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Steven J. Fenves, Ph.D.
RG-50.822.0003

Summary
Steven Fenves was born on June 6, 1931 in Subotica (Szabadka), Yugoslavia, now in Serbia; he had one sister, Estera who was two years older than he. As a child he was known by his middle name, Joseph; in the camps he was known as Seppel, the German nickname for Joseph. His father, Lajos, was the manager of a publishing house and a newspaper; following the death of his brother, he became editor of the newspaper as well. His mother, Claire Gereb, was a graphic artist — according to the Subotica Museum, the first academically trained female artist in Subotica. Steven had a very conventional, affluent childhood in the social setting of his parents. He had a governess, Fräulein Schmidt. It was very important for his parents that they not speak the rough Schwäbisch that was spoken in the streets; but that they speak Hochdeutsch. By the age of 10 or earlier, he was trilingual — Serbian in school; Hungarian at home; speaking German by spending a lot of time with the governess.

There were economic differences between the Jews in the community; the Reform wing was quite prosperous — essentially they brought industrialization and commerce into the country. Steven and his sister went to a state school, but the state was so poor that it could not afford to support all the schools. Yugoslavia ruled that if an organization could supply a building and three teachers, the state would supply the fourth teacher, and thereby it would become a state school. Though their school was actually called Queen Mary School, it was informally referred to as the Jewish School. The majority of Steven's friends were Jewish and went to the same school, but he also had Gentile friends.

Yugoslavia, a new country, was not the friendliest state toward Jews. There was strong pressure on the part of the Yugoslav government to separate the Jews from the Hungarians — insisting that Jews not feel Hungarian, but feel Yugoslav. Steven was not aware of anti-Semitic activities until April 1941, the day that Germany attacked Yugoslavia. As an ally of Germany, Hungary reoccupied the former Hungarian provinces it had lost in the Versailles Treaty. Many of the anti-Semitic laws of Hungary preceded those in Germany and were immediately applied in the occupied provinces. Steven's father was expelled from his position at gunpoint; the publishing house and newspaper were taken over. As a student entering the first year of gymnasium, the Hungarian law, Numerus Clausus, was applied. The law stated that the percentage of Jews admitted to establishments of higher education was to be equal to the percentage of Jews in the population as a whole; that was about 6% — so he had to study very hard for the admission test. His father, just out of a job, had nothing else to do; so he spent the summer coaching Steven. He was one of the nine Jews that were admitted. The following three years were like segregation — the Jews sat in the back. Whether you raised your hand or not didn't matter; the teacher never called on you. Anti-Semitic invectives were half the lecture. There were three years of increasing restrictions and increasing humiliations. With his father out of work, everything in the household was being sold, including his precious stamp collection; his mother worked by making handicrafts.

In April 1944 Germany occupied Hungary. Steven thinks that his parents did not try to escape because they considered themselves too prominent — they would be recognized. His parents considered themselves so much a part of the German culture that they could not believe that this was going to happen to them — they didn't consider themselves "them"; they considered themselves "us". His parents avoided conversations about what was happening. The occupiers took younger children out to the field for physical exercise where they did push-ups in freshly deposited cow dung. The family stayed in their home until the deportations in 1944. At first, only two rooms were requisitioned for the

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Hungarian army; later, a couple of other rooms were taken. The family was lucky that the three Hungarian officers billeted in their home were very polite. Two or three days after the occupation started, his father and most of the town's intelligentsia were deported. About three weeks later the order came to vacate their homes and report to the ghetto — a narrow strip of land next to the railroad yards. One of the memories that has stayed with Steven forever was that as they were moving out with a few possessions that they could carry, people were lined up the entire two flights of stairs waiting to ransack the apartment — yelling at them, cursing them, spitting at them. Later they learned that their former cook — whom they had to let go three years earlier — was in that crowd and had grabbed his mother's cookbook and one portfolio into which she stuffed as much of his mother's art as she could. After the war, she returned it to them.

By his 13th birthday, Steven was already in the ghetto. He never had a Bar Mitzvah because by that time there were no religious services. They were in the ghetto for about two weeks — one room, minimal sanitary facilities, minimal food, terrible conditions. He had permission to work outside the ghetto; so he could bring some food back. The machine shop where he worked had a clandestine radio; they heard the BBC announcing that the Normandy invasion had started. One day they were all lined up against the railroad station and loaded into railroad cars for a small trip into the village, Bácsalmás, where a real concentration area was set up. A week later they were shipped to Auschwitz. Steven did not see a German soldier until here. The chasing them out of their house, the guarding of the ghetto, the loading of the railroad cars was done by Hungarian gendarmes. These events were widely reported in the newspapers; church bells rang when the town became Judenfrei.

