pub, there was a very beautiful peasant woman, with I don't know how many skirts on her, this was the reason you recognize a peasant woman, in those days they still wore a lot of skirts, you know, that's an Eastern European costume that a dozen skirts is no big deal. And she started to flirt with the bus driver. And soon the bus driver came, went over to her table, and they had a good time and, of course, we were getting more and more anxious that this is going to create a big problem here, right? We knew that we were on a timetable. All of a sudden, the bus driver said to our leader, "How long do you think we will be here?" And our leader said, "Well, all these kids eat, oh, a half an hour, forty-five minutes." He said, "Good, I'll be back." and left with the woman. We ate, and our leader said, "Okay, line up outside." And instead of going back to the bus, he led us down on a field into a big barn, I would say about one mile down in a muddy field, it was February and snow and mud everywhere. We all got into the barn, about thirty of us, they closed the doors, barn doors, and he said, "Okay, don't worry. Everything will be okay." After midnight, 1:00 or so, the barn door opened and we were, they said we have to get on line and marched down, there was the river Ipoly, I-P-O-L-Y, and that was the border between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The Austrian border was already sealed, but the Czechs still let Zionist groups come over, it was kind of an arrangement, the Joint did it for a lot of money, however, they didn't know which border, Czech border guard was a communist or not, so we have to be very careful. And once we went beyond the border guards, everything was organized there, I will go back to this. So as we were marching down, I saw a woman in a leather jacket with a revolver hanging on her hip in blue jeans. I looked at this woman's face, said, "Hey, I have seen her before." And I looked and said, "This is the woman in the pub." This is to show you how organized they were. I mean, the Germans couldn't have done better, really, with their devilish organization. I mean, everything, if you understood the whole, they called it *aliyah*, the going of, to Israel. If you understood that, how they did it, you can understand how they could survive. All right? Surrounded by, of course, a sea of enemies. Once we got down to the river, we had to take our shoes off, and we kept everything on our head, the river was not high enough, we couldn't swim, so we had to walk, but I was very small, and it got to my throat at one time. Now this is February, imagine. We got over to the other side and it was supposed to be that the border guards change, everything was according to the clock, and something happened and the border guards did not change the way they were supposed to, they were still talking to each other. There was snow on the ground and the dogs, their dogs were barking, so we had to lie down on the snow for about a half an hour, wet. And many of us got sick, right there. I myself, I lost, I got frostbitten and even today I suffer for that. Now, then the border guards finally were gone and we went up, there was a house where they used to press grapes, it was a grape growing region, but had no roof and the wind was blowing and I remember, I don't think I have ever been colder in my life since then. And so we huddled together because now we missed the truck that was supposed to pick us up right down on a highway

beyond that hill, so the Israelis, the two Israelis, a man and a woman who were leading us, they went down and eventually, in about four or five hours, they located the truck, the truck came back, the truck was looking for us and then left and then, anyway the truck came back, we got up on the truck, the canvas, the top was taken down, and from there on, all we heard was the engine of the truck was occasionally, when they were halted and the word dollar, the word dollar came back all the time, I remember that.

End of Tape 5, Side B

Tape 6, Side A

Q: This is tape two, side A, of an interview with Robert Holczer. So you'll say something about the group of people that you were with.

A: I, my best friend in that group was a young man by the name of Zev Rotics. He lives in Israel at this time still, in Haifa, at Rehov Shunamit 14, and we correspond monthly, we have been ever since, ever since that time, and eventually when I left Israel, we corresponded, we kept up and I consider him my best friend. He's about the only person I keep up with. Oh no, there was one, another, a man by the name of Nissan Meschel, and I have no, he is in touch with my friend, Zev Rotics, but I lost touch with him, so I have no idea what happened, I just know that he's living there. But the others, the, I remember one young lady who was with us and she, unfortunately, had eventually pneumonia when we got to Vienna, which I will go back to when I continue the story of the journey, and died in Vienna of pneumonia, and she's buried there somewhere in the cemetery and I always planned to go and visit her, but I always run out of time and I don't know where she is buried, probably there is no more than one Jewish cemetery, so when I go back to Israel I'm going to find out because my wife… Zev Rotics, sometimes he goes to the meetings of our old friends and so he would know. Now, after the truck finally stopped in Bratislava. In Bratislava they took us to the gendarmerie where, as a formality, we were arrested, and interned in the synagogue, they took us to the synagogue that had already warm rooms, straw on the floor, blankets, good food, everything, and we were told that next morning we are going on. And it was very strange because next morning, again, the gendarmerie surrounded the synagogue, it was a big show, of course, all just in case some Soviet authority is watching. And they took us to the railroad station where we were taken in boxcars, how interesting, locked up, quite a few people in boxcars, and the train started and I think within an hour or so, they opened up and we were in the American sector of Vienna. Because Bratislava is very close to Vienna. We stayed in Vienna for, I think, two, one or two weeks, and in an American hospital, that's where the Joint somehow got an American hospital for the Zionist members and we were all there and we were given good food and warm rooms and it was very pleasant, the only thing we were always warned about, not to ever wander into the Soviet section. We were free to wander around, the city was still divided into four sections, American, British, French and Soviet. And sometimes we had to go very close to the Soviet section in going to, I remember going to a swimming pool, it was on the edge, and so everybody was nervous. But, basically, it was a good time. Vienna was full of refugees, full of life. After one week or so, then we were taken across, again by trucks, across the Alps into, no I have to correct myself, to, not to Austria, to a, a, a UNRRA camp, UNRRA was the United Nations Refugee Association or something, so the joint gave us temporarily over to UNRRA and we were housed in a beautiful area of the Alps in a town called Zaalfelden. It is a, on a lake, just the other side from Germany, and there were some very picturesque villages nearby, and I remember even though here the food was very meager and we still were hiking almost every day and going up in the mountains, and I remember that just above our camp, our refugee camp, there was a place, a mountain hut where Hitler and Mussolini met and we had to see it and sometimes a cabbage soup a day just didn't give us enough energy, but we were still

pushing for it, we wanted to see it. We stayed here, again, one or two weeks and then on, again, now over the border to Italy. In Italy, they took us again to the train station, somewhere in northern Italy, and the train then was closed up and sealed, but regular train, we just could not leave the train, Italian detectives were on the train to make sure that nobody escapes because it was ridiculous because who wants to escape to Italy, at least at that time? And we were taken down to Bari. Now, the only thing that stands out in my mind was that a lot of times when the train stopped, we, of course, rolled the windows down and the good looking girls among us ended up with dozens of pictures from Italian men, written on it, I love you, I'm going to marry you and all this, by the time we got to Bari, I think the girls were exchanging pictures and who wanted this one and this one? I mean it was a funny thing to see that those men were really just instantly falling in love with these girls. In Bari, a ship was waiting for us, if you could call it a ship. It was called the Galil, Galilea or Galilee, I forgot exactly, and so we boarded the ship and in two days or three days, it must have been three I think, we were going to reach Haifa. Everybody got sea sick, the boat was an old, old fishing boat that the Israeli government brought from, bought from Greece and it was a primitive thing, very primitive. And I know I have a very strong will and I don't want to, you know, go back to that, to the story, but I never throw up, somehow I just psych myself up ever since I was a little kid as a result of an incident that I would not throw up. And I remember I was the only one on the ship who could eat. Everybody else was just constantly throwing up and so we arrived, by the time we arrived in Haifa, everybody was just yellow and green and wouldn't want to look at food. Now, the funny thing about this ship is that a few years ago I was travelling in France with my wife and we stopped in the Loire valley in a small little town, Blois, and as we were walking in the town there was a kind of a summer suit that I wanted to buy, it was very inexpensive and I needed a summer suit for wearing on some occasion that I have to wear a suit and I went into the shop and I was trying on the suit when the owner of the shop all of a sudden yelled and said, "Shalom haver." And it appears he was talking to my wife and somehow it came that he was a Moroccan Jew and he was telling, I think, my wife that he was a Moroccan Jew and all this, because he had a definite Arabic name. And so my wife, I think, told him that I was Jewish, too you know, and this, so he invited us after the deal—which was a good one—he invited us to a bar down on the street, an outdoor café, to drink something with him. And during the conversation he asked me a little bit about my life and he said to, and I asked him and he said, "Oh, I was in Israel, I was a sailor." I said, "Where did you sail?" He said, In the Mediterranean, of course," and I said, "What ship?" He said, "The Galilea." "What time?" He said, "From 1948 to 1950 something." Well, he was on that ship, you know, and I mean it was a small ship and he was one of the sailors. Well, when we arrived in Haifa, of course, that was a very emotional scene and then eventually, the war, basically, was finished and there was no temporary animosity so then we, our movement went to a kibbutz there where we then blended in and one year after we were taught a trade in the kibbutz and we got our own land then. I don't know what else you want to know about the Israeli thing.

Q: Everyone from your group then who was travelling together went to the same kibbutz?

A: Yes, everyone went to the same kibbutz except the ones who did not want to go to the

kibbutz, had relatives who were waiting for them and this was a little bit of a disappointment to us because theoretically, everybody was supposed to stay together, but this was not the case. There were, not everybody wants to live in a kibbutz because it is a very difficult living for those who dream of money and wealth and their own car and all this because it's a, at that time it was a very perfect community, but it was a community, you didn't have a great deal that you owned at all, you know, you were lucky if you had a radio that you can call your own. So we lost, I would say, about one-third of our group who had planned, but not shared their plan with us, to go immediately and stay on the outside.

Q: How was it decided that your group would go to a kibbutz, was it decided communally among the group or did someone else decide it for you?

A: All Zionist youth organizations basically, with very little exception, very few exceptions, were geared toward the kibbutz. This was an understanding back in Eastern Europe where we were recruited that Israel, and they always brought the example of the pyramid, that the, we Jews, we always like a pyramid on the top, we had all the, the farmers, and down at the bottom where the pyramid is the largest, we had all the intellectuals, and Israel needed a pyramid upside down, where the largest group is going to be the farmers and the agricultural group, and the smallest one is going to be the intellectuals, the tip of the pyramid. So almost every Zionist organization, that was the very strong influence and educational goal to teach you to go and be a farmer in a collective, you know? So that was the reason why most of us did go to a kibbutz. And who decided it? It was decided above, that had nothing to do with us, where we would go, we were assigned to an old kibbutz, very old, experienced, large kibbutz, called Givat Chajim, in Israel which is in, about midway between Haifa and Tel Aviv and this is where we learned our trade for one year, we stayed there for one year.

Q: Did you speak any Hebrew at all?

A: We did not speak any Hebrew when we arrived there, most of us didn't speak any Hebrew, except the ones who came from very religious families. They knew quite a bit and for them it was much easier to learn, we spoke no Yiddish because Hungarians do not speak, Hungarian Jews, very few Hungarian Jews speak Yiddish, and so at first we felt a little bit kind of ostracized by the community, especially the young Israeli kids. There were so many Hungarians coming in at that time that the Hungarians even had a nickname in Israel, they were called Igen-Migen, Igen means yes in Hungarian and so kids would go after us on the street and call us Igen-Migen, Igen-Migen, because they heard us speak. And so we were in a big hurry to learn Hebrew. And then when we learned Hebrew, we had another thing, the Hungarian language is such that your accent stays with you no matter what language you learn, and so we had a very thick accent, even when we were speaking Hebrew, so we had our difficulties with the language, but most of us learned it eventually. I was there in Israel for two years and by the time I came home, I was really speaking fluently.

Q: What trade did you learn on this kibbutz?

A: Okay, I was a tractor driver in the kibbutz and worked out plowing everything connected with the tractor, it was called a Falha, that particular branch, and from sacking, you know, flours and up to plowing and then seeding and cultivating, we had, we did everything. Then we got our own land, own piece of land, which was a reclaimed area on the train line between Tel Aviv and Haifa, it was the, the, the Israel and Jordan swapped land and so Jordan give back a piece of land so the train service can go from Tel Aviv to Haifa because part of the train line was in Jordan. This was the land that we received, and it was a very dangerous place, so when we, the first day we went out there, I remember, was really hair raising because the tractor drivers had to go down and plow and the, the weed in Israel is much higher than a human being and also we didn't know where the mines, if there were any mines. And even though the army supported us and they did give us, you know, generous support there, we the tractor drivers had to go down and practically open up the area. And so we were very respected in the kibbutz for that reason. Above us was an Arab town, Tul Karem, which today is under Israeli occupation and still a very hot spot for riots. And I remember that Arab town practically you could see the people on the street, and here we were on the other side living, you know, two enemies and of course, I had a lot of adventures because of living on the border, but then again, that has not much to do with the Holocaust and I am sure that the Holocaust Museum has a lot of testimonies from Israelis so they don't need. I don't know, but that's up to you, but I have a lot of stories that came to us as a result of living so close at that time, back in 1948, 1949, on the border, you know.

Q: I'd be interested in hearing how, what kinds of relations or encounters you had with Arabs in that area.

