

Judy Jacobs Testimony Transcript

I was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1937. At that time, antisemitism, had already reared its ugly head so to speak. But things were reasonably placid. We were an urban family, very much upper middle class. And I think even though our lifestyle was urban, it was not too distinguishable from the way that we live here in Kansas City. We lived in the city in a large apartment –not in a house. We had no cars, because people didn't have cars in the city. But we had a very you might called charmed lifestyle. Everything was very nice, beautiful home, servants, a professional father, a professional mother. Everything was very nice. Based on the kind of background my father had come from, which was quite observant, we did not live a very strongly identified Jewish life. My dad was quite active in the Zionist organization. I don't know what our laws of ritual observance were. I just don't recall. I don't remember going to the synagogue very often or that kind of thing.

I started school in first grade. There was no kindergarten, or I did not attend one – I can't say. And that would have been the fall of 1943 when I was six years old. And I went to a Jewish day school. It was a school connected with a Jewish boys' orphanage. I have no particular recollections. It was a coed school, so it couldn't have been too orthodox. I remember walking to school and until about December, things were reasonably ok. I don't remember any particular problems. The bombings increased subsequently around December 1943, early 1944. And school attendance became more erratic. And I don't really remember going to school anymore, even in the early spring before the German occupation.

I think that maybe I will go on into the German invasion of Hungary. And some of this I remember quite vividly. 1944 – I was seven years old. They invaded in March of 1944. Unfortunate things began to happen in fairly very rapid succession. The first thing that I recall was, having to wear a yellow star. The second thing was that our movements outside, as Jewish people, was restricted. Although Budapest was so heavily bombed at that time, that you really didn't spend very much time away from your safe, you bomb shelter availability. But never the less, we were completely restricted. I'm sure that the Jewish school was completely disbanded, though I don't recall that. So we really couldn't go out very much. I know my father used to go out. The Germans had set up the Jewish Council, and this met in the Jewish Communal Area, which by the way, is still the Jewish Communal Area. We have visited it. And this was one place where Jewish people could go and congregate. And it was the only place to get news. But getting there was a different issue. I mean we had daily arguments in the family. My mother wouldn't go. They wouldn't let me go. But my father insisted and they would argue about this incessantly. Because you never knew as a Jew, when you walked out the front door. You had identification papers, you had a yellow star. Everybody knew who you were. You just didn't know what kind of misfortune would befall you. Food was becoming increasingly scarce.

We never lived in a ghetto. What they did initially, ultimately there was a ghetto in Budapest, and it was essentially confined to the Jewish Quarter and it is pretty well defined even now - I mean the area. It pretty well stands as it was. Originally, the Germans designated what they called Jewish houses –apartment buildings. Now I think that they did not designate enough of them. But the apartment building where we lived was designated a Jewish House. So this happened, well they came in March, perhaps late April, I think this is close enough. So we were able to stay where we were. We had a large apartment. And family units of our extended family moved in and my parents and I were confined to one room and each family unit got a room. We got a little crowded but all in all it wasn't so bad.

I don't know what happened subsequently. I was not made not made privy to the decision to go on the Kastner Train. I mean, there we were, but then I was a young kid. I don't know how much I had to keep my mouth shut or what the problems were. Kastner was from someplace in eastern Hungary, maybe Kolozsvár, but I'm not really positive. But it's not relevant. He was a journalist, if I recall correctly. He went to Budapest, again I don't know precisely what year in the 40s, the early '40s. And he was part of the relief and rescue committee. I think that was the name of it. Which was perhaps the quasi underground organization. Well, the Germans were losing the war. They needed money. They needed trucks. They needed ammunition. They needed food. And he was approached, if I'm correct, by the Germans with the idea of making a deal. Specifically, what happened, I don't know. But I can say that the train was some sort of an agreement on the part of the Nazis to free some people – Jewish people or at least not to send them to the gas chambers in return for things they hoped to get for the Jews from the Allies. Of course, the Allies were not going to cooperate. It's almost unthinkable and not unreasonably so. But that was the origin.

My father again, my father has told me the story. I don't have any recollection. Tells me that sometime around May of 1944, now recall the Germans had come in in March and we left at the end of June. My father was going to the Jewish Communal area or as often as he could for information. He heard that this list was being compiled. This was primarily a Zionist undertaking. My father had been a very active Zionist all his life. He was a member of the organization, he had worked very hard. The people mostly in the selection process were his, if not his friends, certainly his acquaintances. So this was his group. This was a group of which he had been very much a part. And I believe that that is how we got on the train. And all of a sudden, one day, we were packing. And we essentially, only could take what we could carry so there was one suitcase for my father and one for my mother and some little something for me. And I don't know how the decision to pack what they packed was made. But it didn't seem to serve us very well later, because our shoes wore out and we had no replacements and we were cold and we didn't have enough to keep us warm. But anyway, we went to a collection center in Budapest. I don't remember where it was, I just know that 1,700 and some people gathered there - and the number I learned very much later. And we were there for several days, I don't remember how many, and ultimately we went to the eastern railroad station.

