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**AJR**

**Winston House, 2 Dollis Park**

**London N3 1HF**

**[ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk](mailto:ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk)**

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**Interview Transcript Title Page**

<b>Collection title:</b>	AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive
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<b>Interviewee Surname:</b>	Botkai
<b>Forename:</b>	Gustav
<b>Interviewee Sex:</b>	Male
<b>Interviewee DOB:</b>	18 May 1936
<b>Interviewee POB:</b>	Budapest, Hungary

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<b>Location of Interview:</b>	London
<b>Name of Interviewer:</b>	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
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## REFUGEE VOICES

**Interview No.** RV216  
**NAME:** Gustav Botkai  
**DATE:** 13 March 2018  
**LOCATION:** London  
**INTERVIEWER:** Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

**[Part One]**

**[0:00:00]**

*Today is the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2018 and we are conducting an interview with Mr. Gustav Botkai. And my name is Bea Lewkowicz, and we are in London.*

*Can you please tell me your name?*

Gustav Botkai.

*And what was your name when you were born?*

Birnfeld, Gustav.

*And where were you born?*

Budapest.

*And when?*

1936.

*Mr Botkai thank you very much for having agreed to be interviewed for AJR Refugee Voices.*

The pleasure is mine.

*Can you tell us a little bit about your family background?*

Well, it's very difficult where to start. The most prominent... chain of my family is on my grandmother's side. She was one of sixteen children, of whom only about seven survived. Her brother had- one of her brothers have gone to London before the- before the war. Before the Second World War. And ended up with a, a business of running a dance company. Darmora Ballet which ...they, they, they did on their own. The other prominent sister gradually moved to London through Vienna and Paris. And her daughter married Doctor Simpson, who was the owner of the DAKS business and the Simpsons of Piccadilly. Very- very wealthy family. And the rest of the- sisters, one was- one was a singer in Budapest. A chanson singer. Quite well known.

*What was her name?*

Sólyom Janka. And she- her- her life is, is, is quite interesting. And the rest of the family sort of drifted in- into various obscurity.

*Those are all your grandmother's...*

That's all my grandmother's side.

**[0:03:22]**

*And what was your name of- what was the name of your grandmother?*

Paula Vo- Paula Vogel. Paula Vogel. Her husband was an architect and... they- he operated from our home in, in - in Budapest. We had a very large flat there - about nine bedrooms - which eventually was broken up into three separate flats during and after the- the war.

*And where was this- where in Budapest?*

In Andrásy út. Andrásy út *harminchét* [37].

*And do you remember your grandmother?*

Oh, yes. Yes, I remember my grandmother very well. Unfortunately, she- she, she became very ill in the latter part of her life. She- she got Alzheimer's and made life very difficult for my mother.

*And what about the other part of the family?*

Which part? The...? I don't know anything about my grandfather's ancestry. It's only my grandmother's. That's where you have the Schloms, who have very strong Jewish connections. They- they came from Romania and he was a cantor. Singing and writing music.

*And what was his name?*

Schlom.

*First name?*

Salomon.

*Salomon Schlom?*

Yes.

*And he was cantor at the Budapest- at the...?*

In one of the synagogues. I don't know which one.

*And this is from your father's side or from your mother's side?*

**[0:05:45]**

This is all my mother's side. I don't know anything about anybody other than my grandfather on my father's side.

*So, tell us a little bit about your first memories. What do you remember?*

Historically, or...?

*Well, your first memories. Whatever they are.*

First memories I, I- I was in- in school. I'm, I'm sort of trying to- to think of memories that are relevant to- relevant to my growing up. And I- I was probably one or two of the Jewish boys in- in a school which was not Jewish. I, I- my- my parents who were aware of the oncoming Nazi... occupation and troubles that- that were facing, when I was two years old, they have baptised themselves and me. And from there on, I have- I have been going to church and... accepted the Catholic religion. Until probably at the age of seven, going home from church, I was beaten up by a gang of thugs who said, "Well, don't you bloody Jew go into this church again." And then my parents decided to tell me about my Jewish background. So, from there on I didn't go to church and... So where do we go from there?

**[0:08:32]**

*How did they know that you were- that you were...?*

People knew. It's a- it's a small- it's basically a very small city. Everybody knew. It, it is- it is in a way unfortunate, because it had later implications that... It couldn't be hidden. And initially- but because my family lived in that house for a very long time.

*Yes.*

And they- all the people in the house knew that we were Jewish.

*Right. And when they- must have- did they change their names?*

No.

*No. So you- so that also... yeah.*

Yes, that- that didn't help.

*A slight give-away.*

I- I seem to remember a family meeting some time before the worst part of the- the war started, where it was considered to go to Australia. But the family was very large. The elder grandparents wouldn't move. My father wouldn't move without them. So, it was decided to, to stay and to- to get false identity papers. We were all fitted out with false identities. I had to learn my name, and... had been told how to behave and how to protect myself from being recognised that I was Jewish. How to go to the toilet.