A: Well, when we first showed up, when we first showed up, the first day, there were Arab shepherds down on the other side of the barbed wire, the border was just marked with a bunch of barbed wire. And when they saw us, they emitted a sound like woo-woo-woo, and they were running away, they were just scared to death. These were shepherds, very poor people, and we didn't know exactly who they were, but we learned eventually, that they were, they were working for the local, you know, sheik or whomever owns the land for very little. And eventually, we also saw that here on this side of the border we are plowing with up-to-date 20th-century machinery and we saw not far from us, a man on a horseback whipping people just because they did something apparently that did not please them. The owner of the land had practically complete jurisdiction over these poor fellows, and that was just a few hundred yards from where we were working. As they got used to us, they came closer and closer and when they saw that we don't mean any harm, they came down to the barbed wire many times, watching to make sure that nobody sees them and tried to make friends with us and we did make friends with them for, the main reason is that chocolate was very expensive in Israel those days, cocoa, and we already had quite a few children in our group, babies. Cigarettes were very expensive for some reason in Jordan and they were very cheap in Israel, American cigarettes. So they asked, oh, these people offered us a deal, but they did not want to do it during the day because they were afraid that the… Jordan had the best military force, the Arab Legion, trained by the British and they were afraid that they were patrolling there and all this and it was a serious crime to deal with, with Israelis. So at

night in the darkness, and I remember it was my turn, too, it was always a few people and always the tractor drivers because we had the contact with the border people, we went down because they would recognize us and it was a very risky thing, they could have just shot me dead right there, it could have been a trap. We went down and we were doing all the business, they jumped over or we went over, but mainly they came over because they were much better fence jumpers than we were. So this was one contact that we had. The other one was not so pleasant, these wadis, dry river beds, that run across, they don't recognize borders, they run, you know, back and forth, Israel, Jordan, and in, when they are dry which is most of the time, this is where the Arab thieves come over, they use these river beds because you can't see them, they are, you know, they are like little canyons. And they would come over in these river beds and go into other areas and steal, mainly animals. And they were unbelievably good thieves. They would steal, they can, they would steal a cattle, they would steal a donkey, they would steal a horse surrounded by walls. Nobody could ever figure out how they did it. So the army hired us to be kind of a paramilitary force and go out and lie, so we had to lie down in the wadis and a few of us, we didn't have very good guns, we had old Czech guns, and wait for these thieves to come. And I only had one occasion when three of us were in a patrol and there were about fifteen or twenty of these coming by and we didn't feel like getting murdered by them because what chances do we have? And so we let them go by and then reported to the border police that they went by, but we didn't want to engage in any fire fight there. Now, my good experience was with the Jordanian Legion, which then eventually had also a sad ending. All of a sudden one day we were, I was plowing I remember, and I had to have always a guard on my tractor with a submachine gun who was constantly casing and watching because I was so close to the border and this was a friend of mine one day who was a guard in an Arab POW camp, an Israeli POW camp, guarding Arabs during the War of Independence, so he learned some Arabic from them. And you will see why this is important, and all of a sudden we saw some, an Arab Legion patrol right by the barbed wire and they were motioning to us to come down and we said no, you know. And so they went away. Next day they came and again they were motioning, they said, "Peace, peace." So finally they went back about fifty yards and they put their guns into a pile and then came back, showing that they had no weapons and they told us, "Sit down on that side of the border. What can we do?" They were about twelve, if they really wanted to kill us, we said, "Okay, let's go down. What do they want?" They just wanted to talk to us and from there on, every day they would come down at a certain time and eventually they, the Arabs have watermelon all over, so it was like a party, they would yell at one of these poor fellows who was working there and I, this is all I learned in Arabic, what it is, "Hey, bring me a watermelon." *Yalla Jibbu Battiyah*. And they brought a watermelon and they would slice it and we were eating, almost every day we had a little lunch there together, we brought some stuff. And this went on for weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks. And eventually we really fooled our countries because sometimes they came over and ate and laughed that they ate in Israel and sometimes we jumped over and we said, "Oh, we ate in Jordan." And one day it was our turn, we stopped the tractor, they haven't come down yet so we were waiting for them, but we were already sitting on the other side, we had a little blanket, we put it down, all the food from our kitchen and all of a sudden a patrol is there, but it is a totally different patrol. What happened, apparently somebody saw them and

reported them, I don't know what ever happened, I never saw them again and these guys were, they drew their guns and they are going to shoot us. And you know that border was no joke, every night somebody was killed there, either an Israeli or an Arab. Very innocent people, you know, sometimes a, one night I felt so badly, a young couple, lovers, were walking around and apparently they were in the wrong place and an Israeli guard, and most of the Israeli border guards were from Arab countries, Arab Jews, well, not Arab, that sounds kind of strange, but Jews from Arab countries, and they were vicious. I mean, you could not get better border guards and they were, they hated the Arabs more than we hated the Nazis. And so they were, they were, they saw one at night, they were shooting sometimes for no reason. So that was a very poisonous atmosphere there, and I mean it took a long time and the fact that my friend spoke some Arabic and all this and mitigated the situation, but then the man said, "How come you speak some Arabic? Where did you learn it?" And then he had to kind of, so finally the sergeant who was leading all them, always a master sergeant leading the patrol, he said, "You have one luck that I have a son of your age." He said, "If I ever see you even down touching the barbed wire," he said, "I am going to just make dust out of you." And of course, we never went back again. That was, these are some experiences living on the border.

Q: Do you remember what you would talk about with these, with the guards before they were taken away?

A: Well, it was a very simple conversation because we had a language problem, it was mainly sign language quite a bit, and we were talking about, basically, these people were talking about their children, they showed pictures of their families and the word peace, *Salaam* or *Shalom* in Hebrew, was constantly mentioned. And I have a feeling that all of us involved, probably, if they are, hopefully they are alive, will always remember this and that kind of softened us up, so we know that human beings can relax under certain circumstances and we don't have to be enemies. It was the first time that I realized that an Arab can, doesn't necessarily have to be my opponent, you know?

Q: How many people were members of this kibbutz?

A: About a hundred, about a hundred, and all from Hungary. But other kibbutzim had sometimes mixed.

End of Tape 6, Side A

Tape 6, Side B

Q: Okay, this is tape two, side B of an interview with Robert Holczer. Did you find that your dream of Israel was fulfilled, the utopian ideal that you had and some of your, your thirst for a place where you felt you belonged, was fulfilled there?

A: At first I was very, very idealistic. Then somehow, I felt a little bit disappointed where in our kibbutz, all kinds of political groups tried to kind of tear us apart. And there were more and more arguments and somehow this and the fact that as the country settled down into so-called peace, if we can call it, the usual symptoms that every nation in the world experiences, surfaced, such as crime and… but the fact that there were Jewish criminals, that shocked me. You know, I was so naive that I thought that anybody goes to Israel, certainly doesn't want to do anything to hurt another human being. There were even, even murderers, and I just one day after another, these things, they added to my little disappointment, but I was still enjoying myself because I love to be outdoors and we, we did the physical work and it was all that a young person wants for self-image, good self-image, we had a very good self-image of ourselves. There were two things that contributed to my, to my coming, going back to Hungary eventually in '51. One was, all of a sudden I realized that I, in all my life I loved my father very, very much, and this is a, I mean it's a fact, there is nothing you can do about it, I loved my father more than I loved my mother. Somehow I always considered my mother a little bit of a, of a kind of petit bourgeois that I never really completely understood. And I thought that she was a little bit, she was just in another, in other words, she wanted me to be also, you know, like she was, and play the piano and all these things and I was not the type. So I was not that close to her even though I was with her all the time and practically, I was also instrumental in saving her life in the war when I dragged her with me everywhere and all this, but my father, and I realized I spent very little time with my father as a young man because he was always away in, in the concentration camp. And now he was home and now they couldn't come any more, Hungary was sealed. And then I also, at the age of nineteen, became somehow involved with a group of cynical people. And I met them here and there and some of them I knew from Hungary and they were married to this and this, I just somehow was under the influence of these who saw nothing nice any more in Israel except the bad things. This, the homesickness plus the fact that then I began to get all kinds of propaganda material from Hungary and somehow, this was the third thing, I was misled by all this, what I read, and I thought that the situation changed and Hungary is such a marvelous country today. And my parents tried to communicate to me, even though they never wanted me to really go away, but now they didn't want me to really come home, they were afraid what would happen to me. And that, they just apparently didn't come across quite well because I, eventually I just decided I want to go back to Hungary, and probably homesickness had a great deal to do, I, at that time as a young man, I didn't realize that you can't go home again, you know? I envisioned that everything is going to be back and all this. Well, I then applied to the Hungarian Embassy, got a permit and the Israelis, of course, didn't keep me there, and in 1951, I returned to Hungary. And those were the worst years, aside from October 15th, those years were the worst years of my life, the next two or three years.

Q: Before we go into more details about that, you mentioned that you found the Israelis very well organized as you were escaping from Hungary. When you arrived in the kibbutz, did you, did you share the feeling that the way that the kibbutz was organized was, was very good and smooth and, did you have any observations about that?

A: The kibbutz was also very well organized, this was an old kibbutz and it was like a clock work. Also, there was a hierarchy which naturally some people didn't understand, but I had no argument with that because I realized a person who came here fifty years ago when there was nothing here except rocks and Arabs shooting at them, has, is more equal, right, than somebody who arrives here today. It was well run, it was a wealthy kibbutz, there was very good food, there was culture, they made sure that orchestras are coming, good ones, entertainment, no, I had absolutely no feeling of let down in this respect. No, I admired the way they carried on. Just a little, just a little thing that shows that how they thought of everything: shoveling manure, for example, of course, not something that somebody wants to do for the rest of his or her life, so or washing dishes in the kitchen, so there were, there were certain things in the kibbutz that it was not a, an area where you were assigned permanently, they were temporary. And so everybody knew that once in a month I have to shovel manure and once a month or twice a month, I have to wash the dishes, so, there were some other, but even this was taken care of, you know, I think in a very human manner.

Q: Did you have dreams or ideas of what exactly you would be doing when you went back to Hungary, was that… was your sense of where you wanted to go in your life very developed?

A: I was naively thinking about going to the university and continuing with my education to become a teacher, a high school teacher, and so I went back through the Bosporus, Turkey, Black Sea, Romania and then Hungary. Travelling through Romania by train, in 1949, excuse me, 1951, was quite an experience, the people just looked at me, looked at me and since there are quite a few Hungarians in Romania, I then… eventually they found out that I speak Hungarian, so there was always a Hungarian there and asked me and I very naively give all the details of my life and all this and that, and I didn't understand why they looked at me, just looked at me, just looked at me, and also Romania was tremendously gray and I could only think of *1984*, going across Romania. And that was only the beginning, 1951, you know?

Q: You're referring to the book, *1984*?

A: Pardon me?

Q: You're referring to the book?

A: Yes, I refer to the book *1984*, or the movie rather, okay? It's the same thing, but the movie is the one that I always keep in my mind when I think of Romania. So I arrived on the Hungarian border and here was an officer on the border looked at my papers and all this and

he, I'll never forget what he told me, he said to me, "I don't know where you come from, but it must have been very bad, very bad there, that you come from." And he looked at me and said, "Welcome to Hungary." And this was a border guard officer. And I thought this is a strange thing, what does it mean? Well, I learned very quickly. When I boarded the train again on the other side of the border, it was just as gray as coming through Romania and then finally when I arrived home, I looked around, I realized that I was totally, totally misled. Never have I been misled before or after the way I was. I arrived there and it was the grayest, most colorless, most suspicious, paranoid society you can imagine. And my bad period started with, of course, not being able to get a job, any job, there was no one, going to the university, of course, was ridiculous to think about because I was an unreliable element, I came home, number one, from the West, I was an imperialist agent, as far as they were concerned, not only that, I was a Zionist imperialist agent. And it took me almost six month to get a job to sweep a floor, to sweep floors and clean oil off the concrete in a garage, in a state-owned garage.

Q: How did you get the job?

A: With great connections, the fact that my father was from the working class and many of his brothers and their friends were involved, but mainly their friends of where they come from, this suburb of Hungary, a very poor one, suburb of Budapest, where now the communist officials with great connections, but nobody wanted any names, nobody wanted to stick out their neck, they just somehow pushed some paperwork somewhere and I was an, kind of an auxiliary labor help, a no name person whom they hired because they needed somebody to clean something. And that was the only job I could get. What hurt me even more was the fact that my good friends on the street, some of them who stayed in Hungary, not too many because most of them escaped, but they would not want anything to do with me because most people didn't want to touch me, didn't want to talk to me, they don't know me, they rather would go to the other side of the street than to meet me. Some probably out of disgust that how stupid a human being can be to come back to this, and others for fear.

Q: Because you had been in Israel?

A: Yes, yes, because I had been out, it doesn't have to be, it didn't have to be Israel, anyone, it was a totally paranoid society, everything that happened in the Soviet Union was copied the next day, you know. So the, I worked in this garage for about six month and I always noticed with great nostalgia, how they have these posters about urging workers to go to college and I wanted to go to college, and I went to the Party secretary of the firm which had about twelve garages, had to sign a paper that recommends you to go to the next step and every time I went to see him, he laughed at me, he said, "You know that you are here by the grace of a few people and not, you have no merits to go there." So the, my break came when the secretary became very ill, the Party secretary of the firm, and they sent out a temporary Party secretary, and she was a woman, she was very busy when I entered, you know, dirty and overalls and all this, and when I told her what I wanted, I got an, this opportunity and try, now, when I told her what I wanted, she said, "Well, I don't have time to write you a

recommendation. I'm glad that a worker wants to go to college, we need working youth, why don't you dictate what you need to my secretary and I will just sign it." So I passed the first hurdle, with this I went to the university where I had to submit this. This was a committee, they interviewed you and they read your, you had to write your, your biography, autobiography for everything, everything. So here was a committee, admitting committee, the Young Communist League, the Communist Party, one from the faculty, et cetera, about, I would say, seven, eight people. And when they got to certain points, they said, "Come on, you must be joking that you really think that, you know, you can come here." Well, I left and as I was going out a man whose name was Mr. Bartos, he was on the faculty, this was the Hungarian Teachers Academy, this was the university where I wanted to go, it was called the Teachers Academy, but it was part of the university. He came out and he said, "Holczer, Holczer, didn't your father play on a certain soccer team?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Didn't your father have four or five brothers playing on the same soccer team?" And he said, "Yes." And he said, "Okay, come back in September and see, maybe since you were a minor when you left the country, I will try and write to the Ministry of Education, maybe something can be done." Well, I was holding my breath for three months, I went back in September and I went into the Party secretary's office, they had no idea who I was, they couldn't find any paper, anything, so I was looking for him. And I found him and he said, "Just a second." He went into the Party secretary, he came out a few minutes later and he said, "I am very happy to inform you that the Minister of Education, on the basis that you were a minor when you left Hungary, give you special permission to enter the university." And he said, "Now, this was the last time you ever talk to me, you ever looked at me, you ever even thought that we have anything to do with each other. Never again." He said, "That is the price. You understand?" I said, "Yes." Said, "and say hello to your dad." That was it. I went home, my father remembered him, they played on the same team. And he was the head of the physical education branch of the faculty, you know? And this is how I got in. And I had a very, very good time because I found out ninety-nine percent of the kids thought the same way as I did and there were very few communists, very few. And yet, when it came to 1953, I almost was, I was thrown out for about one week. Stalin was dying and when he, in his last breath, he looked up, he saw doctors around him and he was paranoia, he said, "Who are these?" They said, "Doctors." And Stalin was very anti-Semitic and he said, "Are they Jewish doctors?" And I think, out of twelve or so, seven or eight were Jewish, they said, "Yes." They said, "Arrest them." And they were, all the doctors around Stalin were arrested a few days before he died. And then, when this happened, in Hungary, too, they were looking for Jewish doctors or anybody who was, had anything to do with Zionists because they called them the Zionist conspiracy against Stalin and they found me at the college. They had to, since this was a chain reaction, that went down. So they found me and they told me to go home and that I am a Zionist this and Zionist that. And Stalin died three days later and I mean, I was just heartbroken because it was before exams and all this and it was in March and I was ready to take my exams soon and then when everything died, died down, and the so-called Thaw, this is what they called it politically, the Thaw started, then they called me back and they said forget about the whole thing and continue.