Well, ultimately, we got on the train. They were cattle cars and the doors were closed – they were not sealed. There was a bucket, and somebody rigged up a sheet around it and that was the toilet. And I think that was it and we did not get off this train for days.

Originally we were told that we were going to Lisbon. So we assumed that we were going westward and the train moved all night and next morning we were back in the railroad station. So ultimately we started moving again. And we stopped in Linz, Austria, Linz is east of Vienna, maybe by 40 or 50 miles. By this time, it was pretty well known to everyone on the train that we were not going to Lisbon. There was no question that we were not going to Lisbon. We got back on the train. We had left Budapest on June 30th – this was several days later. I don't know exactly. We got back on the train and again we didn't see where we were going and ultimately some days later as our food was pretty much running out and people were becoming very restless and things were no longer so placid inside this small confined cattle car, people were getting sick. Anyway, we finally come to a stop and it's a very pretty area – heavily forested – Bergen-Belsen.

We get off the train everybody and we start walking on foot, carrying what we have to carry. We were pretty much lined up and I don't know double triple, you know two three people in a line. Nazis German soldiers armed on either side, yelling screaming, some with whips. It was quite an experience - told to hurry. It was a fairly long walk. I don't really recall how long. And then we got to the concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. And it looks just like what you've seen in pictures and in the movies – barbed wire, the watch tower, the barracks. The men and the women were separated. You know miserable typical concentration camp living conditions. I think they were three-tier bunks with straw mattresses. What the dimensions were, I don't really recall. But it wasn't really big enough for me, let alone for an adult. I mean, it was very cramped quarters and just infested with every kind of insect and every kind of insect or vermin that you can imagine. So we were bitten by fleas and your food was eaten by rodents and so forth and so on. We got special treatment because we were the Kastner Train. Kastner, during all the time that we were incarcerated, was free. And he was negotiating and manipulating and whatever it was that he was doing.

And so we received special treatment and yes, we stayed together, not under the best of conditions but we did stay together. They did not take away our belongings. As summer turned into winter and it became colder, it became a problem, because we certainly brought insufficient warm clothing. And we brought insufficient numbers of shoes and that was a really acute problem. Every day we had to go outside and we had to line up for roll call, or whatever they called it. You know, they did a count. And we had to do this when it was hot and when it was cold or when it was raining and whether we were healthy or whether we were sick or whether we were equipped with clothing and if somebody miscounted, they sometimes kept us for hours and hours, yelling and screaming and swinging their whips. I don't remember them ever whipping anybody. But the intimidation – I'm talking about the Nazis – the intimidation was overwhelming. When it was roll call time, you would start to cringe, because you never really

knew what would happen. Physical abuse probably took the form of no food for example. I don't know what the calorie count of the rations we were given was. But it couldn't have been more than 300 calories a day. We would get something that they called coffee – black-everyday. God only knows what it was. The only resemblance to coffee was the color. And, of course, by the time we got it it was weak – I mean weak, of course, but it was cold – no sugar or cream, of course. Then we had some very watery miserable soup with snails and the shells were invariably in the soup as well, and occasionally a little bit of rice and so forth. So that had its own particular results and everybody was very skinny and very susceptible to anything and everything that went down the pike.

Each barrack was nothing but a place to sleep. And at the end of the row of barracks - a barrack meaning one, not a freestanding building but some kind of a one room accommodation for I don't know how many of these bunks, maybe a hundred, maybe more, I just can't tell you- at the end of a row of these there would be a bathroom. And the bathroom had, as I recall, some things that looked like laundry tubs and cold running water – no hot water, no showers, and of course, no soap or towels. You either had them or you didn't, but they weren't supplying them and someplace, I don't recall where, there were latrines - in a separate location. So those inmates who had the energy and the motivation, worked very hard to bathe themselves and their children on a daily basis in cold water, in any kind of water. I think partly for dignity and self-respect and partly in terms of personal hygiene being a hopefully a preventive measure in terms of warding off disease. I assume that's the case. I know my mother made great efforts daily to scrub me down with soap. I was healthy. I don't know if there was a relationship or not. I remember my father reached a point where he said, "What's the difference? I don't have the energy." He was skin and bones. He had lost maybe 50 pounds or whatever. He was an absolute skeleton. And he just didn't have the energy. He just barely made it. But my mother persevered.

