

Interviewee: Peter Krausz

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Interviewer: Karen Codner

Peter Krausz-Engel was born in Budapest, Hungary, on June 21, 1933. He was an only child. Before WWII there were 600,000 Jews there, although with the advent of the war, many Polish Jewish refugees, 300,000 arrived, running away from anti-Semitism, and raised that number. Peter's father came from a lower class family. He worked as an upholsterer. He had come from a small town, in the south, near Yugoslavia. He had two brothers and one sister. Mother's parents came from a higher social class. The grandfather had two factories, and he would travel extensively for his business around the world. During the first Communist regime, he lost one of the business. The second factory, was taken away during the regime of Nicolas Horti in the 1940s. Peter remembers the grandfather as a man already dispossessed of everything. The family lived in Pest. Children's games and activities. Most of the friends were Jewish. Mother worked in a luggage store, and Peter was raised by the grandparents. Because of the different cultural backgrounds, Peter's parents clashed often, and ended up divorcing. Peter would visit the father often. Father lived 242 km away, and at age 6 Peter would travel alone by train. Father lived in Naskaniza (?) a small town from where the Nazis began rounding up Jews. Father was taken to do forced labor in railroads. Peter visited him there. Father wore a military uniform. That work lasted until 1942 (a total of 4 years.) Then, they were taken to the Russian front in order to collect the mines before the Hungarian and German troops entered the towns. Father, and a couple of friends managed to run away and gave themselves up to the Russians, even though they were Jews. They kept working in forced labor for 5 years: 1942-47. He worked for a furniture store, in his profession. Peter and his family did not know any of this. Mother was still working but when the Jewish business were taken away, she lost her job. She then as a Nanny for a German family. She was treated well and fairly. This happened in the first few months of 1944.

Peter went go to a regular public school until 1943. In 1944, he could no longer. In the first few months, Jews had to wear the yellow patch, and live in a building designated for Jews only. Peter felt he was Jew by birth, but did not know what it entailed. The persecution convinced him that he wanted to be a Jew, and he was convinced it was worthy. The family went to live in a building where an aunt, her husband and their child lived. The apt was closer to the Jewish neighborhood. The aunt's husband was a tailor. On the first floor, there was a museum (which he never visited!) On November 10, 1944, suddenly German soldiers entered the building. A German officer invited all the women to come down to the courtyard with a blanket and a change of clothes. From there, by foot, they were taken to Austria. Peter was left with his aunt, who hadn't wanted to go down because she was pregnant. Peter missed his mother terribly and he would sniff her clothes to assuage his pangs.

The Fascist party in Hungary was brutal. Its members belonged to a lower class. He remembers an episode when the grandfather needing a medication. Peter went with his mother to the pharmacy for it. They were wearing the yellow patch. They passed a building, which was the Fascist center of gathering center. F young people, about 18-19 years old, approached them, and began kicking Peter. Mother cried, Peter did not utter a word or cried. Mother was very proud of him. He remembers the Catholic Church. Some priests would take the Jews to the Danube River, and shoot them. (The shoes display

there today are a reminder of that episode.). After the war, Peter saw the perpetrator priest being hanged, by Jews. On the other hand, other Catholic priests raised their voices to protect the Jews. The Allies' bombardment forced all to live in the basement. Catholic priests would come there to bless and protect the Jews.

The Jewish building that was a "protected buildings" by the Swedish and Swiss government. The Jews who lived there were the well-to-do who could pay for that protection.) The ghetto is built. When the Fascist government began implementing the anti-Jewish laws, the Jews had to move voluntarily to the ghetto, or be killed. Peter moved in with their elderly grandparents. Russians were approaching. It was the winter. Inside the ghetto there was a park where the bodies were piled up, and frozen. Others were shot. From inside the ghetto walls, Peter witnessed when the Russian army entered. A Russian soldier showed up. Peter came running up from the basement, understanding this was liberation. He wanted to hug the Russian soldier who, not knowing what the army had found, pushed Peter away with great force, making him fall backwards down the stairs. Exiting the building, by the fence, there were a couple of children tied with barbed wire and shot to death. Lack food. In front of the building, there was a dead horse. People from the building would exit with knives, and would cut pieces of it. Peter did the same. The grandmother made a goulash with it, and for the first time in months, they enjoyed a satisfying meal (without telling the grandfather where the meat came from!) Peter would remove doors and windows from destroyed buildings, cut them in pieces and sell the wood. With that, he would obtain some foodstuffs.

When the Russians arrived, in March 1945, they opened the ghetto. They had been in the ghetto for 5 months only. They returned to their former apartment. The mother came back too, but was hospitalized. She had been in a concentration camp in Austria, in Lichtenberg. The Russians liberated them. Because she fell ill with typhoid, she was discarded off the train. She dragged herself to a house where she found a bag with lots of Hungarian money. It encouraged her to return home. She thought there was enough money there to buy a house! The money though, had lost all of its value. Mother healed and Peter went back to school. Later on, he went to a Jewish school, in 1945. 240,000 had survived the war, out of the 600,000 Hungarians and 300,000 Polish Jews. Mother went back to work, by opening her own luggage shop. Nothing was known about the father. When Peter turned 13, she bought him a used bike to help her with deliveries. Two years later, they found out the father had survived, and was returning to Hungary. It was August 5. Father was in apparently good shape. He was 37 years old. Feeling ill, with a back ache, he went to the Jewish hospital, where he was diagnosed with polio. He died two weeks later. Apparently, before he was released by the Russians, they fattened the prisoners to look good, although he was already in kidney failure and other illnesses. Father returned a Communist. (Peter was also a member of the Communist party for a while because when Communism arrived in Hungary, if one wanted to study, he had to be member of the Communist Party.

Peter's Bar-Mitzvah. He would go to the synagogue with his grandfather, but his teaching was interrupted by the illness of his teacher. The rich uncles could afford to give Peter meaningful presents: one gave the top material for a shoe, and the other the sole. The grandfather had the shoe made. It was the first pair Peter ever had, that was not inherited!

The Communist party in Hungary, and the government was topped by Jews. It was their vengeance!

Mother said that the Jewish capos were worse than the Nazis. The grandparents died in 1954. The Jewish cemetery in Hungary. Father's grave.

At the completion of his university studies, Peter entered the military academy. He became an officer in the Hungarian army. Everyone there knew he was a Jew. He left Hungary in 1956, after the revolution, by walking to Austria. His army friends warned him from any Russian patrols. After arriving in Vienna, he realized there was no room for him. He was sent to Lintz, to talk to the Joint authorities. He was checked as to his Jewishness, and then put in touch with people who were coming from all over the world searching for workers. A Chilean industrialist arrived looking for a person with experience in mine work and explosives. Peter's trip was financed, and after a year he managed to bring his mother from Hungary. His army buddies helped his mother to get ready to depart. Peter's doubts of God's existence because of the Holocaust. When in scholarship in Israel he tried to talk to the chief rabbi about his doubts, but the conversation never happened.