**[0:10:33]**

*What was your name?*

Koretz, Tamás. And you- I- I can't remember what my mother's name was.

*So Koretz was the surname?*

Koretz was the surname.

*It's really interesting, because there was a, you know, a rabbi in Salonika with the name Koretz. Have you heard of it?*

No.

*That's another story, but...*

No. Again, this was a-

*Why that name? What did it-?*

Because they had to buy somebody's identity and that is what they have been able to buy. They- they bought the papers from existing families. Some were out of Budapest. And that- that it's- they thought that that is going to protect. Well, it didn't.

*Before we just go on with the story there, let's- tell me a bit about your parents and, and what sort of life they had before the war.*

Well, very comfortable middle-class life, with a large home. We lived together with my grandmother and grandfather. My grandfather was working. Had- had an office at the back of the flat. And then he gradually became ill and... that was closed down. That was closed down well before the war. And then my grandfather died, and ...he died of cancer. What can I say?

*Where did your parents meet? How did they meet?*

**[0:12:29]**

My father was playing the saxophone in his younger years, and my mother and my parents sort of visited the place totally without knowing. And- and I think they fell in love there. And they continued.

*And when did they get married?*

I don't know. I- I don't know. I don't have the date.

*And what was your father's profession?*

He didn't have a profession. He was working for his, for his father's business. They- they had a textile business in, in Budapest. And they- they, they worked together. They sold cloth and- wholesale and retail. And I remember, again, they worked from their flat. They had a very



large flat just oppos- in Wesselényi utcai, just opposite the Great Synagogue. And from their first floor flat you, you- you overlooked- you overlooked the synagogue. That part of my family I think frequented the synagogue... more than my side of the family did.

*But when you went there...*

I went there quite a lot, because I was very friendly with Paul, my cousin, who- who was brought up there. And he is- he's here in London. And we played football in front of the synagogue. That's all I can remember about- I don't know about- I can, I have no recollection ever going into the synagogue.

*Right. So, your parents lived a comfortable life?*

Both sides have lived a comfortable, middle-class life.

*And what sort of friends, or what sort of circles did they have?*

**[0:15:02]**

My mother was quite a flamboyant person and had quite a bit of social life. I don't know anything about my- my father's. The war had sort of... broke that up. But my father was taken to forced labour, but because he baptised a few years earlier, he wasn't in fact taken away. He was taken to the army. And that meant that his- he was positioned in Budapest rather than being taken to the front. I have seen very little of my father during these years. He's- he, he visited us occasionally. He managed to sort of... get away. And then things got a great deal worse. Then he- he escaped from the army, because they were going to move their whole unit to the front and he didn't want to be going there. And from there on he was- he was hiding, at various places. But that's another story.

*So do you- you were very young. Do you- can you remember him?*

Oh, I remember him, yes. I remember him. He, he, he cropped up quite a few times during the war when we were in trouble and my mother was being- when the Nazis wanted to take my mother then...to, to- SS thugs and *csendör* [gendarme] which is the Hungarian version of

the special... police - turned up to take her away. We were warned by the housekeeper that they are coming to fetch her. So, she, she- she hid in the- in the flat.

**[00:17:48]**

There was a- there was a little cubbyhole, which was not very prominent and she climbed up there and they couldn't find her. So, they said, "Well, we'll- we'll be back again." And then she came down. And a few hours later they surprised us and they- they got- my mother pretended to be ill. She put herself in a bed and pretended that she, that she can't be moved. The- the Nazi thugs have been trying to get her to move. She demanded a doctor. There was a doctor friend a Doctor... Blumenthal- Blumenthal - Jewish doctor. He, he came up. He said, "No she can't move." So, very reluctant- reluctantly they gave her one more day. During that visit, I, I sort of appealed - with my grandmother's prompting - to them, to leave my mother. And I was threatened to- to be kicked. So, I withdrew. And that is just a little memory of- of the day and when- when these people left and left her for a day, then my mother contacted my father and he said, "We have to leave." So, during the night, we walked out, my father, my mother and- and me. And went to a hiding place nearby, where there were about twenty other people in one room. The police turned up the following day looking for my mother. And of course, my grandparents and my uncle were there and they didn't believe that she wasn't there. They searched the flat. They demanded to open every- every cupboard. When the key wasn't produced to the sitting room wardrobe, then they took a gun out and they shot the lock, to open the door, and threatened my grandmother. But had to go away without- without my mother.