On the train there were 60-80 people per railroad car; no food, no drink, one pail of excrement for relieving oneself that didn't last very long. Six days, six nights without food or water; people dying — they were stacked to the corner giving you a little more space; people going mad. Suddenly the doors swung open, and SS dogs, inmates, everybody yelling, throwing you out of the railroad cars. There was no sloping ramp; there was just the drop from the railroad car to the siding. They were lined up; men separated from women. That was the last time he saw his mother; his mother and sister were separated from each other and went different ways. He later learned that his mother lasted about 10 days. She had an asthma attack and became a muselmänner, a walking corpse, carried away in the morning with the night's dead; not even in the gas chamber — directly to the crematorium. His sister went to Bergen-Belsen where she worked in a light bulb factory threading filaments into light bulbs; she was liberated from Bergen-Belsen. Steven was sent to the right, to the boys' barracks in Compound C; he was there four months — from mid/late June to late October. Appell at six o'clock; line up for food; one run a day to a latrine; evening appell; boredom … absolutely nothing to do.

The expectation of not surviving was 100%. He saw killing in Auschwitz all the time. Whenever he went to the kommandeur in front, the gallows had corpses hanging from them. He saw a vicious Jewish kapo suffocate an inmate by making him lie on the ground, put a shovel across the person's neck, and stand on the two ends of the shovel. No one ever came to select workers from the boys' barracks. Steven was saved by being selected as an interpreter. At that time in Auschwitz the kapos were still green triangles, common criminals brought in from prisons; and they needed an interpreter. The only reward as an interpreter was that after the inmates were fed, interpreters were allowed to scrape out the bottom of the barrels.

The big change occurred in August when the Gypsy families in Compound C, known as the Gypsy Compound, were exterminated. Now the kapos had red triangles — political prisoners. One of them asked if someone could be a translator/interpreter/dolmetscher in Polish, Hungarian, and German.

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Steven never heard Polish in his life, but he figured that Serbian and Polish must be very similar; so he volunteered. Although Polish was more difficult than he thought, he did it. Becoming attached to a Polish kapo changed everything. When all the adult interpreters were busy, he went down to the front SS station, met the German foreman or camp commander; escorted them to the appell, translated while they questioned the inmates and escorted them back out. That was his official job; unofficially, the same people were the resistance organization. Black market was the big resistance medium. Steven got attached to a roof repair detail which went from compound to compound repairing roofs. While doing this, he met his sister on a visit to a women's compound. He managed to buy a sweater and scarf for her before she was shipped out so she'd have some warm clothes. He bribed a courier to take the items to her.

They were also the contact to the resistance that was outside the camp. They passed lists of prisoners, lists of numbers. The Polish Underground was never more than a kilometer or two from the guarded perimeter of the camp. Around October, Auschwitz was closing down; the Russians were advancing. One of the crematoria was blown up; selections were becoming severe; the boys' barracks was totally eliminated. The Polish kapos decided to smuggle Steven out. They shoved him into an outgoing transport, and he wound up on a train going out. They arrived at a small village, Niederorschel, in Saxony-Anhalt [NOTE: upon investigation, Niederorschel is not here, but in the district Thuringia.] When they got off the train, there were speeches. Then the foreman came up to Steven asking why he was there, because he hadn't selected him at Auschwitz. Thinking quickly, Steven replied that since there were so many new häftlinge, it was decided that another interpreter was needed; the foreman thought that was a good idea. After having a hot meal, which was a great novelty, he was led to the kapo's room where he was questioned by the Hungarian inmates for many hours. At the end they accepted him because they realized that he was useful to them.

The camp, a satellite camp of Buchenwald, was very small — 700 inmates at most; producing Focke-Wulf fighter plane wings. They worked 14 hours a day, 6 ½ days a week; Sunday afternoon was off. There were maybe 40/50 civilians; the rest were inmates. Steven worked on the inspection station; his only tool was a dentist's mirror. He had to identify faulty rivets and look for tears in the aluminum skin. There was a lot of sabotage and a lot of stealing. The camp word for stealing was freien — liberate. During the winter of '44/'45, things slowed down. The railroad line east to Essen was bombed, so wings could no longer be delivered; supplies did not come in, so wings were less and less complete. On April 1, they were ordered on a march; between April 1 and April 10, they were on a death march to Buchenwald through Mühlhause, Sömmerda, Berlstedt, Buchenwald. When they started out, there were about 740 people; at the last count in Berlstedt, there were about 500. On the last night, they were herded into a small camp in Berlstedt at the foot of Buchenwald.

