

# Frank Szasz Testimony Transcript

I am Frank Szasz. I am a portrait painter, an educator, and a print maker. I was born in 1925 in Budapest, Hungary. I was educated and raised there. From there on I lived all the way until I was taken away from Budapest, in that city of Hungary.

Interviewer: Could you tell us a little bit about your growing up, about your childhood and your family?

My father worked for a newspaper in Budapest. My mother was a housewife, a mother of two children. I had a sister and me. And we grow up in a kind of a very middle-middle class-ish way. Educated in Hungary. And my art education was already very limited because the Academy of Fine Arts in Hungary had a percentage of Jewish people they were willing to accept. And after two years at the Academy I was just kicked out because of that.

I consider myself Jewish because my mother was Jewish. And I must tell you that I was not raised in a very strictly religious manner. I know all the basics a Jew needs to know, but I considered myself a Hungarian living and born there all the way until they tried to prove me otherwise.

At 19 years of age, in 1944, when I was taken to the Nazi forced labor camps... In Hungary every year they posted what age group should report to the authorities who are of Jewish or have Jewish decent. And my year 1925, the birth year, came up in 1944 in the Spring. It was determined where and when should I report. And at that time all the young people, 19-year-old men of Jewish decent, were reporting at those points. And the day came in 1944 – springtime – about this time, when I went to the point where I had to report. It's a provincial small town. They wrote my name in and immediately, in a group of people, we were moved. We – the group had a number and I am sorry I – someday it will come to me, possibly, but I don't remember that number. This group of over 300 people – Jews, half Jews – all of my age, were moved to Transylvania – eastern Hungary, building railroad. There was a railroad line - a single line of rails and they needed two lines – one going and one coming. And they put us to work there.

Interviewer: How did you get from Budapest to Transylvania?

By train, the whole group was trained, I mean put in train, and shipped there.

Interviewer: Can you tell us about the train ride?

Well, it was not exactly like the Nazi concentration camp shipping, you know. It was in regular trains but military guard were guarding us. This was a Hungarian territory where they took us and it was called a forced labor camp. The guards were elderly Hungarian soldiers and officers. They guarded us. We had barracks near this line where we worked and rather limited

space to sleep. They were just very primitively built by wood bunks – one long bunk and we were just sleeping next to each other. There was a little straw thrown on the wood and we brought from home a blanket. It was a list what we should bring from home. And we brought our own blanket and container from which we ate. This was all prescribed to bring with us.

We were toward the end tail of the war. Older Jewish people working in these forced labor camps were shipped earlier to the front, to [unclear] and I cannot tell exact number but I would say at least 80% of them died in the Russian winter there. Since we were the youngest who were, who were taken, and the front was already moving to the west from Russia, the Germans started evacuating Russia. So our situation was not at that point as bad as it was the earlier ones who were shot out on the front by Germans, by Hungarians.

And we had to get up very early in the morning. We got a very meager soup for breakfast and out to work. The work guards were also Hungarian military, but they were rougher people, you know. These were young men from Budapest. Hardly any of them was accustomed to hard physical labor – many medical students, I was an artist, all kind of people, and very few who could really productively do the work. The guard who was pushing us and chasing for faster production were quite rude and severe. Eight months did I spend in that camp, which was right next to the railroad line.

And if I am remembering correctly, I guess in August was the month in 1944 when the Romanians capitulated. They put down their weapons. They were not willing to fight on any side. At that point the German Army that has occupied Hungary, Romania and the surrounding countries, they started in a great speed evacuating Romania. And the evacuation line was right in front of our camp. Day and night we have seen how the Germans were moving the trains. The last trains were German soldiers in a short and half-naked just holding onto train platforms, where they earlier moved the tanks. They were sitting there in the cold nights. Then German soldiers on foot were retreating also toward the west going through our territory. They were taking every cow, every pig they could find in the villages. It was such a pathetic view – hundreds of cows were herded in front of the German soldiers. And farther back, a mile or so, were the poor peasants whose cow was taken. And they hoped somewhere, somehow they might get back their cows. And they were going through our territory there – pigs, cows. Then came motorized German divisions. I remember I was almost shot at that time, because our guards knew that I spoke German. My mother was raised in Germany. And one night they woke me up - the guard - and dragged me to the entrance door of the camp. There was a huge motorized German division and they were lost. They didn't know what direction to go. And the Hungarian guard could not speak with them because they didn't speak German and they wanted me to translate and the Germans asked direction. They didn't know I am Jewish, you know? And they asked direction and I translated. The guards didn't gave any direction because they didn't know either. But they said something – go this way and then turn and whatever. I translated to Germans and they started moving. Now I could hear for two hours the motor sounds. I was back and asleep when it turned out that the direction was bad. Miles and miles of motorized