And I remember, not too long after we got there, that a group got together and started a school for the kids. Now the Germans did not in any way get involved in what we did. We were allowed to do pretty much anything we wanted in the camp. And the only fear was that nobody wanted to be very conspicuous about anything. You were afraid if you do something and it looks like it's working, they'll try to eliminate it. Or as an individual, you didn't want to stand out, because you just didn't know what the consequences would be. So these people started a school. I don't remember what we learned. We certainly, we had no books, we had no supplies. But I remember going to a class and I remember thinking - this is nice. I can't recall how long this continued or how many people it involved. But I remember the fact and I remember appreciating it.

I remember the High Holidays there. I don't recall whether it was Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur or both. This was clearly the end of the summer or early fall and we had been there since July. So we and our belonging were all in better condition. I remember very specifically getting all dressed up in the best that we had with us. And remember, we had not been separated from our belongings. We had what we took, except as we wore these things out. So we all got

dressed up and there were services and I remember, my mother and I had been in the same barrack. The men were in a different barrack. So I don't quite recall my father's roll, but I remember my mother and I walking the length of this compound dressed up so to speak to services. And I remember again thinking - this is special. This is nice.

About October, remember we had gotten to the camp in July and we had been a group of 1,600 and some – I don't remember the precise number – but about October, there was a rumor that was widespread in the camp, I remember this very specifically, we were going to be released. So everybody went back to their barracks and started packing and these rumors persisted for several days. And then ultimately, I don't recall how we were notified. Generally, most news came to us at the time of roll call - which was often a very long process depending often on the whim of who was in what kind of mood among the German authorities. But I don't know if this is where we got the information. Ultimately, we heard that approximately 300 of our group were going to be released. And at that point, we didn't know who they were. Well, my parents and I were not on the list. 300 were released and they went to Switzerland. And this is in October. We were in northern Germany - the rest of us who stayed – 1,300 and some.

The weather kept getting worse. The war intensified. Food was shorter. It was cold. It snowed. And I've mentioned this before, was the most terrible thing was everybody's shoes wore out. And we would have to go out in the bitter cold, the freezing rain, the snow for roll call with threadbare shoes I mean with shoes that were virtually non-existent. And shoes became probably one of the most coveted items, well food as well. But you just couldn't do anything without shoes. In December of 1944, we heard we were going to be released. Well, we had heard that before. We were suspicious. We had once been told we were going to Lisbon, and Bergen-Belsen is not Lisbon. And ultimately, by the way, Lisbon was supposed to be en route to what is now Israel, which was then Palestine. So broken promises were so prevalent, we believed nothing. Well, low and behold, one day at morning at roll call outside we were told we that should be ready in about two hours. It was probably late morning. I don't recall exactly. We were told to be ready to leave in two hours. And, of course, everybody was all excited. I don't know whether we were told where we were going. But we were told that we were going. So everybody was excited. Everybody got packed. Well, the two hours turned into three, four, five, six. And we were there overnight. I don't remember if we were there a second night or not. But ultimately, we did leave.

The weather was bad. It was cold. It was snowing. Many people were essentially barefoot. Nobody was warmly dressed. We took what we could carry. And we started out hiking to the nearest railroad station. I don't remember how far it was. I just remember that it seemed like the longest journey that we had ever taken. We were starved. We were cold. The weather was bad. We were under-clothed. You know, the whole bit. But anyway, we got to the railroad station. We got, this time on regular normal railroad cars with seats - not cattle trains. The doors were not sealed and we were given food. I mean real food. We were given chocolate. We were given canned sardines. We were given other things too. I don't remember. But I

remember the canned sardines and the chocolate. The train started to move. And I don't recall how long the trip was. But we were soon at the Swiss border in San Gallen and this was December. I don't recall which day of December, or how close to Christmas. But I remember hearing church bells. Now, I'm Jewish. We don't have church bells. But those were the first church bells I had heard in years and it made quite an impression. We crossed the border at San Gallen, which is in the German part of Switzerland. The Red Cross took us over and they put us in some kind of a large building. They gave us clothing – lots and lots of clothing, lots of food. It was a miracle we were alive. We were safe, we were warm, our stomachs were full.

We were taken to a place called Caux, which is in the mountains a few thousand feet above Montreux. And there were, I think, two hotels that were used. We were not in any manner confined, but where were we going to go? I think, my parents, by this time, were aware that nobody had come back to Hungary after the war. But they knew that their parents, their siblings, and aunts and uncles and so forth had all been exterminated, mostly at Auschwitz. And they didn't want to go back. That was a given. There was no way in this world that they were going to go back to Hungary. I have an uncle in Arlington, Virginia, who he's been there since the latter '30s, and he prevailed on my parents to come to this country at that point. We thought that that may be the only family that we have and my mother in particular was very anxious to be with family. And I guess my father agreed. And the ties of family seem stronger than the ties of Zionism. After all we had been through. My uncle is a family practitioner, and he brought us over and we stayed with them – him and his wife and son, for a while when we arrived. So that is why we came to this country and subsequently had a normal life.

Source: Judy Jacobs video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/jacobsjudy/>