Q: You mentioned in the last tape that your father had, after he returned from Bor, he was appointed on a committee for housing?

A: Mmm-hmm.

Q: What, what happened with his work, with his career, did he remain on that committee after the communist takeover, or did he continue, you also mentioned that he went back to work for his former employer, did he continue to work for this former employer? What became of his career?

A: My father's former employers, either died or escaped in 1947 or 1948, to the West, so this, what I mentioned, was a volunteer work. Everybody, basically, had to volunteer to do something. This was volunteer work, he volunteered to be appointed to this position and this was not a paid job. And it did not require a great deal of his time. He immediately looked for some opportunity and started to work for a co-op, a lot of co-ops started and what co-ops were are a group of people who banded together and formed a what you would call a, maybe a small enterprise, as long as they worked under the ruse of a cooperation and everything was divided, the profit if there was any, and they paid their taxes to the state, this was what the communists considered kind of a happy in-between of state farms or state enterprise and private enterprise. Because private enterprise was phased out gradually, except in cases such as a shoe maker that, you know, repairs shoes, but even for that, eventually, they had co-ops, shoemaker co-ops or tailor co-ops or this, but a few, a few of those branches, that you could not really work any other way except in a co-op, but he was working for a co-op where he rose eventually, he was a very smart man, and he rose to be kind of a midlevel manager, but also working and this co-op was working with a lot of women who would then get the merchandise and do it at home. They were making shopping nets and shopping bags and things like that that anybody can do on a sewing machine at home. And then they would bring it in and so actually they had a very, a very small area, a very small base and just a warehouse and he enjoyed this, he enjoyed it and he was very much liked. The only problem he had occasionally is that they asked him, because he was such a good worker, and he received all kinds of awards that he didn't really want particularly because he was not very, you know, infatuated with the communist system, they always wanted him to join the Party because he was a perfect, what they called cadre, cadre, he comes from the working class, he was a hard-working man, he was an honest man, he rose from nothing to a midlevel manager, so he was an ideal person. But he never joined, he always said, "No, absolutely no." So that, he was such a good worker, they left him alone.

Q: Did your mother have to start working?

A: No, my mother was totally just a mother and a housewife, she never had any, any, and I can't remember my mother having, you know, political opinion or anything like that, she had other interests. She read a lot and went to the movies and she loved visiting around during the day, she was kind of a social butterfly.

Q: You mentioned that in school you were studying geography and history?

A: Yes, that was my, in college, geography and history.

Q: And that the other students who were in school with you were, were also didn't have a lot of sympathy for communism. Did you all get together with your classmates and did you, did you talk about politics often, what was the mood like among your, your, your fellow students?

A: Interestingly, with most people, you could talk politics. You know, eventually, throughout these years, we isolated the ones who were suspicious to us and… because they were always eager beaver Party workers and give big speeches and some of them did big speeches and we knew that we can still talk to them, they're just careerists and they just want to go ahead. But I would say the great majority, even in the worst days, we could still discuss things. Obviously, we didn't do it on the street, we didn't do it elsewhere except in our own home or in a restaurant where there was a lot of noise and they couldn't discern, you know, who says what. So in this respect, we did not really have a kind of a prison atmosphere in college. And our professors, I would say eighty percent of them were very much against the regime and occasionally they let that go in very, you know, ambiguous statements. We recognized it immediately and all this, but just to give you one example, most of us, we had to go to Russian instruction every day, most of us either didn't show up or if we did, we didn't listen, we didn't learn anything, and after going through college, at the end you had to take a state exam. And I, the exam in Hungary at that time was you had to draw a written note on which you had a topic. And you were given fifteen minutes to take notes on that topic from your memory, you were given a pencil and some paper, and when you were called upon, this was your turn and you could talk about, introduce your topic and there was a committee. And I went to my Russian exam, and this happened to other people too, and I drew my topic and I couldn't even read the title, let alone, couldn't read the title, I just, in these years I just never bothered to read, to learn enough to read. Today of course, I'm not very proud of this, because now I know that the more languages you speak, you know, the more lives you have, but those days, this was a political statement, they couldn't believe it, they just couldn't believe it because I was straight A in my subjects and so there was tremendous animosity toward me from the police, from the Party secretary and all the others. Can we stop?

End of Tape 6, Side B

Tape 7, Side A

Q: This is tape three, side A of an interview with Robert Holczer. Do you want to continue with what you were saying about your. . .

A: Oh, the Russian exam. And then I found out later that some of my classmates had the same problem and, eventually, they decided not to, not to have us back, so they just gave us a D and they were very angry about it. But in a way it was their fault, too, because how could we get up to that point, going through all classes, didn't they realize that something is wrong? Well, this, I remember this very distinctly, that that was one way to show our reaction to what was going on. And otherwise, even the ones who were very active in the Communist Party, most of them always gave us a signal that this is all a show, there is nothing to worry about. There were very few people. So when I left the college, at that time, you, I became a teacher and we were supposed to go to the countryside, they could not, you could not teach in Budapest the first year and I was then assigned to a little, small village, not far from Vacz, from my mother's birthplace, only a few miles and taught there for a year. And this was a small village of a minority, Hungary has very few minorities, but they have some Slovak minorities in the North, these were Slovaks and they speak, they spoke very little Hungarian, but they would not admit it because they were afraid that there would be repercussion, so they asked for a Hungarian teacher, they could have asked for a Slovak-speaking teacher, too. And it was quite an experience, but it has nothing to do with being Jewish or with the Holocaust, none of that came up, it was just a totally different one. And then after this year that I spent in… I made contact again, I wanted to get back with a youth organization and I found interestingly that the Communist Youth Organization, the Pioneer organization probably could use me because, I mean I went through the boy scouts, I went through the Zionists, I had some very definite ideas and I answered an ad and became a director of a summer camp. They looked for a young teacher who, I had about twelve other young teachers with me and it was in Budapest, it was just a day camp, and it turned out to be such a good experience that the local Communist Party secretary asked me if I would like to come and teach in the district. And I said, "Naturally, this is it!" And so I was transferred to, just to a suburb of Budapest and I taught there until the Revolution came and I escaped again.

Q: When did you graduate from college?

A: '53.

Q: And so it was in '54?

A: Yeah, the Revolution came in '56, okay, so. . .

Q: So you taught for two years in a suburb of. . .

A: Yeah, right. One year in the countryside and two years in this suburb. Junior high.

Q: You mentioned that you were involved with the Democratic Teacher's Union at one point?

A: During the Revolution, they asked me to organize a Democratic Teacher's Union. I was not a Party member, they knew that I was not also an anti-Party member either because, and this I wanted to bring out and emphasize, that as a Jew in Hungary, you could never be truly an anti-communist because you knew one thing, as long as the Communist Party was in power, there would be no pogroms and your life is safe. And this is what happened after communism, and communist fall, most of my relatives and friends who were in Hungary, this was their greatest fear, that what will happen to them now. And anti-Semitism is now rampant in Eastern Europe, in Hungary, too. So this is just an interlude, I just wanted to say something about that. So I was just teaching in this suburb and until the Revolution and as a, and during the Revolution, they sent for me and they wanted me to get the Democratic Teachers Union together, various democratic organizations, and all this. And I came out to a couple of briefings with people, with the local council, the town council, the district council and one day there was some fighting out there and I saw a bunch of people with armbands, the Arrow Cross armbands. And I looked out the window and all my desire to ever do anything or to stay there, just went away. Right in that moment. I realized that this is now when I have to leave. Even though I had a very good life, the last three years, after I was transferred to Budapest, I had a very, very good life, relatively speaking, you know? A good salary, I started to write for the newspaper, the… stories about young people. I ran camps and financially, and I got all the recognition and awards and all this, I couldn't complain. But when I saw, when I saw that, the symbol, I went home and I said, "This is it. I will never return except to visit." And I told my parents, "In two weeks, I'm leaving."

Q: Where did you, you mentioned that you had a, you had a real enthusiasm for working with young people and that seems to be something that you did for most of your adult life and at the time, what, where did your, where did that enthusiasm come from and what, what were you teaching, were you teaching them simply geography or were you trying to teach them a broader range of things?

A: Well, when I was transferred to Budapest, immediately I started to teach geography, they had these so-called pioneer houses, these were buildings where the kids can come back in the afternoon and depending on their interests, join groups, study groups. And I was running the geography group which was a lot of introduction and simulations of how a river is meandering and then old river is meandering, a lot of tests, hands-on type of activities. I took them to hike and I taught them how, orientation in nature and all, everything that was romantic in the boy scouts. And from this, I kind of organized a group of very enthusiastic kids who eventually would follow me anywhere, you know, and it appealed to me as a young, and I can still do that, and so then people saw this and they hired me to run big camps. But I always neglected the political thing, that was not, I never really cared for the politics, but I emphasized the romantic thing. I even wrote a book for the Pioneer movement and suggested a completely new uniform and emblems and all this, what kids love at that age, because the Pioneer uniform is the most, was the most impractical thing a child can have. A white shirt, can you imagine, with dark blue pants and a red kerchief, I mean, and

nothing on it, they were not, they couldn't have any emblem anything, so I said, "No, a child wants to see his or her achievements, right there, he or she wants to show it to the world." And so they were, they were giving me some free hand to do it and I did a lot of this, submitted it, it was accepted, so this is what I loved, that I could have some influence and push them away, mainly from politics, into romantic activities, you know, and that is the one, that is, I think that pleased me a great deal. And eventually, it was a, I did it until the very last day, until I left Hungary, and I still corresponded with many of my kids who were in my group as adults. And when I went back later on, ten years or fifteen years later, some of these kids were running the same kind of camps and organizations and they always came and they said, "You know, if you had told us that in the middle of the night we have to leave our homes so that nobody will wake up and assemble in a place, we would have been up there. And we would have been following you all the way out to the border." I didn't tell them that I was leaving because I didn't want them to even have this silly idea, but after I left some of them learned about it and three of them came after me and ended up in Switzerland, but eventually went back to Hungary. So occasionally, when I am in Hungary, I do bump into them and I go out and look up some, and those who were very nice to me, I always see. I even see the Communist Party secretary, the woman who was influential to get me, I took my wife, too, to see her during the late '70s and early '80s, she and her husband, I just, they were good people. They came from the old communist underground, you know? And though we never talked about it, I'm sure they were just as disappointed in what happened to Marx ideas as most other people. But they would never discuss it because they were too loyal to the Party.

Q: When 1956 came and some of the demonstrations started, were you intrigued in any way or did you mainly feel concerned about the fascist elements that you were seeing? Did you go to the big demonstration on October 23rd?

A: Yeah. I was on the street all the time because I believed that I have this, anybody, most Holocaust survivors have an intuition, have a, somehow, a sixth sense and we always wanted to read the crowd. The mood of the crowd. And so I was in the street all the time, watching what's happening, kind of sensing the undercurrent. I was like an animal and I knew that I knew exactly what was going on. And I knew that these people eventually could be up to no good or quite a few of them could be up to no good because, you know, the leopard doesn't lose its spots and even though it all started with great democratic slogans, eventually after two weeks, it did disintegrate and there were a lot of fascist groups and I did not want to live under Russian tanks, but I was glad, myself, that the Russian tanks came back. I just didn't want to live under that system either, but at least it saved the lives of a lot of people because there were ugly incidents. The Revolution started for two weeks, the first one week was kind of democratic and looked like democratic and the second week, just everything disintegrated and the crowd went berserk and I didn't trust any of that any more.

Q: You also mentioned that there was an extreme amount of anti-Semitism during that time. Would you just tell me some examples of what was going on?

A: Well, unfortunately, after looking at all the countries where anti-Semitism is so rampant, has been and still is, I must conclude that all Catholic countries are that way in Eastern Europe, only the Catholic countries. Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Croatia, these are the countries where, and some of them have very little Jews, in Poland there are only a few thousand Jews left. I have experienced anti-Semitism all the time, [coughs] excuse me, and even when I go home nowadays to visit, well I haven't been to Hungary for the last three years, but the letters I receive from my relatives constantly refer to that and my family was never very much interested in bringing this out because they are, rather, they consider themselves Hungarians, the ones who are living in Hungary today and I'm always surprised that this is a main concern to them, so apparently this situation has never changed. In 1919, Hungary became the first fascist country of Europe, even before Hitler, and stayed that way, at least, even today under the current, the undercurrent is very anti-Semitic, the Jews are responsible for everything just like in the Middle Ages.

Q: How long did you have to prepare to leave, you made the decision to leave and then, how long did it take before you actually left and how did you make preparations?

A: Well, the Revolution was defeated in the first week of November and it took me about ten to fourteen days to get going. I just wanted to say goodbye to my good friends and my family and also I had a cousin who wanted to come with me and I had to do a little preparation there, too, because he was just a high school graduate and a very green fellow at that. And eventually he brought his friend, so the three of us started out and in about ten, ten to fourteen days, I can't remember exactly, but no more than two weeks. I just wanted to see exactly what works, what doesn't work, how can I approach the border, the most practical way, a lot of people were practically there and then captured and brought back to Budapest. And the repercussion was nothing but still, you didn't want to go through all this and then in the last second, just before you would go over to Austria, captured, you know, be captured, so I kind of did a little homework, that's all, and tried to think of the practical aspects of how to do that.

End of Tape 7, Side B

Tape 8, Side A

Q: I'm going to sit next to you, Robert, so we're not leaning too much.

A: Yeah, yeah. I… basically, I want as little to do with Hungary as possible, and Hungary usually come up in my dreams, in a nightmare.

Q: It does?

A: Yes. I... obviously I'm not that devoted to Hungary. I'm not a person who really believes much in national identity, you know, I just... I feel that cause more problems, that and religion, than anything else, so I've never been a patriot of basically any country, and there... I still am not. So, does it sound all right? Yeah, an eye on there. All those countries, so they wouldn't turn Fascist.

Q: Okay, I'm going to slate the tape.

A: Okay, yeah.

Q: It's...

A: This was probably off the record.