**[0:21:18]**

We then stayed in that room, that was almost uninhabitable, for a long period of time. And with the help of some friends, they found us hiding place in a flat nearby. All I can remember from there, is that my mother was trying to make friends with the neighbouring young people and found out that they are part of the death gang of the Nazi group. And because she made friends with one of them, they- they said, "Look, when- you better disappear because my mates have found a yellow star taken off your son's coat. So, they discovered that you are Jewish and they are coming during the- the night to- to pick you up." So. A friend was contacted. I don't know how. And they picked us up with their little... ambulance. And we

were taken to one of my uncle's- house. Now, that uncle had a hat factory, and he was very popular and he had a, he had a, a, a concierge who was working there and did some work for him. And found an empty flat in- and there we were hiding together with another part of the family who... Jutka- now Jutka Ullman. She is- she is, she is now in Canada. She was a cousin of mine. And- and her mother. The father stayed in the flat which was locked up. And my father was at that point running away from authorities. And they said that he should join Judit's father in hiding in that empty flat. It's dark. It's at the outskirts of Budapest. They will be safe there. So my father agreed and he went in there and stayed for a while. But he was a very mobile, busy kind of person and he couldn't spend much time there.

**[0:25:11]**

My mother and [inaudible] - Jutka's father – no, the two mothers have been taking food there, virtually risking their lives every time they went there. But my father couldn't stand the- the dark and couldn't stand the- the life there. He, he passed his time by undoing curtains and rolling into balls of thread and- eventually my mother found a false identity for, for him. And he then got out and... and started to look for work. He got caught. And he- he was- I'm finding it very difficult to get the sequences right. He visited us once in- in, in the flat. He couldn't stay there. There were too many of us there. And there- he, he got caught. He was taken and he was sentenced to death. He was put on a lorry. Taken to be executed. It- it was an open- back lorry from the story that we were given. He jumped off the lorry at the back and then came back again to- to us. He stayed- I think- one night, and then he- he had found a job in a bakery. And that's where he spent the rest of the war years. Two weeks before- and he came out- he came to us and assured us that he will be safe, because there are three big ovens there and one is always empty. And when the bombs come, he can, he can hide himself. He can get into one of the ovens and- and he did. And two weeks before the end of the war, apparently, a bomb destroyed the whole house and he suffocated in the oven. And it's only after the war because it's only a couple of weeks then that firm identification took place. In the meantime, we drifted from- from one hiding place to another. At first, we went down to the... to the cellar in the same- in the same block of flats. And- because the bombing had been quite persistent. And we, we stayed there till the Russians- till the Russians came.

**[0:29:15]**

*So, were you all the time with your mother?*

All the time with my mother.

*The two of you.*

Yes- no, my grandmother was with us as well.

*So, the three of you.*

Yeah, the three of us.

*And you were not staying in any of the Jewish hou- the Jewish houses...*

No.

*... or one of the protected houses?*

No.

*Do you know, did they- did they try to get some papers or those Wallenberg...?*

No, we- the- the- my mother stuck to the false identity which wasn't Jewish. Which was- so no, we weren't taken. They- she- she said all along that- well, my father said that "Don't- don't get involved in crowded collections." That- he, he- he could see that the Jewish houses can be picked up by the Nazis and, and group. And so, no, we stayed with our false identity all- all the way through. So that's really- that's really the story till the end of the war.

*And how did you- you were very young. How did you manage this situation? Do you remember what were your feeling at the time?*

I can't remember. I've been- I've been told how to behave and I tried to behave like that. And I adapted, I think, to, to- to the circumstances.

*And how did you pass your time? Let's say, you know you said you were in hiding in the cellar. Do you remember what were you doing? What- were you- was your mother trying to occupy you somehow or-?*

Pass. I have no recollection. ...None whatever.

**[0:31:31]**

*And why did they- you said they wanted to arrest your mother. Why, your mother? Why...?*

Well, because at that time we were still at home. And then the- initially the legislation that the Hungarian government passed was first- it went stage by stage. First, they said that all Jews have to be registered. And they have also registered their bicycles. I remember when they took our bicycles away and then all the radios had to be taken away. I remember when they took our radio away. And then gradually they, they said all women under forty has to- has to be taken away. And my mother was under forty, and that's how they- they came to, to take her. She didn't go in. Some women went in when they... And my- my mother stayed at home. But we had some 'friendly' neighbours who reported her to stay at home that he- she hasn't- went in. She didn't go in and...

*So that saved her life that she really refused to...*

Yes.

*... leave.*

Yes. Again, little snippets of... my memory. I used to be very friendly with two young women. I- I always liked women. I always got on with women better than I got on with men. And I visited them, and they were very sweet and very nice. They lived on the second floor. And it was them who reported my mother. And after the war my mother took them to court and they had a... nominal sentence.

*How did she know it was them? How?*

Oh... Again – pass.

*So, they denounced your mother?*

Yes.