divisions were going in the wrong direction. Some officer came back to this camp looking for me. They thought I intentionally misled them. But the guards didn't know where I am they said. And that saved my life.

And then came toward the end, you know, and the guards were very nervous. They knew they will be questioned someday for what they have done during those days. And a friend of mine and I noticed a very nervous old soldier – kind of a neurotic old man. He was very brutal with us but we could notice the change in his behavior. You know, he was nervous and afraid. And my friend, who was a bit more courageous than I, stopped a guard on his way and this guard was also driving the horses to the city for supply. He brought supply to the camp. And said to him that, “Well, you know what your future holds?” (shudders) You know, it was a pretty scary question. And my friend said, “If you can take us with your horse and, and wagon to Budapest, we will get you civilian clothes and you might be able to save your skin.” The old man just grabbed the opportunity and got even a paper for my friend and me that we are working to pick up supplies for the camp. We are working with him. He was in a military uniform and we wore just armbands – as every camp person had to wear – identifying who he is and where he was. It had the Star of David on it. And he took us through the German lines, which were ahead of us, to our address to the capitol where I came from. I was very concerned about my mother, who I left behind. I knew that my sister was not...

Interviewer: What month was that?

It was in the Fall months – September or October. I feel more like October. We arrived to Budapest on that wagon with the two horses and the soldier and my friend who was a very kind of – he could find solutions easily always. He got off the wagon, went into an inn in the outskirts of Budapest and offered to anybody two horses and a wagon for civilian clothes. And it was - the deal was made in minutes. We gave the soldier that suit. In the restroom, he put it on, threw away his military uniform and left.

And we left on foot too. We were in civilian clothes, of course. And my first trip was home – to my house, which by that time in Budapest has been a Jewish House– it was called. Before the Budapest Ghetto was established the government pointed out in each district one big apartment building as a Jewish House and the people from the surrounding area had to move into that building and move into any apartments. So our apartment, which had about five rooms, where I grew up there, had about 36 people living in – children, women, men, everybody. I was amazed to see this. And the concierge was responsible for those people. There were certain hours when they were allowed to leave the house to buy groceries or whatever they had to do, but in a certain hour they had to be back in the house. I managed to get in, you know.

Then came a terror in Budapest. People were shot on the street. There were many Jewish people who moved around with false identifications and if they were discovered they were shot on the street. And we got scared – my friend and me - and learned - news gets around

very fast in Budapest always – we learned that our division from Transylvania has been transported by train to Budapest. Sort of evacuated because the Soviet Army was moving forward very fast from the east. And in our scare, we decided whatever will happen we would be safer with our division.

One day, a Hungarian Nazi came– you know, with the Nazi armband in uniform - asking for me by name. He is ordered to take me to the headquarters of the Nazi place. Even the guard, the Hungarian guard, looked with sorry at me, you know. I was just scared to death. And this was a blue-eyed, blonde young man in this Nazi uniform. And he just leads me away. We were about two, three blocks away from there. He turned towards me to turn -he had a rifle on his shoulder and I walked in front of him and he always told me which way to turn – told me to turn to the left. I turned to the left and we were out of sight from the camp and then he told me my friend, who I sent a message to, sent him to get me. This was a Jewish boy. This was the Jewish underground, you know, that was actively working. I became also a working member of that later. But he said, “Don’t worry. Where do you want to go? I am asked to take you to your friend. But do you have any unfinished business?” I said, “Yes, my mother is in the Jewish House. I know sooner or later they will deport them.” So he took me to my mother and I told mother, “Just come with me.” And I took my mother with me to the friend.