Q: Yeah, that's…

A: You don't want to… although I can, you know, I can…

Q: What we can…

A: I'm willing to say this on tape, too.

Q: Right, right.

A: Doesn't matter.

Q: Yeah. Okay. It's March 17th, 1999, and we're in the home of Robert Holczer, in Paris, Kentucky, and conducting an interview that's... that's based on his post-Holocaust life, just basically following up on... on a couple of other interviews we've done for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and this interview is sponsored jointly by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Kentucky Oral History Commission. And I'm Arwen Donahue, here we go. Well, I'm curious, before we…

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: …go into the chronology, to hear more about your theory of nations. Did... you were talking a little earlier, just about how you really have an ambition of going back to Hungary and finding the people who are living in the same house that you were during war time. So, do you... but then again, you don't have a lot of strong feelings for Hungary. Do you dislike going back, when you have visited? Or, how do you feel about visiting there, even?

A: Well…

Q: I'll hold it.

A: Yeah. I don't mind visiting Hungary, but... and the reason I don't mind visiting, because I still have friends and some relatives I care to see and I care to be with. But, on the whole, when I am there, I feel like a total stranger, which is not... which is not just because of what happened to me, it's also a tremendous generation gap. Most of the people of my age, are... [dog barks] probably you have to stop that.

Q: Yeah, I'm wondering what... Hungary…

A: Yes, that I... as I mentioned, I like to be with people, but the feeling of totally estranged, I realize is not just what happened... because of what happened to me, but also because I am now a... I... reaching the age when most people are just not around any more. And I... it's a strange thing to walk through streets where you used to play, and you know that nobody is there any more from your previous life. However, when I hear some anti-Semitic remarks, which you can hear often in Hungary, even today, or I see some very rude behavior, then I realize that I am very lucky not to be here, yeah. So... and I have never been a patriot of Hungary. I've never had a Hungarian passport in my life. I've always been really, stamped. Every document I ever had in Hungary, had a big... a ZS on it, which meant I was a Jew. So, since I was never a first class citizen, not even a second class, no citizen at all, I just don't have any attachment to the country, as such. I do have attachment to certain places where I grew up.

Q: Are you an American citizen?

A: Oh yes, I became an American citizen in 1961, and so I always kid people who ask me, when they hear my accent, what happened to me, how come a foreigner is teaching American government? Some of my students question me and I said, "Well, I have been an American much longer than you, and your parents." And so…

Q: Do you feel more of an attachment to being... to America than Hungary in any sense? I mean, by being a citizen, by having lived here for so long?

A: Oh, definitely. I must be honest and say that I do not have nationalistic feelings, as most people would have. The flag or a national anthem doesn't really mean much to me. I don't consider that patriotism. But I like a lot of things here, especially the constitution, and I appreciate the fact that I can live a free life and for them I am very grateful and my patriotism manifests itself this way, and not by waving the flag.

Q: Did you know anything about the Constitution before you came, or how did you learn about... about the Constitution?

A: No, I didn't, because I couldn't... I couldn't read it, I didn't speak English, and in Hungary, they were not very eager to translate the American Constitution as I was growing up. But when I came here, and I began to learn English and eventually when I went back to school, and was a history major, I had to... so, base... my first encounter with the Constitution was in college, in Fresno.

Q: And what... what impressed you about it, or what was your response to it when you first _____?

A: Oh I thought that it was a tremendous document, naturally, and I still admire the people who wrote it. I consider them geniuses, creating something from nothing, truly, and I wish that we had some of that caliber walking around today in Washington.

Q: Was becoming a citizen of the United States an important event for you? Did it mean anything?

A: Yes, because I never in my life held any kind of citizenship or any kind of passport. And the fact that now I have something that will... unfortunately, that in the 20th century, the fact that you are a human being, with two eyes and a nose and everything else on you, is not sufficient proof for you to travel around the world and be protected by international law. Considering all this, I felt much safer now that I have a country behind me and I am protected in case I am in trouble somewhere. Yes, it meant a great deal, because those days, I liked to travel a lot, and it was a sense of security that I had from it.

Q: Well, going back to then, when you first arrived in the United States, in 1956?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember your conceptions, your ideas about what the United States was then and what you actually found and what your first impressions were?

A: Well, since I came from a Communist country, and before that a Fascist country, initially the U.S. was never painted as a paradise. Never even painted as any country that is desirable to live in. All I heard about it was negative. However, I was raised in a family, my father was a very enlightened man, and he raised me on the truth, so I knew that this

is the country of the free. And I had no qualms about this. The thing that bothered me a great deal about coming here, and also I, as I mentioned before, I did not come here... this was not my first choice, you know, I had to follow my cousin. What bothered me, I have... I was never that much in favor of modern times and fast times, and a landscape with skyscrapers, that was not my vision of my future life. I was a typical European, who felt a lot more comfortable in... on a narrow street with half-timbered houses, and a lot of people on the street, and sidewalk cafés, and little restaurants. Then to go to a country where none of this would exist. So I had my reservations this way, emotionally. I had no qualms about the United States politically, but I was worried about how can I adjust to a place that doesn't have much traditions.

Q: Did you find that to be true, that your impression was that there was no tradition here, or did you…

A: Yes, yes, very much so. I still am very nostalgic when it comes to, for example Christmas. I consider our life here quite plastic and I understand why. I am not faulting anyone for it. I know that a country that is so young as the United State, just never had the opportunity to develop those traditions that European countries have, that existed now for thousands of years. And so... But it is just sad. I feel that a great deal of problems come from the fact that we are so young, and we grew too quickly, almost like a teenager who just became totally uncoordinated.

Q: But you mentioned that your father taught you about America, that it was... that it was the Land of the Free. What did that mean to you? What did that mean to him?

A: Well, in the war, we listened, as long as he was around, and we had an opportunity, we listened to London, to the BBC, it was... and occasionally, I think, but I am not so sure, even the Voice of America could be heard. And, of course there, we heard a great deal about the western... so-called western world. And realized that while we are living there as practical slaves, in the western world, people have a very good life. And that appealed to me a great deal.

Q: How long were you in Camp Kilmer, when you first arrived in the U.S., in New Jersey?

A: I think it was no more than two weeks. It was just a screening process to just give a very superficial screening, so certain elements, undesirable elements would not sneak into the country. They were looking for members of the Communist Party and unfortunately, people who were sick, because with certain illnesses, you could not gain entrance to the United States. For example, if you had TB. And then, from there... and also, they were in charge of sending you somewhere. So, they were kind of dispatchers.

Q: So it was then that you got sent to…

A: Saint Louis.

Q: Saint Louis.

A: Yeah, Saint Louis, Missouri.

Q: Uh-huh, uh-huh, what did you do there?

A: In Saint Louis... Saint Louis, Missouri, I was welcomed by the family, by that time, adopted, of course, just symbolically, my cousin, and we were united. They were a... you might say upper-middle class American family with some problems and they thought that getting two Hungarian refugees would probably mitigate their circumstances. And I was, within weeks, working for a wholesale jewelry company. I was just a stockboy. And, very simple work, and that was my job. And on weekends, as long as my cousin was with me, of course, we were walking around and going to a movie, even though we couldn't understand much of it. But just planning, eventually, to be integrated into this society. And on weekdays we worked, we went home, we watched television. And the family was... it was a very interesting situation, because the man was manic depressive and we could never figure out what his moves would be next. The... his wife was a very darling woman, and she was the one who tried to figure this out, that with two Hungarian refugees, the situation might change. They had a mentally retarded son in an institution, who came home on weekends and they had another son at home, a very brilliant young man, who was always creating something electrical, or mechanical, even. So, we had good relationship with him, and I kept up with my host mother for a long time, and only when we left for Europe, that was the time when I lost contact and I don't know where she is. I understand they got a divorce after. It was in... unbearable to live with somebody who was so unpredictable.

Q: You mean when you left for Europe to move there with Jan and…

A: Mm-hm, mm-hm, yes.

Q: ... much later. Uh-huh. Did you have the idea at that time, that you would be staying in the United States? I know you had the idea originally that you didn't want to stay, and you wanted to go back to Europe. Were you thinking, after you had arrived, that you would actually stay? What... What were your thoughts about the future?

A: Well, I realize that I was in a trap, because there was no way for me to go back to Europe, even if I wanted to, and be accepted by a... any country and get some legal status anywhere. The reason was, once you were placed in a country, you couldn't really do much about it any more. So I knew I had to make the best of my stay here, but I certainly didn't want to stay in Saint Louis, because I was totally astonished at the prejudice in Saint Louis. Not just against Blacks, but also against just about anyone. I worked mainly, this is my fate, with German, it was a German company basically, a German family, German workers and I heard enough of... you cannot name a group or a race around the

world about whom they were not talking during the day, always in very derogatory terms. And then I found out that Saint Louis was a very Germanic city at that time. You were either of German descent, or you were Black. And luckily, when I became very, very upset about this, my Black fellow workers, first by sign language, probably, and later on, as I learned my English, pidgin English back then, they invited me on weekends to be... to go around with them, because they said one cannot just sit at home. And they introduced me to the Saint Louis that most people who were born there, probably, wouldn't know. I went to just about every nightclub, I heard just about every jazz band that there existed those days, that came to Saint Louis. And many times, in a huge dance hall, I was the only white face. And of course, sometimes, I ran into almost trouble too, because of that.

Q: Were you not... did it seem strange to you that it would be the group of Black co-workers, rather than Germanic co-workers who would befriend you, or did you think that that had anything to do with you being Jewish, or did you reject friendships with the German descent co-workers? What was the story with that?

A: No, because most of those Germans were Jews, and... but that didn't prevent them from being prejudiced against me too, and they knew that they were... that I was Jewish. It was just a general thing in Saint Louis, to look down on anyone who is not an established person. And I felt this, everywhere. I just... and the situation at home, where I was staying with these people, was also not very happy. And that, I think, contributed to my thoughts that, how nice it would be to go to some other place.

Q: So you came with some ideas about this being the Land of the Free, and did it surprise you to see how... what a division there was between Blacks and Whites in this country and the way that the White people treated Blacks, and the problems with equality?

A: Yes, yes, that surprised me very, very much. In one of these weekend excursions, I was introduced to a very charming college student, she was Black, and we started to date. And eventually, she explained to me that we cannot see each other any more, because her life was in danger, and my life was in danger. And she said, "You don't understand this now, but twenty years from now you will understand. And as much as it hurts me, we have to stop seeing each other." And that was my first great introduction to prejudice, really, on a personal, you know, basis.

Q: So, up until then, you really hadn't realized what a strong division there was, or what a taboo there was against interracial relationships?

A: No, I mean, you know, I came from a society that was tremendously prejudiced and I thought I am coming to a society that is much more different and much more positive about these things. And it really surprised me that there was so much dislike and hatred, that I knew could not be erased very soon.

Q: Were there any civil rights activities going on in Saint Louis during the time that you were there? Was there... were there any at… you know, discussions, just in the wake of the Brown versus Board of Education decision that interracial education would be happening? I mean, were you aware, or... that the schools would stop being segregated? Were there any things like that happening in Saint Louis that you were aware of?

A: This was in 1957, and by 1957, June, I was gone. So I only lived there for five months or so. And I... my English was not good enough to read newspapers or even discuss anything political with people. I did watch television, because I felt that it was a good way to learn, and I got certain ideas, but I am not aware that I was... anyway I ever met, you know, this kind of a problem in Saint Louis, no.

Q: How did you learn English?

A: Well, when you are... this is my great argument against bilingual education, that when you have to, you learn everything. You can learn Chinese probably, just as well as you learn English. No, for Europeans, English is an easy language to learn. Not so easy to write, but to learn, because it's... the grammar is much simpler than some European languages. I just put my mind to it, and I decided, if I am here, I might as well do it. I could have gone to Cleveland, for example, and live my life as a Hungarian, but I wanted to be integrated into the society, and I love the English language, that's the truth. I think of all the languages, even though I admit that French is a very beautiful language to listen to, but I love the English language, I love... and this is why I love to read and I learned just by listening and my willpower, I think, helped me to get through. And among all the people eventually I associated with, who arrived at the same time, I made the most progress, because I just decided I don't want to belong to any Hungarian club and I don't want anything to do with this. I really want to learn English.

Q: It was a... you mentioned in the last interview that it was a friendship with... was it a professor at Washington University? Was that how you got out of Saint Louis and to Aspen? How did your acquaintance with this man come about?

A: He saw a newspaper article about us, in the... I think it was the Saint Louis Post Dispatch. He... Because we were the first ones, my cousin and I think the first Hungarian refugees. And he cut it out and misplaced it somewhere, and only a few month after, somehow th- the article came up and he called us and he invited both of us to dinner, to his house. And by that time my cousin was gone, so I went and I met him and his family. He just wanted to socialize and talk about the days in Hungary. He came to... he had come to this country before I, right after World War II. And his wife was a former German psychiatrist, and they had one son. And…

Q: But they were not Jewish, were they, or…

A: Yes, yes…

Q: ... were... they were Jewish?

A: ... they were. And... but of course, this doesn't have anything to do with it. Interestingly, I last... I lost contact with them in... sometimes in the sixties, and reestablished it last year when I went to Aspen. And Mrs. Chabay was there. The professor, Mr. Chabay, was already dead, but she was there, visiting from Florida, where she lives in a retirement home. And so I had a good chat with her about the good old days.

Q: When you met them, did they ask you about your experiences during the war? Did you talk at all about that?

A: Yes, they ask me a great deal about that, naturally. But they were also very much interested in my... at... in my present experiences then, which were also not very good. Something happened to me after I moved out of my original family, and established my independence. For a couple of month, I lived with a Hungarian couple who rented a room, because they needed some money, and they had a room with a separate entrance, so I rented that, and there I had a pretty bad experience, and so I was just ready to leave, anywhere, in the United States. And this is when they showed me a film of Aspen, Colorado, where they had the summer home, and where he was a member of the music festival staff, and said, "You are coming with us."

Q: Do you want to say anything about the experience that you had, that was bad?

