

RG-50.944.0087

September 25, 26, and October 4,14, 2019,

Budapest, Hungary

Summary

Tamás Szigeti was born on August 20, 1930 in Kaposvár, Hungary. His paternal grandfather, Adolf Szigeti, was chief postal inspector in Kecskemét. His eldest son, Márton – Tamás's father – became a physician. So did the middle son, István, while the youngest, Iván Ferenc became a lawyer. The latter two settled in Kecskemét. Márton opened a medical practice in Kaposvár. His maternal grandfather, Mór Kiss, was a landowner in Újkécske, in the Szolnok area and had three sons: Lajos, József, and György, and a daughter, Róza (1906), who married Márton Szigeti in 1928.

Only his maternal grandfather was religious, not the rest of the family; the sons married Christian women. Both sides of the family celebrated the Jewish high holidays.

Kaposvár's Jewish community was Neolog. Mr. Szigeti remembered only one Orthodox family. In 1941, his parents converted to the Lutheran religion, which became his religion as well. After the Holocaust, he became an atheist; he could no longer believe in the existence of God, if God allowed extermination of the Jews.

His father had a successful practice and was well regarded in town, where half of the ca. 50 physicians were Jewish. After renting, they bought their own home at 8 Berzsenyi St., which included his father's medical office. His father also owned a car. The family had a housekeeper, and an Austrian nanny for him. In early childhood, he learned more German than Hungarian. He visited the Jewish elementary school; there were 10 boys and 19 girls. Only three girls: Edit Priegler (sp?), Györgyi Hajós, Kató Bárány, and himself survived (showed photo of 2004 of their meeting).

He became a boy scout and enjoyed the activities, mainly the summer camps.

Before 1941, he did not know what anti-Semitism was. He was well integrated in school and outside.

From age 11, he visited the local high school, where, among ca. 600 students, 45 were Jewish. Of them, only he returned, two had been in hiding.

In the fall of 1941, as a Jew, he was excluded from the boy scouts. All of a sudden, he said, he had become a Jew, which he did not understand. All Jewish boys in his high school were excluded.

In 1942, for a short while, the Jewish students still were allowed to participate in *Levente* (paramilitary youth organization) training, but in the fall they became "forced laborers." He illustrated this with a photo, in which the Jewish students were wearing a yellow armband, while he, as a convert, had a white armband. He said that they had to do shoveling tasks a couple of times, but not real and regular work.

In 1943, his father was called up for forced labor to a nearby village, Mozsgó, where he served as a doctor. He was not allowed to leave the village, but he, Tamás, and his mother visited, and he also spent the summer there.

He remembered March 19, 1944, the German occupation. On Sunday morning, he was going to church services when he saw the first German soldiers on motorcycle on the main street. He went home. Two German officers looked at their apartment, but did not sequester it.

Soon, they had to wear the Yellow Star, announced through loudspeakers. The Jewish Council, whose members were Mittelman (sp?), the pharmacist, Antl, a wealthy investor, and Kardos, the hardware merchant, had to supervise all anti-Jewish measures, and organize the ghetto, which was set up in May. His father's car had previously been seized for the military, and his medical equipment was also taken away.

His family moved to the other side of Berzsenyi St. and shared an apartment with another family. Searches for valuables were often conducted in the ghetto. In the ghetto, a 60-member Jewish police kept order. Gendarmes guarded the ghetto's outside perimeter.

His parents knew that they would be taken to some work camp, but avoided talking about it in front of him, and gave him no explanations.

In the last days of July, they had to leave the ghetto and walk to the *Tűzéraktanya* (artillery barracks). Gendarmes guarded them and the Kaposvár residents watched them from the side of the road. In the *Tűzéraktanya*, the women, among them his mother, were searched by midwives, and he remembered how humiliating it was for his mother.

His father told him much later, in Auschwitz, that a gendarme who had been his patient offered to hide them, but thinking it was not a serious offer, did not dare to accept.