During the march the guards were Wehrmacht reservists, about 40/50 years old. Now they were replaced by Waffen SS. In the evening, as some SS officers were talking, Steven saw a kapo go back to the staff car and sit down on the running board. This shuffle was the signal that one inmate wanted to have contact with someone from an organization. Steven crept up to him and acknowledged that he was part of a resistance organization; he had been one since the first day in Niederorschel. Steven was informed that the camp was being emptied, and the inmates being shipped somewhere; he was told to stall if he could. Steven crept away when he saw officers approaching and reported the talk to other organization members. A Czech political prisoner suggested that the only way to stall was to count on the precision with which the SS runs. The next morning, three people hid so that during the appell the

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count came out three short. The guards searched until mid-afternoon when they heard gunfire from the approaching front. At that point the SS commander decided to march the prisoners out to Buchenwald. People were tired and broken. The usual habit on a Sunday afternoon was singing in the yard. When Steven yelled the Russian word for 'song', the Soviet POWs started singing. Soon the whole group was singing, and people were marching in step. When they arrived at Buchenwald, he noticed that the chimney of the crematorium was not smoking — a good sign; a gate to the quarantine area was open — they were not going to be held in quarantine; the people greeting them were kapos … inmates; there was no SS inside. The inmates there were all wearing the red beret of the Buchenwald Resistance Organization who controlled everything inside the camp. The following afternoon he saw the Americans arriving. He collapsed from exhaustion and lack of food; for seven days they had been marched without food or drink. He found himself in a hospital run by an American unit — the 150th field evacuation hospital. He was cared for by German nurses. Eventually he went to a barrack that was designated for people seeking repatriation to Yugoslavia; those seeking repatriation to the East were there for months. He helped himself after liberation; he didn't need anybody. He toyed with a number of ideas: asking to be sent to a Displace Persons Camp; joining Zionist organizations for clandestine entry to Palestine; though United States immigration quotas were closed during the war, a category of DP orphans was admitted. He decided that if anybody in the family survived, they would go home; it was his obligation to go home. From Buchenwald, American trucks took them to Plzeň (Pilsen); trains took them to Prague where a hostel had been converted to a transition center. They then went to Budapest where he asked permission to see if he could find any of his mother's relatives. In Buda he met his mother's aunt who asked him to stay with her to spare any further heartbreak. He solemnly promised her that if he didn't find anybody alive, he'd come back to Budapest and stay with her. The next train was back to his home; a couple of weeks later his sister arrived. In late September his father arrived on a Soviet military hospital train. He was very sick and had a total nervous breakdown; he died February 6, 1946. By that time they had found a small apartment; his old house was owned by the Communist Party and guarded by military guard. The family's cook, who came back with the things she saved from their house, helped them find an apartment, cleaned the apartment, and was very supportive. Steven went back to school; he made very good friends who were helpful in his readjustment to civilian life. But the entire propaganda apparatus of communist Yugoslavia was surrounding them; it wasn't a pleasant place to live.

In 1947 he and his sister escaped. The first overt sense of liberation he had was when the locked train from Yugoslavia was reopened in Milan, and they were waiting to take the train to Paris; that's where he had this sense of walking into liberty again. Eventually, he and his sister got very nice offers of positions in Venezuela. Three years later, when the Yugoslav quota was reopened, he and his sister came to the States. A year and a half after he came to the States, he was drafted into the army where he eventually found himself back in Stuttgart. It was then that he realized how much a creature of German culture he was. He came back to the States, qualified for the GI Bill, and completed his education up to the doctorate. While his family, professional work, and obligations were growing, he thought about his Holocaust experiences in the third person. And then some unpleasantness made him realize that it's always going to be with him. That's when he became active in a survivor organization in Pittsburgh. Since then he's felt obligated to be a spokesman.

He doesn't think justice has been done with the Nazis; justice can never be done. He has the highest regard for Germany for suspending the statute of limitations and for still pursuing Nazi functionaries; also for the education they are providing to the young people. He is very chagrined by what is going on

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in East Europe and the resurgence of anti-Semitism all over Europe; especially the resurgence of officially sanctioned anti-Semitism in countries like Hungary. When the Hungarian government gave two grants to Subotica — one to open a Holocaust Information Center in town — Steven was asked to have his mother's name as the name of the information center and was approached to have an exhibition of his mother's work. Steven asked that his mother's name be withdrawn. He couldn't stop the exhibition; but he said he was not loaning anything, and he was not speaking there. For a follow up exhibition, he didn't lend any artwork, but he lent a slide show of the art that is in a monograph he wrote on his mother. He doesn't hold a grudge against the current generation, but he couldn't collaborate with that group of people.