A: Well, it was... I don't even know if anyone in the future would completely understand it, but it was just a strange coincidence that my father's company's... every company in Hungary had a Party secretary, they were in charge of practically life and death, what was going on. And my father's Party secretary, a lady, was the mother of the person who rented the room. So, he and his wife immediately, when this came to the surface, they immediately were afraid that I might report on them back to Hungary, which I had no interest, I couldn't care less, except one day they... I heard a big argument and I realized that they were arguing about abortion. The man wanted his wife to abort, she was pregnant. They were very... social climbers, real social climbers, who were constantly adding up, every penny on a piece of paper, figuring out when and how they can move, they can buy more furniture, they can buy this, they... a child was the last on their priority list. And so I heard her cry, and all this, and a few days later I came home, and she was in a pool of blood. She had done something to herself, and I found her, and it…

End of Tape 8, Side A

Tape 8, Side B

Q: This is tape one, side B, of an interview with Robert Holczer. Go ahead.

A: And so the young man knew now that I... we have a secret, and he was afraid that I would report this back to his mother. And of course, I had absolutely nothing to do with his mother. Then, next, the mail from home stopped. I did not get any, any, any mail, which was very strange, because I had an agreement with my parents that every week we shall write to each other. They received letters from me, desperate letters, what happened to you? And nothing. This went on for weeks and weeks, until I went to a Party, and the woman confidentially asked me to step aside, and told me that she was with them somewhere, and they were a little bit tipsy, and they were saying that they are stopping all my mail and stuff it under their mattress. I left the place very quickly, I went home, looked under their mattress, and I found all the letters, and confronted them with this, and I knew that I would have to move out, and that's exactly when this happened, that I was invited and they said, "Oh, you come with us."

Q: So you went to Aspen?

A: Yes. I went to Aspen, and that was like going from a cave to paradise. Not only that it was beautiful and now, I had always been a mountain man, but the people, I just loved the people. That was way before Aspen was discovered and made into the rich man's Mecca. It was now a... it was a great deal of Europeans... Americans from the 10th Mountain Division that exist... that trained there during World War II, and many of its members came back and established Aspen. It was just a marvelous group of people. Today, of course, they are all dead, but their names are on streets, and the recreation centers and parks. And it just... it was a little bit weird for me to return and see all my friends names as street names and park names and all.

Q: What was it... tell more about what it was about the place that was so appealing to you, and also how that changed your perception of the United States, if it did.

A: What appealed to me is, number one, up on eight thousand feet, you need each other. The winters are pretty harsh, and the summers were filled with tourists coming to the music festival. You needed other people's help and you had to help others, too. There was just a camaraderie there, a very open attitude that appealed to me a great deal. I was still young, and the fact that I could get a job where I... my hours were not so regimented, even then... there, I felt so free. The pay was good in comparison to other, you know, kinds of other areas of the United States. There was so much color in the place. All kinds of people coming and going. It was just a... for a newcomer, it was a marvelous, marvelous introduction to American life. There were people there who were truly the most middle class, rigid family. There were people who were a very relaxed family. All kinds, and they were all... they all got along so well, that was a great surprise to me. I also loved the

fact that a great deal of the town, the eastern part, was still in such primitive state back then, that some miner shacks still had cooking utensils on the stove, just as they left them back at the turn of the century when the panic came and many of those miners went back to Italy and you... what is today Yugoslavia. So, there was a little bit of the old. Not everything was concrete and glass, and well, even today the town has preserved a few buildings. I was very glad to see that not everything is rebuilt.

Q: When you formed friendships with people and made contact with people there, did they... were they interested in your past, and where you'd come from and what had happened to you during the war? Did anyone ask you about that, and did you feel compelled to talk about it?

A: Yes, yes, they were very much interested. These were the type of people, the locals and well, most people worked in businesses that catered to tourists. And it was an asset if you had an accent, and if you look like somebody who had an interesting past, because they... sometimes they hired me for a certain job just because I had a story. And yes, people were constantly questioning you about this, and I couldn't care less, it... as a matter of fact, I enjoyed this kind of fifteen minutes in the sun. And so, I mean, in this respect, I had no problem.

Q: Did you find that people had an understanding of what had happened during the war, and the history of what had happened to the Jews in Europe?

A: Mm, mm, well no, not much. The only people with whom I could really communicate about the war, and what happened in Europe, were the ones who were in the European theater, and as I, as I mentioned before, many of the so-called 10th Mountain Division's members settled there, and I loved to talk to them, because they were very much involved in the liberation of some of the European countries, so they knew where I came from. I just have to add one more thing to this, that interestingly, the reason I am so fond of Aspen, even today, because I believe that my life in America was shaped by that two and a half years I spent in Aspen. Almost every major friendship, almost every major contact I had, after I left Aspen, was based on something that happened to me in Aspen. Almost every one of them. I still am very close, and my closest friends today, I say, in the U.S. are those who were with me in Aspen, and those who still are alive.

Q: What was the work that you did while you were in Aspen?

A: When I arrived there, immediately, the next day, I started to wash dishes in a little café house called the Epicure. And I was there, I think, for no more than five days or so, when a very nice looking Austrian gentleman stopped by and, who looked, I remember, who looked exactly like the famous French actor, back then Fernandel, and said to me... he watched me washing dishes and he said, "Oh, I am so and so, I am a friend of Mr. Chabay." And that was the gentleman who brought me to Aspen. He said, "And I would like you to come over and see my shop." And he brought me over to his shop, he had a

nice jewelry and gift shop, and it was... he was a watchmaker and that was his main profession, but he also had a very, very nice place. And he asked me... we conversed in German, since he was Austrian and I spoke much better German than English and he said, "How do you like my shop?" And I said, "What a nice, nice, cute place." He said, "Would you like to work for me? I can give you this much," which was a lot more than washing dishes. I said, "But how can you hire me? I don't speak English." He said, "I didn't ask you whether you speak English or not, I asked you whether you like my shop." And he said... And I said, "Yes," and he said, "You're hired." And that was the kind of attitude that prevailed in Aspen. Easy going, fun loving, a lot of kidding. So I worked for Kurt Breznits, and I started to work for him, this was in 1957, about, I would say, July. And our friendship survived for forty-two years, because he's the one, he and his wife, in their eighties, I visited them last year. Now, I work there until late fall... early fall, excuse me. A young man came in around September, and by that time there weren't too many people in Aspen, because it's a seasonal place. At least back then, the off season, you could hardly see anybody in the street. At the end of September, people were leaving, the music festival was over, and the ski season came around in December. So everybody left, vacation, travel. A young man came in and started to talk to me. He said, "I got a problem, my mother has a birthday and I have to get something for her." I said, "Look, that's not... shouldn't be a problem." In my broken English I said that, and he looked at me and he immediately said, "Well, where are you from?" And of course, the whole story came about and I said, "Well, why is it a problem to buy something for your mother?" He said, "Because she has everything." And this is how I met a then young man by the name of Sheldon Rich, who was the son of a Chicago banking family. And on his twenty-first birthday he received a nightclub from his parents, called, The Limelite. He just kept coming back and talking to me, and we just became really... friends. We'd occasionally go out at night and he would bring his date and I would bring a date, and had a very nice relationship. And then he came back later on, and he said, "I have to leave my place, and there are three apartments in the nightclub. I just hate to leave the place unattended. Would you mind moving into one of the apartments? You can just stay there, and when I come back we can just share apartments, and no problem." Well, who'd... who would refuse a free apartment? I moved into the Limelite apartment, and when he came back in December to open it that year, he said to me, "Look, I desperately need somebody that I can trust, to be the cashier. How would you like to work for me?" He said, "I double your salary." And I said, "Well, I would do that, but I am very loyal to my boss, whom I love dearly and I just... I just can't leave." He said, "Oh, this is America. We don't have to worry about that. I'll take care of that, I'll talk to him." He said, "You know, Robert, here, we don't even show up when we leave, we just call and say, send my check somewhere." He says, "There's no loyalty here." I said, "No? You want me to be loyal to you." The conversation went on and on and on and I said, "Well, I just cannot go to my friend, Kurt Breznits and say, 'I am leaving,' because you double my salary." But the truth is, I needed money very badly to go back to school. That was my aim, that once I mastered the language, I would go back to school. So, by the... I went to work next day, and my boss and friend, Kurt Breznits was laughing and said, "Robert, you don't have to have these problems in this country. This is not Europe, and not only that, I would be

delighted if you can make twice as much money as you made here. I can't afford that salary." But I said, "But we were such good friends." He said, "Well, from now on, as long as you're in Aspen, every Friday night, we will have dinner in my family home." So... and we did that, just every Friday, I usually work late Fridays, so they had an early dinner, just so I can come. And we had dinner together and talked a great deal. And we saw each other other nights too, but that problem was solved, but I could never understand this distance that is between employees and employers. I'm still, even in my old days, as a high school teacher and all this, I would have been very hesitant to go and report to somebody that I found a better place and I want to leave. I know it's silly, but it was just pounded into me that you are loyal. And so I worked for the Limelite, which became a very well-known nightclub those days, with a lot of folk singers, as that was the time when the Kingston Trio and all the others became famous and it was the... you know, the great time of folk singing. Pete Seeger and all the rest, the... most of them came to this nightclub. And eventually, from cashier, I was promoted and eventually I ended up managing the place. And then my friend and boss, Sheldon Rich, became lucky, because his hated nightclub was sold. He could sell it to a group of folksingers who were singing there, three, four people, and they formed a group called "The Limeliters," named after the club, became famous, and now they could buy the club from him. So, he sold the club, and I became the employee of the group, and... up until 1959, when I left. But I maintained relations with one of the group, and his family. These are people who still very much around today, you know, the four. And one of them, Glenn Yarbrough, who was my friend, is still producing CD's.

Q: And you decided... so your motivation to leave was really that you wanted to get in... to continue your education? Was that…

A: Yes, I knew that living in a tourist place, I knew that I would never have, probably, the money to go out on my own, because every year, buying a place, and setting up some kind of a business, was more and more expensive. As Aspen became more and more fashionable, everything became more expensive. Besides, I had no interest in opening a business. I always thought of myself as an educator. I wanted to go back to school, and luckily, I got together with some adventuresome kids, and they told me about Alaska. They said that in Alaska you can make a lot of money and it's fascinating, and it's beautiful. And I loved to travel, so it was just a spur of a moment when I decided that at the end of the season, around April, I would go and follow them to Alaska, and would try to make money, and then, eventually, that fall, I was going back to school in Fresno.

Q: Why Fresno? Why Fresno?

A: Why Fresno? Yeah, people always ask me this question, because I'm the most unlikely person to end up in a central California town of practically no distinction. Hundred, hundred ten degrees heat. Why Fresno? Because they were the only ones, back those days, who answered my letters... not giving me a scholarship, because I had trouble getting my records together from Hungary. It was against the law, at that time, to send

anything out, and I had to wait for my parents to find an opportunity to send it out with somebody. And so, I just... a college had to accept me on my word, and apparently they were afraid to do that. But Fresno said okay, you can come, spend a semester, we'll find out how you function here, and then we will determine your status, based on that. And we cannot give you a scholarship, but we can assure you about the National Defense Scholarship, which was given to people who eventually end up in education. And so I applied for that, and I got a National Defense loan, excuse me, not scholarship. That's what it was called back then. And I received that loan, and so eventually, after Alaska, I ended... I ended up in Fresno. And of course, that was another eye opener, another piece of America that was very unknown to me. And it was a little bit of a crazy town, with... Fresno is the center of the Armenian population in America. And they were... I hit it off with them extremely well, no problem, until they found out that I am writing my master thesis on Turko-American relations in 1918-1920, and that was the time when the Armenians were persecuted terribly. And of course, no nation is all bad, no nation is all good. And of course, when they were reading a little bit of my thesis, they found out that I was very sympathetic to Kemal Ataturk. Of course, I condemned the method of getting rid of Armenians, but I was... I found some goodness. So we had some little differences, but all in all, I liked the people in Fresno. I liked them. I had a lot of foreign, foreign students, colleagues in the college and it was probably easier for me to navigate there, than if I had gone to a big institution, where I would have been just a strange fish. Here I had a chance to talk to professors. It was just a very relaxed atmosphere.

Q: Were you feeling surprised that you'd been to several very different places in the country, with very different atmospheres. Were you surprised at how much variation there was in this country, that you had kind of come to expecting a certain, maybe…

A: Uniformity.

Q: Yeah.

A: Well, I reported back, I remember to my relatives, and parents, I said, "This is not a country, this is a continent." I said, "Don't think in terms of a country, this is a continent." It's... it will be that way for a long, long time, and I think it still is. When I travel, in spite of the uniformity that modern age brings, you can still see that it is... it'll take a long time, and perhaps it shouldn't, perhaps this is the way it should be, that we still have areas that... like you can open your eyes and realize that you are not in Chicago, or not in New York. And hope that they will keep it this way.

Q: Well, you talked a little bit, in your first interview about what happened then, and how you... how you had gone from... it was after you got your Master's degree, you went from Fresno to teaching, in a special ed school, in Marin county, and you mentioned you had a... you had wanted to go there because you had girlfriend in the area. And do you want to say anything more about that time, or do you want to go on to saying something about... I'd be interested in hearing how you met Jan and what... kind of how your

relationship grew, and was built, and whether... and what she knew about your past and what you talked... I'm getting ahead of myself. Why don't…

A: No, that's okay.

Q: ... you answer my first question first.

A: Yeah, well, the... when I arrived at the Bay Area, for me that was just incredible. I practically pinched myself every morning when I woke up and I saw the sun and looked around, and the scenery. I just couldn't believe that I was that lucky. I just couldn't find words to describe it to my parents, the beauty of the area and the very uniqueness that the San Francisco Bay Area had for me. And still, it holds just a fascination. It's almost like Europe in the United States, when I walked the streets of San Francisco. I lived in Tiburon... Belvedere... no, Tiburon, I'm sorry. I lived in Tiburon, Belvedere is just next door, which at that time was affordable for a bachelor schoolteacher like myself. Today, of course, it would be impossible. And I had a nice little apartment in a duplex, overlooking what they call Raccoon Straight. And these are small, little islands in the bay. The sailboats were going back and forth all day. Tourists, you know, boats, and it was just a very, very picturesque environment. The type of people I associated with, mainly through school, through my job, were very pleasant. Most of them were very young, and we did a lot of things together. I also had plenty of opportunity, of course, to go on my own. And those days, I just was a restless spirit. I had a tendency to walk down, for example, at night, and see the streets... the lights of San Francisco, and just feel that there is something going on in the city that I'm not part of, and I just have to hop into my car and go there. And I did that, and it was then fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, I was in the city, going around. And so then, I was walking around and I was happy, and I did a couple of things. And then I looked back and I saw the lights of Belvedere or Tiburon or Sausalito, and I felt that there... something must be going on and I'm not part of it, so I hopped in my car and went back. So I was just restlessly looking for that unknown beauty which really was just around me, all over. And I loved to hike up on Mount Tamalpais. Mill Valley, all those communities were very unique to me, and I thought I would live my life here, probably forever.