They spent two days under very crowded and unsanitary conditions in the barracks before entering the first train on July 29, 1944. He said there were 70-80 people in the rail car. The train stopped briefly in Kelenföld, just outside Budapest. He learned after the war, that the last wagon, which had about 20 of the wealthiest Jews of Kaposvár was uncoupled from the train and those Jews were taken to a camp in Budapest. Some of them, like Kardos, survived the war. They also stopped in Kassa (Košice, Slovakia) at the Hungarian border. A few people were allowed to get out of each rail car and bring water. His father got out too, and he vividly remembered that he was hit by a German SS-man with the butt of his gun. He was very scared and cried. They had no idea where they were going. They had never heard of Auschwitz. He was not able to grasp what was happening to them, and why.

After three days, in late evening, they arrived in Birkenau, but they only learned the next day that it was Birkenau, Poland, where they had disembarked.

Lights were everywhere, prisoners of the *Sonderkommando* were shouting "Los, los!" (Move!) over and over again at the new arrivals. Women and men were quickly separated. He went with his father, who was holding his hand. He did not remember who suggested lying about his age when they reached the group of SS officers and Mengele, but he said in German that he was born in 1928. He was a corpulent child and passed. His father claimed that he was younger than his real age.

They had showers, were shaven, and received prisoners' garb and wooden shoes. They were not tattooed. He, somewhat uncertainly remembered that they were in Barracks No. 23. There were only Hungarians in that barracks, but only about 100 from Kaposvár. They saw smoke rising from somewhere, about 300-400 meters away. His father told him that dead people were being burned in crematoria. Their *Blockältester* was a Polish prisoner who was constantly yelling at them. He had a small separate room in the barracks. They only worked occasionally in Auschwitz. Once he and his father were carrying turf through the women's camp and from a distance he saw his mother who also recognized them. That was the last time he saw her.

His only solace was that he was with his father. He realized that he had to stay alive and never thought of death, although he saw and knew that people died there. Everybody lived from one day to the next.

He said the *Appell* was the worst thing in Auschwitz, lasting for hours in the mornings and evenings.

Mid-September, they had to board a train and after several days arrived in Kaufering, (close to Landsberg, Bavaria). There were 11 camps in the Kaufering area, all sub-camps of Dachau. He was in Kaufering IV. The conditions were much better than in Auschwitz: the camp was smaller – he estimated 700-1,000 people -, the barracks was smaller, the food was better, and the guards were older *Wehrmacht* soldiers, few SS-men. The prisoners were from all over Eastern Europe, but mostly Polish. He had no luck with the work, however: he and his father worked outside on the construction of an airport (maybe Augsburg, he thought), mostly shoveling, but they had to walk about 12 km to and from work.

Around mid-October, he was losing his strength and told his father that he would stay in the camp for a day. He and ca. 200 other prisoners, who did not report for work, were lined up and made to board a regular train. After 4-5 hours, they arrived in Kaufbeuren [most likely at camp Riederloh II, also a sub-camp of Dachau, ca. 90 miles from Munich]. They were housed in a big hangar like building, which could be heated. Again, he worked outside, digging ditches for water pipes.

He was alone, without his father, which was extremely hard for him.

Later – in 1947 - he learned that Kaufering IV had been emptied and that his father had also been transferred briefly somewhere before Kaufering IV was turned into a large hospital camp serving all the other camps. At that point his father was transferred back to serve as a doctor. He never saw his father again.