The friend was hiding in an elegant villa as a non-Jewish person. I mean he had the identifications. There were very many refugees from Transylvania by that time in Budapest, and they had their identification papers - non-Jews of course. And they were selling those papers. And my friend bought several of those papers and he gave me one, and he gave my mother one. And I felt we are safe. My friend gave me an address where I took my mother. And this was a refugee place where the Transylvanian refugees could sleep and got food. And it was very hard for my mother to learn her name, which was not her name, you know, and the year she was born in case. Luckily, she was never asked for her papers. I know they would have killed her. And took her to that place and I went back to my friend. And here started our real active time.

It was – I think it was – October, because early January of that next year was when the Russians reached our villa, where my friend and I was hiding. So we spent time from October to early January there. My friend had connections to the underground movement and they discovered that I am a graphic artist – a visual artist – and the asked me to develop a way to, to fake rubber stamps, you know. And I found an ingenious way to do it. And from there on the underground was printing birth certificates – Hungarian birth certificates. And the young man, the only one who I knew from the underground, brought these blank birth certificates to me and I put the Hungarian authority’s rubber stamp on it. That was my contribution to this movement.

Then one nice day – January it was already – 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup>, I would say. And this morning, I am up early, I look out the window and I see strange military. This was already snow – winter. Shooting went on for days now. Strange soldiers in a very weird outfit – they – unbelievable how they looked. They happened to be the Russian soldiers. The days after the Russian

occupation of Budapest were very nightmarish. Part of Budapest, the Jewish population, was overwhelmed with joy because they are once again free. The ghetto, which was at the other end of the city, escaped from being demolished. So, thousands and thousands of Jews survived the time. But now it started another kind of nightmare. The Russians were very rough soldiers and they robbed and took anything that they considered of any value. The occupation of Budapest took days, but finally it was over, and from there on I thought that I am free.

All the Hungarian Nazis were still hiding in the basements. They were just as afraid of the Russians, you know, as anything else. But I was not afraid. I felt they liberated me so I have nothing to worry about. I didn't realize that the Red Army kidnapped by then 20,000 men from Budapest, transporting them into Russia, into the Soviet Union, for forced labor. And I was out on the street. I was a heavy smoker and I missed the cigarette. So I went out to the street in hope to find somewhere to be able to buy cigarettes. And a Russian soldier stopped me, you know, with his gun. The Russian word *davay* means "c'mon, let's go," you know. And it has other meanings but in those situations that what it meant when the capture somebody and they push him to go they would say, "davay, davay." And that machine gun or whatever they have there – we called it, typical Budapest, we called it a "*davay* guitar." So one of these Russians with a "*davay* guitar" stopped me asking IDs. And I had IDs by then and, of course, he couldn't even read it, you know. He looks at it, tears it apart, throws it away, pushes me into a storeroom behind him and the room was already full, you know. He didn't know one thing that I knew, that during the war every building has a basement. And during the war, because Budapest was bombed, they made passages from one house's basement to the next one so that all the underground was connected. I knew it. The Russian didn't and I told the men in the room, "just follow me. Let's go in the basement." We did find the passageway and came up out three blocks farther away, you know, and we were escaped.

By that time then I realize there is some sort of a danger and I have no ideas. I was more careful. They captured me two more times. The second time I escaped the same way, but by that time the Russians realized what happened - what's happening. The third time they took me and there was no escape. And they took me to Soviet Union. Now this happened within a time of roughly about a month - January and part of February. No, I think it was already March, because it was Spring.

1951 when I came back from Russia and that was the time when I got married in Budapest. I tried to establish myself as an artist. I was designing and illustrating children books in Budapest in 1951. And I felt that's the most neutral territory – less political territory. And I became the art director of the only children's book publishing house - designed books and there came 1956.

1956 was the year of the revolution of Hungarians against the Russian occupation. It happened in October. I was married by then, two sons, and we decided to leave the country. We don't want to live there anymore. In Vienna - we ended up leaving Hungary - and the

Hung...and the American Cultural Attache' in Vienna, whose name was Mr. Kelly. I made contact with the American Embassy. He helped my family to get out of Vienna straight to the United States.

Source: Frank Szasz video testimony - <https://mcheckc.org/portfolio-posts/szaszfrank/>