Q: What year was it? What year was it when you arrived?

A: 1961. And, as I mentioned previously, the only job I could get here was... teaching mentally retarded students, but I didn't mind, because I thought of the old Hungarian proverb that said for any... for something that you like, you would even let people chop wood on your back, and I strongly believe in this. And so, I just... I didn't really consider teaching these children a great deal different than teaching regular children. As a matter of fact, in certain aspects, in certain sense, it was even easier because they were so loyal and devoted to you. Naturally, there were some problems with emotionally disturbed kids, who were in this group, too. But basically, it was easy, because of their love and devotion. And I stayed in it for ten years, and after ten years, I honestly said to myself,

I'm burned out, I have nothing more to give, and this is when I returned to regulating... teaching so-called normal children, if there is such thing. And my wife, yeah, I met my wife at a teacher's meeting, and our superiors, our administrators, were a rather strange bunch of people, who had sometimes very unreasonable requests, and it had nothing to do with education, such as we should have two pairs of shoes in our drawers, so we would never have dusty shoes. And saying this to people who had to go out in the playground almost every hour, I mean it was strange. And they criticized the way we dressed or what we said, or we looked, and they didn't much do it to me, but to... because I was a man, and I was the only man on the faculty of the county, but mainly to women. And... so I met my wife and at that time she was married with three children. And she struck me as a kind of a person who doesn't really want others to know much about her. And I found out later there was a reason for that. Then… and we just discussed things, and I in my mind said, "Oh, this lady's quite cold." That was my first impression. And never bothered really much. But, our path crossed at these meetings, and eventually, she was writing some kind of a publication for mentally retarded teachers, and she called me up, and...

Q: Mentally retarded teachers, or students?

A: I'm sorry. No, teachers of retarded students. And she called me up and she wanted my advice in something, which I still maintain, even up today, it was just a device to strike of...

End of Tape 8, Side B

Tape 9, Side A

Q: This is tape two, side A, of an interview with Robert Holczer.

A: Yeah, and as I was saying, first, I was not really very impressed, because she was not very warm. And then the relationship changed after her phone call, when she asked for some help, because I thought if a woman is really cold and reserved, she wouldn't call me and ask for help. And so I called her back and we started to chat, and from there on, occasionally, we called each other. But we never talked about personal things, and so, the whole thing kind of petered out. And then, later, a year or two years later, I was invited to a party, and to one of our colleagues, and he said, "Oh, by the way, Jan got a divorce. She is divorced, and she looks good." And according to... excuse me... according to Jan, I said, "Wow," which I deny. I never said such thing. But anyway, this, or whatever I did, or said, they considered it some kind of a sign for me that I would like to see her. So they invited her and kind of matched us together one evening, and we hit it off just right. And from there on, I began to see her more often, and eventually, we just decided that this was a pretty serious relationship. But I was thirty-seven, thirty-six and a bachelor, and I just was not going to get married without giving it some thought. So, I did what my previous girlfriend did, and signed up for one year to go and teach for the Army in Germany. And I arrived there, and I spent a year in Germany, and that year convinced me that yes, that she would be the right person for me, so I came home. And we got married on Mount Tamalpais, on the top of Mount Tamalpais, the mountain I loved to hike around, and the mountain we both saw every day, coming and going to school.

Q: How old were her children at that point?

A: Five, six and eight.

Q: Did they ask you about your experiences during the war at some point, or did you tell... did they know anything about your history?

A: Interestingly, they were more interested then, than they are now. As little children, they kept asking me a lot, and these days, as adults, if we meet, maybe they fear they knew... they heard everything. But I am surprised that my sons, who are writing all the time, just as a pastime, never really ask any questions. And they are around movies concerning the Holocaust and... back those days. But no. But back then yes, yes, and I told them quite a bit, and it was not really that much about the Holocaust. They were too little, and I didn't want to, of course, cause nightmares, but it was mainly just life, what was life when I grew up and what I... the things I did, and they were fascinated by my accent, and they begged us to have another child, so he or she could have an accent. They thought that a baby is going to be born with an accent. And they laughed at my mistakes that I made, because sometimes they were really funny. And inadvertently, I did say certain things that just sounded very strange, and still are a saying in the family.

Q: Such as?

A: Pardon me? Such as, I... for a long time, I thought that fungus is really fangus, and so everybody called fungus a fangus. Once I told them something about a lawyer, and I... instead of lawyer, I kept saying liar. And they couldn't understand, and in the end they said, the difference is of no... when I learn, I said, "God, there is no difference, lawyers, liars, what's the difference?" And so there were many cute episodes. Drift and draft, I remember I had trouble distinguishing that. "Close the... close the door, because there is a drift." And so ever since, everybody called it drift and not draft.

Q: What about Jan? Did you talk with Jan about your much... in the early times of your getting to know each other, about your experiences during the Holocaust, and about just the Holocaust in general?

A: Yes. There is no problem there. She really wanted to know everything and I told her everything. And she read a great deal. And, as a matter of fact, she is my police woman, because she doesn't allow me to watch anything concerning the Holocaust on television, because she says I have such nightmares that she doesn't want to wake me up and it just... too much trouble. But I was amazed that after we got married, how much time she... and effort she spent, and energy in reading books on Jewish history, and then, of course, going into her favorite theme, cookbooks. She has Jewish cookbooks and she knows more about Jewish cooking and holidays, and... so today when somebody ask me about some Jewish custom or holiday or something, I always refer them to her, because she knows a lot more about it than I do. I just, because of my indifference to religion, I just never really give it too much thought, of learning much about holidays and the background, but she did. And of course, there was never any question about conversion, anything like this, because I myself, I was not practicing.

Q: How... was her family accepting of you?

A: Yes, and the reason was, by the time we got married, the person who probably wouldn't have liked me, because he was a rabid anti-Semite, her father, was gone. Her mother was a very tolerant person, but she was dead, too, by the time we got married. So, the only relatives around that she had, was her brother and her sister, who are 20th-Century human beings, and they are very, very tolerant, and very progressive people.

Q: Okay, so you stayed in the Bay Area until 1974, is that right?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. What did you think of... were you aware of what was going on with the... with the Summer of Love, and the Free Speech Movement and all that stuff that was happening in Berkeley, and San Francisco in the late sixties?

A: Oh yes. By the time I arrived in the Bay Area, and even before that, as soon as I could understand and speak some English, I became involved in the social and political scene very much. For example, I remember when I... even before I settled in the Bay Area, I would come up for the weekend and would go down, just by myself, to North Beach, in San Francisco, to the beatnik coffeehouses, and just listen, or converse sometimes with people. I really enjoyed the beatnik era. I liked those people, they were very introspective and intelligent. There was kind of a subdued, refined attitude about them that I appreciated. Occasionally, when somebody played the piano, they were sipping the coffee and philosophizing, just a great time, I think, for literature, poetry reading. They were all part of the scene. That truly was an interesting chapter in my life, going to North Beach. Then, later on, of course, after we were married, after I came back from Europe, from my one-year stint with the Army, which was in 1966, that is when everything started, especially the Vietnam War flared up. And our family was very much involved in that. We were going over to the city, and I remember making big signs. My wife joined the Another Mother for Peace movement. We were demonstrating, and there was a very cute episode that happened to us. She usually sewed a lot for herself and for the children, and bought a very nice, flowery material to make a dress. And we went to a big demonstration over in Berkeley, and had to make our own signs. And we were getting the signs ready and all of a sudden, we look down on our youngest son, Kevin's sign, and what did we see? A beautiful flower, of some textile, and if we looked at it, then we realized it was her dress material that she had bought. He was so fascinated by the pattern, and he needed flowers, because that was the theme of the demonstration, you had to have flowers on your signs, that he didn't think twice, and he was cutting out the flowers from... what... we didn't know what to do about it, and then we decided just to talk to him, that this was not really the proper thing to do, but he didn't get punished. So that was Vietnam. My sister-in-law wrote to, for example, to Lyndon Johnson and told him that she fears that he should not run again. And interestingly, about three days later, he came out and he announced that he would not run. So that... we felt that the family can take some credit for that decision. But, we, we tried to have our children go and learn a lot about the times where we lived in, because we realized that they were very exciting times, very unique times. And perhaps, I always thought later on in their lives, life will be much duller than it was back then. We also lived, by that time, in Inverness, in an area that was in the center of all these cults, and rock bands and so the kids were exposed to all these people and spent sometimes days, just listening to their music, up in the hills. It had advantages, it had disadvantages. The disadvantage in this respect was that, no matter what parents would say to their children, they always had a place to go and because these rock groups had open house, you could help yourself at the fridge, or whatever, eating, or no matter how young you were, you were also welcome to dip into the pot and smoke it. And so it was in a... in the sense, difficult. And many of our children in the area, were runaways. They would occasionally run away because that was just the style.

Q: During that time, did you... were you aware of how Americans in general thought about the Holocaust and Holocaust survivors, and some of the stereotypes that were attached to them? And did you think of yourself as a Holocaust survivor, and how were you... how

were you relating to the culture at large, in terms of that kind of identity?

A: Mm-hm. Now that is a very surprising question, because I never really thought about it, but as you were asking me, I realize I didn't really think much about myself any more, as a Holocaust survivor. I just thought much as a member of the scene, so to speak. I was more involved in what is happening in America, and thought more about it day by day, than to think too much, to give too much thought about the past. So, in this respect, it was good, because one should not constantly be visited by ghosts. So I think it, it was a good thing for me, in this respect. And you know, I was part of the whole story then, and, rather, an American fighting to end the war, and bring justice to people who were oppressed.

Q: But you did have nightmares about the past, you mentioned that.

A: Only... only it usually... it was provoked by watching some television story, or reading something in the newspaper. Otherwise, they were going away, they were becoming distant.

Q: What about when you lived in Germany and you're... you're there in this nation that had perpetrated these crimes, and people presumably were much more aware of the history there, than your acquaintances had been when you lived in the States. Was it a bigger issue that The Holocaust? Was it more of a... did it have more of a place in your life and did you talk about it with people?

A: The... now, this is a very complex story. When we lived in Germany, which was from 1974 to 1993, I would say most of the time, when there was a West Germany and East Germany, the Holocaust was not a big problem, mainly because the West Germans were bringing it into the open. It was not something hushed up under the rug. There were discussions about it in schools. I spoke about it to high school students, mainly. The whole... the whole problem with the Holocaust and the way Germans would look at it, really started after the Unification. Now, I must also say that there weren't too many people who were alive in World War II, by this time. Because I was fifteen when the war ended, and I am seventy now, almost. And so, most people are dead, who were in World War II. Now of course, it doesn't mean that Fascism as such, is dead, or was even... was dead. Yes, I heard anti-Semitic remarks, and sometimes, when I felt that it was the proper thing to do, I responded, and sometimes when I looked at the person, and I realize it was a primitive old idiot, there was no reason to say anything. It would have been totally superfluous to provoke anything, because it wouldn't have made any difference. I rather concentrated on talking to people of the middle and the younger generation. And I found that intellectually, at least, they understood what was the Holocaust. They were very ashamed and sorry about it, and I felt no urge to drill in, with young people especially. I felt that they were progressive enough. The younger German generation amazed me, because I think they are very progressive, and I think they see history in the right light. How... all this changed after the unification, because you had now Eastern Germany

joining. A country that was never taught proper history, where the Holocaust, oh well, only West Germans were responsible for the Holocaust, because all the Nazis, according to East Germany, were in West Germany. So, those people had no background, and they had... they were not prepared for this historical fact and they denied it. And this is why the skinhead movement and all the neo-Fascist organizations, basically, come from, East Germany, even today. Add to this the usual reasons for Fascism and anti-Semitism, a very high unemployment and very bad economic conditions and the fact that unification didn't bring immediate remedies to all their problems. So they had to again go back and blame the old scapegoat, the Jews, in spite of the fact that there aren't too many. So, since they couldn't attack many who are living among them, they went back to the past.

Q: You were living in Frankfurt at the time that the Wall... that the Berlin Wall came down?

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Do you... Did you foresee any of this? Did you, at the time... what were your emotions at the time, and your thoughts at the time that the Wall came down and you were seeing the... that there was this... unification was going to be happening?

A: Oh, I think that everybody basically felt the same, that we lived truly in a moment of history that is... has just very, very few companions. That it was something extraordinary. And now, just a couple of years before, nobody would have thought that in our lifetime, something like this will happen. But of course, after the Soviet regime collapsed, then, then, it was inevitable. It still, it was a surprise, and it was naturally something that will always be in my mind, because just a few weeks before, my granddaughter, who was about fifteen at that time, came to Europe and we went to the Wall in Berlin, and we had pictures of her just standing by, and I was telling her that you can bring back your children here, probably, and maybe even your grandchildren one day, and the Wall will still be here. And so, no, nobody anticipated such a rapid disintegration.

Q: Did your... have you talked to your grandchildren about... have they been interested in a... in your experiences during the Holocaust, or ask you questions about…

A: Yes, the... my granddaughter who is twenty-four... I'm sorry, twenty-four? No, no, twenty-two, I talk to her, she knows quite a bit about the Holocaust. And we usually go together to movies, not necessarily related to the Holocaust but sometimes do, like, we saw, "Life is Beautiful" together, and I make a point to take her to movies that deal with history... modern history, or the Holocaust, so we can talk about it. I want her to know everything. The, the... I have two grandsons and I took them too, to the Holocaust Museum. And they are at the... they were at the age, they went through too fast for my taste, but I hope one day they will go back and they will slow down. And the other... grandchildren, or potential grandchildren, are still too young to say anything.

Q: So, when you were in Germany, you were teaching... were you teaching American

students?

A: Yes, I was teaching a regular American high school, where The American Army and the American diplomat's kids would go. Just like any other high school. We had a... that was a school district, just like an American school district. It was funded by the same way, and operated the same way and everything was the same, only the scene was Frankfurt, Germany.

Q: Did you know... did you have other Jewish friends in Germany at the time who had been through the Holocaust?