In December, he injured his leg during work and the wound did not heal. After a while he went to the medical barracks where he found two doctors from Kaposvár, Imre Gerő and Pál Sipkó, who knew his father well. They kept him in the hospital, in bed, for almost two months. Whenever his wound was about to heal, they reinjured it, keeping him out of work until January 1945. They saved his life. He said he certainly would not have survived, working outside in the cold. He went back to work for a short while, but the camp in Kaufbeuren was emptied out in February. All prisoners were transferred by train to Dachau. His wound gave him enough reason to see a doctor again. He spent three-four weeks in the hospital barracks. He did not work in Dachau. From time to time, he had to take out the dead from the barracks and remove their clothing. Toward the end of March, he contracted typhus. He had a relatively mild case. On April 27, he and an unknown number of prisoners were put on a regular train and sent via Garmisch-Partenkirchen to Mittenwald [GERMANY]. He saw signs to that effect from the train. When they arrived in the evening, the prisoners were marched to the Isar river valley. He said this was the first time that he thought he would be killed. He was on the riverbank with the other prisoners and the remaining SS guards lined up behind them on the mountainside. By the next morning, however, the guards had disappeared. It was April 29, 1954. He and three-four other boys climbed up to the road; among them, was Iván T. Berend [President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, now Professor Emeritus of economic history at UCLA, California], as he later learned from Berend's autobiography. On the road they saw U.S. tanks. A

Black American G.I. gave him chewing gum. They were also warned to keep off the road and hide from retreating German units.

The next morning, the Americans took them to the hunting barracks outside of Mittenwald and took care of them.

He showed his photo ID issued by the U.S. Army on June 14, 1945. He registered his birthplace, Kaposvár, as a Serbian town. He had heard from Yugoslav prisoners that they would be the first to be sent home, and he was eager to return to his hometown, not far from the Yugoslav border.

Early July, the Yugoslav contingency was outfitted with clothing, blanket, food, and backpack and sent by train to Zagreb. He made his way from Zagreb to Kaposvár the next day.

He went home, but a stranger opened the door. His parents were not back, but he thought that they would arrive later. He found room and board with Béla Lieber, the pharmacist, who knew his parents well. He was waiting for news about his family.

Meanwhile, he was sent for about two weeks to a Zionist camp in Balatonboglár, organized by the JOINT. They had very good food and it was a kind of rehabilitation for young people who returned from deportations. The only person he remembered from the camp was Ágnes Heller, later the famous philosopher. There was some pressure to immigrate to Israel. He had no intention of immigrating, partly because he was waiting for his parents, partly, because he was not religious.

When he returned to Kaposvár, a letter from his uncle István (he was in forced labor as a doctor, and had a Christian wife) was waiting for him with an invitation to live with him and his wife, Lili, in Kecskemét. He left the Lieber family and moved in first with István, later with his other uncle Ferenc (returned from Mauthausen), when he re-married. He never returned to Kaposvár, except for a short visit in 1972.

His uncles decided that he should learn to be a dental technician, because a friend of Ferenc was a dental technician and was willing to take him on as an apprentice. He said he had no desire to learn this trade, but he was dependent on his uncles and could not make decisions for himself. He did not feel comfortable living with his uncles, particularly not with Ferenc and his new wife.

In March 1947, his uncle István received a letter from Dr. Oszkár Elekes who was the chief physician in Kaufering IV, and knew his father. He wrote that Szigeti was one of his best doctors, but after contracting typhus had died in January 1945 (letter was presented and read).

Tamás Szigeti had to give up the hope that his parents would return, which, he said was extremely painful for him. His mother had died in Stutthof, as he later established.

In 1948, he volunteered for the newly established Hungarian People's Army to get away from his uncles and get an education. He received officer's training. He served until 1956, but did not take the oath to the Kádár government, leaving the army.

At the time, he was living in Budapest, married to a Jewish woman; his only son was born in 1956.

He worked as a chauffeur, finishing high school, and higher education in finance, and had rewarding jobs in that field.

He and his first wife divorced, and he had a long and happy marriage with his second wife, a Christian woman.

In 2009, he and his son visited all the sites where he had been imprisoned.

He also set up memorial plaques for his parents in Kaufering and Stutthof.

He does not have a Jewish identity. He is an atheist.

He showed many photos at the end of the third part and in the fourth part of the interview.