A: No, no, I did not have any. I had some German friends and we talked about the Holocaust, and they knew about me, but it... we never really made it into a big deal, and I never really wanted to make it a big deal, I didn't want them to think that I solely exist and maintain the friendship to kind of pound in the subject. They knew about me, they knew about my life, and we discussed it in... on very civil terms, and I knew that they were genuinely interested and sorry for what happened. But, other than that, no, no, I did not have any other… occasionally, my high school teacher friend, the German couple, they invited me to their schools, to talk. And Germans amazed me because, in our house, for example, there was a lady who was a farmer's daughter, and she was in a... kind of a mid-level managerial job with a pharmaceutical company and she had constantly friends from Israel, and she was not Jewish. I had another... I have another very old friend in Germany, I met back in the early 1960's, and we have been friends ever since, and she has friends constantly visiting her from Israel. She's also not Jewish. So, there's a lot of contact between Israel and Germany, and well, I don't know whether this is a result of a... of a bad conscience or something, but certainly you cannot hold somebody who was not even alive at that time responsible for anything that happened. No, that would be unreasonable. But it's not... today, it's not a big issue. It is a sad fact of history, especially in the western part of Germany.

Q: Did you have thoughts at that time, of where you wanted to stay, whether you wanted to stay in Germany and settle there, and make your home there, or did you picture coming back to the United States at some point?

A: Oh, I could have stayed in Germany, by the sheer coincidence of my name, which is a German name and the fact that I was, for a few month, a German citizen, in World War II. And that was just for a few months, so I didn't include in any citizenship, just by a mistake and because of the strange happenings of the times. They classified me as German in Hungary, and temporarily we were considered Germans, and of course the whole thing was... oh, they only lasted for a few month when they found out who we were. But that little episode and my name, and the fact that the reason the Hungarians tossed us out, besides being Jewish, they discovered that one of my great-grandparents was born in what is called Sudetenland, which was a part of German speaking Czechoslovakia, which was at that time, the Austro-Hungarian empire, and all back, it all

connects together, and it all added up to some very tragic events, because we were not considered Hungarians, and my grandfather was deported to Auschwitz, not because he was Jewish, but because of they said he was a foreigner. He could not prove that his grandfather was a Hungarian, which was not true. But because of this, and other reasons, I could have gotten German citizenship. I could have gotten, probably, a great deal of money that way, because of what happened to my family in World War II, and all this, but I never had, for a second, a thought. I mean, how can I think about settling in Germany, and taking German citizenship? There are so many reasons why I shouldn't have done this, right? Number one is an emotional thing, a rational thing to... that would be a little bit too much for me to bear. Second is that I have an American family, and my wife was ready to return to the United States. There no way would she have stayed in Europe with me. So, I knew that this was temporary, and I enjoyed while it lasted.

End of Tape 9, Side A

Tape 9, Side B

Q: This is tape two, side B of an interview with Robert Holczer. Do you want to say anything else about Germany before we go on?

A: I just want to say that I know that, for the purpose of the interview, you're interested in anti-Semitism and where did I run into the most, and I must say that the country where I ran into the most anti-Semitic and Fascist remarks, and... is Austria. And I was amazed that the... so many years after the war, I don't see a lot of changes. That here is a country that, unlike Germany, was considered a victim of Fascism, which of course, it was not, and played this role very successfully. And today, it is just terrible. It's, the right wing elements are all over it. And you can go to any pub and just wait until they have a few drinks, and there will be some talk about the good old days. So, no, I thought Germany dealt with the problem much, much better than Austria.

Q: So you came to the U.S. in 1993, you returned. Did you come straight to Kentucky?

A: Yes, yes, we came here straight from Frankfurt, Germany, we landed in Lexington. And by that time, we had a little home, because my brother and sister-in-law, who own Briarbrook Farm, had called us two years before, and asked us if we would like to buy a home here for a very, very little money, and that sounded just like a good investment. My wife, of course, immediately knew it was going to be our home. I just considered maybe just an investment. We bought it, and then slowly, she worked on me to retire here. Because I had no intention to come here. I wanted to be near a big city and I loved California. And she insisted that she did not want to go back to California, even though she lived all her American life there, and so she won. Well, she followed me to Europe for twenty years, and I thought it is proper to honor her wishes and whatever they were, but basically, she wanted to be close to her sister and vice-versa, so we came here, and at least we could be in driving distance, within a day, to our daughter in Virginia and to our son and her... and his family in Nashville. So, that was an... also another consideration.

Q: Did you have any preconceived notions about Kentucky in general? Did you consider it to be kind of a backwards place, or did you have... had you heard any stereotypes about it?

A: Well, we used to visit here, almost every summer when... while we were in Europe, every second summer or so, we would come back and stop here, too, for a few days. And so I could... I was always very defiant when it came to this place, I just... I never really opened my eyes as to what is here, rather would sulk so... not in a very obvious way, but call it an inside sulker. That's what I was, sitting on the couch during the day, and occasionally complaining that there is really not much to do here. And this was going on, I was... I never really came here with great enthusiasm. As I put it to my wife, an area that doesn't even have sidewalks in town, to walk around, what am I going to do there?

And also the fences bothered me, that you can't go anywhere, everything is fenced in. And how can you take your mountain bike and, and bike somewhere? You run into a fence within minutes. And I was just not very much for settling here. And then, I knew that she was very insistent, and the last time we were visiting here, I think it was in '91, that was shortly after we bought that little house... people were still living in it, the partners of the farm, and I was walking around, and all of a sudden, the... my past caught up with me, because I spent a great deal, as a young kid, out in nature, and I loved the smells and the... I loved the sight of a tree, the smell of the grass. And all of a sudden, I began to smell and look at the very things that were so dear to me when I was little and I was constantly hiking with my friends. And I realized that this is not a bad place, and besides, it was so peaceful. At night there was no noise. And so I came back and the whole family was around because they were... we were celebrating our wedding anniversary. And I said, "I want to say something to you." I said, "I just made up my mind, I can live here very well." And that was the end. All my sulking went away, all my reservations went away. I knew I was not going to come to the middle of New York City. I knew that there is not going to be any half-timbered houses when I walk into Paris. But I thought that I can make the best of it, and that I can live here.

Q: Did you have concerns culturally, what it would be like?

A: Yes, that was my main concern. I knew that this is a beautiful state and if I drive an hour from here, I can start hiking and it is really an... an open range, but culturally, I had reservations and I still have reservations. I feel a little... I would have really felt much worse, perhaps twenty, thirty years ago, but at the time when television brings you, especially the educational channel and the history channel and Discovery and there are so many channels now that you can get, that brings... they bring a lot of good knowledgeable stuff, and this is one thing. Second, of course, the internet connects you with the world. So, one is not so isolated any more. Still, I am still yearning to go to a town where the streets are crowded. I don't want to live on a crowded street all the time, but sometimes, and I want to go to a sidewalk café, and I want to eat some different food that doesn't taste the same, and just converse with people. I feel that there is, right now in this country, there is great suspicion. You just can't walk up to people and start talking. And Kentucky is even better off in this respect than any other state, probably, or most other states. It just... there is always that suspicion in a person's mind, based on all the stories that we hear day by day by day by day, of violence. Violence really kind of poisoned the atmosphere in this country a great deal, and I'm very sensitive to that. So, I would love to just go to a park and sit on a bench sometimes, and just talk to strangers, as I used to when I was younger. But that's impossible. We don't go to the park to begin with, because there are no... not many parks, and there aren't... not too many people, if you find a park. And when it gets dark, of course, you clear out, and you just don't have that kind of a life, that vibrant life that you find still in European cities.

Q: Do you... Have you formed relationships with people just in the community in Paris? Neighbors, do you spend time in, in that town?

A: Well, with neighbors, I just don't have that much with... in common. One neighbor next to our farm is a hog farmer, and I don't know anything about hogs and he doesn't seem to be interested in many other things. And the others are way down. I go to Paris to take care of some business that is necessary, post office or shopping, and this and that. And my hobbies... one of my hobbies is antiques, so I know the people who are in the antique business in Paris, and I can go in and spend some time and talk to them. But I do not have a close friend. Now my... however, my association with the so-called master gardeners association in Lexington brought me together with people. I do volunteer work for the arboretum in season, every week, and so... one day, and these are the people, usually, that I am the closest to, because we have a common interest, gardening. We spend time together, we have meetings. And after the season is over, we continue seeing each other. So, yes, but since I came back... and that has also something to do, of course, with my age, too... I have not found here, anyone that I can call a friend.

Q: Do you... do people ask you anything about yourself, or have they reached out to you in any way? Do they ask you about your accent, you know, people in town?

A: Yeah, people are funny in this respect. They are interested my accent, and I cannot really say that they are suspicious or they reject me. One man, a young man told me this last year. Said, "You know, you are much better off than I." And he said, "You open your mouth, and everybody says, 'Oh, what a nice accent, where are you from?'" And he said, "I open my mouth and they say, 'Hey, you are not from here, are you?' And you know what they mean," he says, "that I'm a damn Yankee." And I don't know about this, but all I can say is that nobody has ever reacted negatively toward my accent. I see that sometimes people smile when I talk to them, and I know why they do it and I consider it a friendly gesture. And that's about it. The only people I'm really mad at, the ones who listen to me for awhile and say, "What's that?" Because I know that they are putting me on. That… if schoolchildren could understand me, they could, too. But... and another thing that, of course irritates me, when… my hearing is not that good any more, and this has nothing to do with accent and all this, it's just that some people are very intolerant, and if you ask, you know, "Will you please repeat it?" They just say, "Forget it." And the word forget it really irritates me. But that has nothing to do with accent and being foreign born. Otherwise, I find that people are much friendlier, even with my reservations about being suspicious, much friendlier than they were in some other states that I've travelled.

Q: Did you say awhile... maybe the first interview we did, at that time were you working with the Historical Society in Paris, or with the museum? Do you still do that at all, or…

A: No, I don't do it any more, and frankly, I can't even come up with a good reason why. Perhaps it's just that I get very busy at home, and the... somehow, the familiar faces that I knew, many of them left and I... it's very difficult, I think, after a certain age, to make friends and to build kind of a circle around yourself. And also when I first joined, the Historical Society was a lot more vital than it is now. I think it just settled into a routine

life, and it just... I was just not interested any more. The museum was established, it's running smoothly. I don't think they really need me there any more. So I rather concentrate on the Master Gardener's Association, where I can do something, actually work. I am always much happier when I can do physical work, than when I just sit around and talk about what to do.

Q: Have you taken a particular interest in Kentucky history since you've been here, or in learning about that?

A: I... well, not strictly speaking Kentucky history, but I did take my first class, last year, in the history of Cincinnati. Cincinnati fascinated me from the very beginning, because when I saw it, I said, this is the closest thing, around here, to a real city. The others seem like villages, all of them. I can't think of any place in Kentucky, that to me, looks like an urban environment. And the... most of the places are, you know, just built very quickly and the original downtown... unfortunately, Lexington is destroyed, as we know it, and what is left of it is just struggling. Now, yeah, Cincinnati, yes. I was so interested in Cincinnati, and Cincinnati's history, that I took a class, a whole week Elder Hostel class. I like to take classes with Elder Hostel, and it's usually a hands-on class, but this time I made an exception, 'cause I wanted to know the history, background, and more about the area. And it was not just Cincinnati, it was northern Kentucky, too. It was very good. So I'm hoping to do some more. And of course, here and there I read a book about Kentucky. I take some authors who are local and look into their works, and David Dick lives in the area, and his books... so, I am. But I am not really an expert on Kentucky history, I leave this to people who are natives. I just have a kind of a... really a surface interest in just the basics.

Q: Do you feel that you can stay here and live here and be at home here for the rest of your life? Is that something you think about?

A: Oh, I settled this already with myself. That's it. This is my last station. I am here for good, and naturally, this is not a bad place to be, and even though I might... I could think of some other places where I would rather live, but I am here now, and I make the best of it. So...

Q: It seems like you could, if you look back on... on your whole life and where you came from and what your experiences have been, that you could say to yourself that this was almost the last... last place that you would have landed. You think?

A: Yes. I wouldn't have chosen it, back thirty or forty years ago, no way. Because at that time I still was more, somehow I felt that I... that there was still a great deal to discover. And I know that, now that I reached the age, and considering the fact that I have heart problems, that I can't just jump around any more. And even though I would love to visit some other corners of the world, and our country, I have to take it easy, and this is basically a very good point to be. I really like to explore more of the eastern part of the

United States. That's a very good place to be, and the fact that we lead here, otherwise in kind of a Norman Rockwell type life, with my brother and sister-in-law, that here... we have been here for six years... almost six years now, and we never had a conflict, not even a minor one. We eat our meals together quite a bit. We go, usually together to the theater or a party or something. We do a lot of things together. We are... they are our companions, and we are theirs. And so I... considering all this, I am very happy, and at peace.

Q: Have you encountered any anti-Semitism since you've been here to Kentucky?

A: No, no. I have never heard anything like this. I think there are so many... so few Jews here. Of course, that doesn't mean anything, there are very few Jews left in Poland, and there's still anti-Semitism, but no.

Q: And then you mentioned that you talk... have been talking with school groups.

A: Yeah.

Q: Will you say something about what that experience is like?

A: Oh that, that is... I do this with great pleasure, because I know that... in this area, there are very few people, probably, who experienced the Holocaust, and even know what it is. And so, one schoolteacher started this program in the local schools, and she always invites me, about two, three times a year. And last time, it was a closed circuit television that they put me on, with some other classes around Kentucky. And... but most of the time, I just talk to her classes... her combined classes or some other teachers bring in classes, and these are usually kids, thirteen, fourteen years old, and I like to talk to them, because that's how old I was when the real disaster hit me. And so I can kind of get down to their level of understanding and explain certain things to them. And I find that they are very receptive, very receptive. So, I consider it a mission.

Q: Are these students... is this Bourbon county schools?

A: Yes, Bourbon county school system. I've never been to the Paris school system, but it's Bourbon county, which is, just basically, geographically speaking, it's also in the city, they just split, I don't know why. And so I talk to the Bourbon county schools. I spoke to the high school last year, but mainly it's the middle school.

Q: Do you find that the students are they all familiar with the terminology, the term Holocaust? Do they know... do they have a basic grasp of what happened?

A: The middle school students, because of the teacher's eagerness to clarify everything, are much better informed than the high school students. I was amazed. I went to the high school, I... once I went to Berea and talked to the Berea class, and that was the worst.

They were just uninterested, sleepy people with a professor who, himself, put me asleep. I just couldn't blame the students, by that time, they were so turned off, that no matter what I did, I could have stripped nude, and it wouldn't have made much of a difference in that class. But the middle-school kids, the junior high, they are just great to talk to. One girl... just yesterday, I was speaking to a class, and one little girl stayed behind, and I usually spend about an hour and a half with them. I speak to them for awhile and then let them ask questions. And one little girl was just stay... just stood behind and she was waiting for me, waiting for me, when after everybody left, she came up, and she hugged me, and she kissed me, and she said, "This is all... for all the missed loves and kisses that you could not get from your parents during those years." I thought that was just charming. And she just turned around and left. It was... there was no other, you know, second thought about it. And so, it was just very, very beautiful.

Q: Have you not... I mean, well, you mentioned you hadn't experienced anti-Semitism, have you experienced anybody kind of asking you why don't you go to church, or you know, kind of asking you what church do you go to, or just expecting you to be Christian?

A: Yeah, I... that comes around a little bit more often, when the people just cannot comprehend that, how can anybody who doesn't steal, doesn't cheat, doesn't embezzle, has been married for thirty-three years, why am I not a church goer? And that is what I have to explain many times to people. Not only that, when I say I'm a non-believer, of course, I think I'm out of their favors. And... but I try to make a point there, too, that one does not have to go to church and belong to a religion, to lead a decent life. And I say that. I look around and see how many people who go to church are in the news, beating their wives and embezzling money from the school's treasury, or from the county treasury or using highway funds for their own purposes. You don't have to go. You can set your own rules. So, I do more argument about that than anything else.

Q: Do you tell them that you're... that you're Jewish and that that's part of the reason why?

A: Well, I tell them always. I'm not making any _____. I am... I always say, I'm Jewish, but I am not a Jew... I am a Jew, but I'm not Jewish. And of course, first, nobody understands what I'm talking about. And I say, "Ethnically speaking, I am a Jew. I come from a ethnic group called the Semites and one of the subgroups are Jews." I said, "Now these people have been mixed... intermingling with other people for over a thousand years, and therefore there is no such thing as a pure Jew, but then there's no such thing as a pure anything any more, since history mixed us up quite successfully. But, when it comes to religion," I said, "even though I am a Jew, my religion is not Jewish. I have no religion." I said, "I am not... I do not belong to any organized religion." So eventually I think they understand what I mean.

Q: Do you ever get any responses to that? People getting into a conversation, or is that just kind of heads nodding, and then…

A: Well, of course there are always those who feel that they can perhaps sway me over. And I always say, “Look, I’m seventy years old, and you have no idea how many people tried, and you are just wasting your time,” I said. And so eventually, they see that they are. So they give up and many of them still trust me and keeps talking to me, and there are those who kind of shy away, because I might, you know, be who knows, the devil, or... you never know what they think of you if you say I’m a non-believer.

Q: Oh, we’re about to end.

End of Tape 9, Side B

Tape 10, Side A

Q: This is tape number three, side A, of an interview with Robert Holczer. Okay, do you have any contact with other Holocaust survivors in Kentucky, or have you... do you know anything about anybody, besides you mentioned somebody earlier on?

A: No, no, I don't know anybody. And several times, my cardiologist, who is Jewish, and is very active in one of the synagogues in Lexington, mentioned that the rabbi is going to get in touch with me, because he wants me to come and talk to some group within the congregation, but they never contacted me. I really don't have any connection to any other group.

Q: Do you feel any desire or any interest in having that kind of connection?

A: I wouldn't mind. I'm completely neutral. I am not going out of my way to look for it, and... because I don't like to dwell that much upon past. And... but I wouldn't reject if they... if they would want to establish any contact with me.

Q: You live in a rural area of, you know, central Kentucky, and there are a lot of, I mean, as far as other... as far as minority groups, other than the main group, the... probably the main other group would be migrant workers, and I'm interested in just hearing your... your perceptions of how people in the area deal with minority groups, and your observations about... about that, if you have any.

A: I consider this very similar to what was going on in Germany while we lived there. Germany had an economic boom in the 1950's, just like we have now, which meant that the... all the menial and dirty jobs were unfilled. Most Germans just wouldn't want to work in that, and also that they needed more workers than the country actually could produce. So they invited in other nationalities as guest workers, that's what they were called, and they were mainly from Turkey. And this was back in the 50's. The German economic miracle produced a migration from Turkey, which was legal, completely legal. They had to have documents, they entered, they went to work in the factories. Now, today, in 1993... 1999, the economy... the German economy has slowed down considerably. These Turkish workers, the original Turkish workers, today are grandparents. They brought their children back then, it was allowed, which was, I think, a very nice, humanitarian gesture, because Switzerland, who had the same problem, did not allow family members to follow. They could go home on vacation, send the money back, but nobody was allowed to... allowed to come. So, the family members came, and you know, one family member then brings another family member, and pretty soon... I think today there are close to three million Turks living in Germany, a country of sixty-five million people. That's quite a bit, and of course, was tremendous resentment by some people to begin with. But the real problem came not while the economic boom was on, the real problem came when it was over, because now you had a lot of people who were already adults, and born in Germany, to Turkish parents, and all the rest. So now, here

came the problem of what to do with them. Are they citizens, are they not citizens? And welfare, are they qualified for welfare? So, I am afraid of the same thing here. Right now, especially around here, in the Bluegrass, everybody who can think, knows that these illegal... or legal Mexican workers are fulfilling an important job. They are working here in a job that most other people wouldn't take. So, nobody has great reservations. When they see... I heard that when they see something in the paper, that a thief was arrested, or a murder happened, and it is a Spanish name, they do mumble about it, which is natural, I don't consider this extraordinary. But my biggest fear is, what is going to happen when this economic boom ends, and here we will be with these people. Now, they are not going to work. If they don't work, what will happen to them? To their mind? What will happen to those who watch around, and will take the opportunity to do the same as they do in Germany. The skinheads in Germany were burning down the buildings where they lived. People died in fire, they were beaten up on the street, or they were killed. Several, several times this happened. So, I hope that we'd... it doesn't come to this. I think that the... we need more education, especially in the schools, to make these people welcome. They are here for a reason, they are human beings, and just like anyone else in America, they came in by the same rights. If there is illegal immigration, that is not for Kentucky to try to stop it, because we can't, it has to be stopped down on the border, that's not our problem. But those who are here, they are here. So what are you going to do? But the churches, the schools, any institution, I think should work together to make sure that people know that these are human beings, these are not some alien group that is here only temporarily. They are not here temporarily.

Q: Do you draw... when you think about this issue, does you mind draw parallels to your own experience, and experience of Jews in Europe? I mean, even though it's not... I mean, with the Jews in Europe, they had been residents for hundreds and hundreds of years and they certainly belonged there, but... but the idea of some kind of economic problems making one majority group turn against a minority group and persecuting them. Do you think that makes you particularly…

A: Yeah, yes…

Q: ... sensitive?

A: ... yeah, oh, in this... in this respect, there is a comparison. I... definitely, that… they would be made scapegoats, the minute the chips begin to fall. But I don't think that in America we ever have a danger of the death camps or concentration camps any more. I know that we had them, of course, on a much, much smaller and different scale, for the Japanese Americans in the West coast, but I don't think that would ever come to this. I'm more afraid of individual treatment of these people.

Q: Incidents like skinheads getting…

A: Yes, yes, yes, yes, and I would like to see that we deal in school, we deal with them

realistically, that we let their children come to school without any reservation, because children in the world everywhere, makes no difference where they come from, where they go, they should be in school. And number two is that we do not go overboard with bilingual education. These kids know how to speak Spanish, they should know how to speak English, and even the families, I think, would appreciate the fact, that we would just throw them into an English speaking class, and I can guarantee that in three months, they would speak English, without even an accent.

Q: The one thing that I... that I missed asking was about your parents. I... you mentioned, maybe in the last interview, that they came to the States, to visit for your wedding.

A: Mm-hm. Not for my wedding.

Q: Not for your wedding?

A: Mm-mm, no.

Q: Oh.

A: They came in 1967 to visit. They were here, I think, six weeks or seven weeks. And my mother, of course, would have loved to stay here. My father, he was just used to his life in Budapest, and he was very anxious, eventually, to get back. So there was no question that they would stay here. And my father, who has always been around little businesses in his life, he did the usual thing that people at that time did, from Eastern Europe, traveling to the West, they were constantly counting what... certain prices on merchandise, it would cost in Hungary, in Hungarian money. I mean, I was thinking about getting him a little calculator, but he was so fast in his head, he would beat any calculator. So, his favorite place... and we lived in California when they were with us, was Long's Drugstore, which is the equivalent of any big drugstore chain in our area. And he... he would just... if we did something, the rest of the family, with my mother, and he did not want to be part of it, he just said, "Oh, just drop me at Long's Drugstore," and he would spend an entire day at Long's Drugstore, looking... going around, looking everything, figuring out prices and this. So, yeah.

Q: They…

A: ... the Long Drug... the employees began to get a bit suspicious, what is this man doing here, and he was smiling always, because he couldn't speak a word of English. So, finally, I had to... I explained, I talked to the people, and said, "This is my father, he doesn't speak any English, and he loves your store." And this is all he did. We drop him off here, he's totally harmless. He never killed a fly in his life. He just likes to... and so they laughed, and they just... and eventually they all kind of tried to communicate with him and he with them. And another thing that... just blew his mind, that all you can eat little places in San Francisco. And we used to go to one that had very nice stuff, steam

table, of course. And he just could not understand that here, we were five, seven people go, and of course, the kids kept going back and taking more and this and that, and so finally he said, "I can't," he said, "in Hungary, a restaurant like this would go broke in one day." So, my wife went to get the manager, and it... she was a very nice lady, and explain to her where my father comes from and what these questions are, so she sat down with us, and she said… 'cause my father said, "How do you make money, all you can eat?" So, she then pointed out to my father, that look, "Here is your granddaughter. Look what she has. She really didn't take much. Look at your wife, she didn't eat that much. Look at you, you didn't eat that much. The two boys," she said, "the two boys, okay, so they might take up... up to the price that they paid, but look, all of you, you're eat…" and so, she was very patiently explaining. She said, "Our problem is not what people eat, it's what people try to put into their jacket." She says, "You'd be surprised how many people come in here with a bag, and all this." My father could not understand this, that even in America people… because he had, certainly, a very idealistic view of America. But I forgot to tell you that every time we picked him up from Long's Drugstore, he learned this sentence to say. First he learn it in... he said it in Hungarian, then I taught him how to say in English, so the children can understand. He says, "This country is invincible." After looking at the drugstore, he made up his mind, that based on this wealth that is in this... just in this store, and the way people just come in and can afford and buy, all this... he said, "This country, my son, is invincible." He had unlimited faith in this country. And I don't know whether in a previous interview I told you, when people ask him, "Why don't you stay here?" He told them a joke. I think I…

Q: Yeah, you did, you did, yeah.

A: ... I say it, so I'm not going to repeat that, but he... he truly, he... with all the wealth, and everything else that just enchanted him, he... and the nice aesthetics of the stores, he was ready to go home.

Q: What year did he die, he and your mother?

A: My mother died in 1971, and my father died in, let's see, 1980.

Q: Had you seen them again, since... in between…

A: Oh, well, I was there when my father was dying, yeah. I was in Germany, so they called me and I come, and he had a stroke, and... but I was not with my mother when she was dying. My father just called me. So... but they have always been great supporters of the United States.

Q: Do you have anything else that you'd like to add? I'm about out of questions.

A: Well, if you give me a couple of minutes…

Q: Sure.

A: ... You can stop that, and see if there's anything else, okay?

Q: Shall I pause it?

A: Yeah.

Q: Are you involved with any other activities besides the Master Gardener's Association?

A: Yes, we are enthusiastic members of the Elder Hostel program. We have... my wife, I think, participated in just about fifteen or so, and I am just about five behind. And what we usually do, we are taking hands-on type classes. My idea is that I want to know everything before I go, about... a little about a lot of things, such as I have always wondered about blacksmithing. What does a blacksmith do? How does he do it? So I took a class in blacksmithing. I took a class in kaleidoscope making, because that interested me... me, too. How does a kaleidoscope work? How do you make one? And I took several classes in wood turning, which I enjoy very much as a hobby. We also took a beautiful class, which was not hands-on, but still something similar, to... in Hawaii, an Elder Hostel class for two weeks. We were studying the volcanoes, the rainforest and then Polynesian culture. My wife is very active in basket weaving. She's a member of the basket weavers... Kentucky Basket Weavers Association, or whatever... I don't know if this is the official name, but she participates, she exhibits sometimes. Also, she's a quilter, so as a quilter, she comes in contact with a lot of truly Kentuckians. And she doesn't ever come home complaining that maybe they considered her an outsider. She feels very much at home with all these people. We also go to West Virginia, to Cedar Lake, which is also a - an Appalachian center for crafts, and take a hands-on class. Our next class, hopefully, we are on the waiting list, we have taken a class in Charleston and we want to go back, this is our next class. We studied outdoor cooking and we are going back now to study Charleston's gardens. We take trips.

Q: Is this West Virginia, or South Carolina?

A: No, South Carolina, South Carolina, Charles... Charleston, South Carolina. And while there, we visited Virginia, Savannah, and we were fascinated by Savannah, it was just walking around in a European city. And in Kentucky, too, occasionally we take trips. We love to go, as I mentioned, to Cincinnati. We go up to Louisville. My wife, as a quilter, goes sometimes to western Kentucky, which is the quilter's place, you know, Paducah is the quilter's museum. In other words, we are active here, and I took the class in History of Cincinnati, in northern Kentucky. And I plan to... oh, I belong to the Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, a lot of conservationist organizations. I volunteered to participate in the Kentucky water watch program, which I enjoyed very much. It just ended with the Licking River, and the branch here in Paris, Stoner Creek, was our responsibility. Four times a year we had to go down and take samples, and... so that was, I felt I was part of

Kentucky, doing this. We are... we try to stay active and my wife is mainly involved with these quieter things, and I am... I like to get involved with something that takes me out in nature and puts me in a kayak, or out there, really fighting the elements. I still have a little bit of that spark. So, if I can manage, and if my heart gets better after the operation this fall, I'd like to buy a canoe or a kayak, one of the two, and just go on these little rivers here. So…

Q: Well, thank you.

A: Yeah.

Q: Is there anything else?

A: No, I don't think so. That's about it. I mean, I can't... can't really…

Q: Well, thank you. This concludes the... an interview with Robert Holczer.

Conclusion of Interview