*And the other question I have for you - maybe as a child you can't remember- at that point was there- did you hear anything about Auschwitz? About...*

I haven't...

*...what was going on? Do you think your parents knew?*

**[0:34:19]**

They must have known. I mean- nobody knew the extent but they must have known that there is something very terrible waiting. But the word 'Auschwitz' hasn't- hasn't appeared in our- in our background- in our history. But they- they must have known that these people are disappearing, the friends and the neighbours and the Jews in general.

*And what happened to your- to the larger family? So, your mother was saved, your grandmother and yourself.*

Yes, well, my mother and grandmother and I went back to the flat after the war. And then the communist system started. And that's again another...

*It's another story.*

And that's another [ironic half-laugh]

*Let's still stick here with the war a little bit. You talked about the siege of Budapest. So, what about food and what- do you remember being hungry? What did you eat?*

**[0:35:41]**

I, I remember that we- we lived on beans and boiled beans and whatever my- my mother or my grandmother had been able to- to obtain at the time. I haven't been hungry, but I mean, there was a limited amount of food around. I can't remember being hungry. They always managed to get something. My mother kept on going out and come back with certain- certain things.

*And the building you were in, was that bombed?*

Yeah- yes, but not... all the way down.

*Right. So, you could stay where you were?*

We could- stayed in- we could stay in that cellar where we ended up the war - all the way. In fact, I remember when the first Russian soldier came in and opened the door and all, all- all the people have been moving out. And they got knives and things and there was a dead horse there and they took the horse meat. They haven't seen any- they haven't had any meat for a long time. They took the horse meat to go...

**[0:37:12]**

*And how many people were in that cellar?*

Well, we had our own, [half-laughing] we had our own coal cellar. It- it's- there was only my- ourselves. And I can't remember anybody else there. The main cellar, the main cellar we couldn't go to, because they would have recognised us not belonging. There- there, the was a main cellar where all the other people went. But we couldn't go in there. So, they opened the coal cellar... for us.

*They were worried that somebody would recognise you?*

Yes.

I mean there were Jews hiding all over the place and it was- we would have stuck out there like a sore thumb. Everybody would know that we don't belong.

*And what happened to the- to the bigger family? What happened to the other people?*

Well, they, they- they- they varied. The most interesting- the most interesting wing of the family is probably ...my- the- from those who stayed in, in, in, in Budapest during the war, there was my aunt Sólyom Janka, whom I mentioned. She- she has... she was a very well-known, a very well-known chanson singer. Very, very popular in her time. And she fell in love with a Count, who was part of the big family of Telekis - Count Teleki. And they wanted to marry, but Teleki family refused permission to have- have a Jew- a Jewish person to get into the family. So, he must have been head over heels in love with her. And he left the family home and he moved in with her to a flat. And the irony of the story is that they couldn't get married then. But it saved her life, because his name and influence enabled her to stay in the flat. And the Nazis wouldn't take her, because of the protection that the Teleki family had provided. After the war, it was a totally changed situation. He was a Count; that was public enemy for the communists. And she- they- they got- then they got married. And because they got married, he was saved from what the communists would have done. In other words, he could stay in Budapest and wasn't- and- and wasn't deported and sent like a lot of people just out of Budapest. And they got married and when he died, she was the sole beneficiary of some of the bits and pieces. Some of which have sort of lingered down and even we got some- some of the Teleki family's wealth. And if you look around in this room, I can still point to some of the things that came from the Teleki family's inheritance. The other sister...

**[0:42:10]**

*So, they saved each other?*

They saved each other.

*And did they stay in Budapest the whole...?*



They stayed in Budapest all the way through. But she wasn't allowed to sing until very much later, and by- by which time music had drifted away from the kind of music that she provided. But if you look up on the internet, her, her songs are- her name is there and you can actually recall some of the songs- they were original.

*In which language were the songs?*

Oh, it's in- all in Hungarian. Yes.

*Yeah?*

She rang- she sang poems. Hungarian poems, mainly.

*And why was she not allowed to sing?*

Well, it was- it was- in the Nazi period, because she was Jewish, in the communist period because she wasn't singing communist- communist songs. It- it, it, it just wasn't until- until much later when things eased a little bit. But then she was really too old to make an impression.

*Did they have children?*

No.

*Ok, and your other relatives- you were saying?*

**[0:43:27]**

Well, my other, my other- my uncle who came out in 1936 helped- helped us. When I got to Vienna, got me... passage so I was amongst the first to fly out from Vienna to- to London and then I stayed- I stayed with them for about six months until I went to university.

*That's much later. But he- so he left in 1936?*

Yes.

*And how did he- how could he leave? Or how did he- did he have help coming to Britain? He himself?*

I don't know how he got to- to Britain. I think they- they travelled with a- with the dance group.

*Yes, what was the name of it? I wanted to ask you.*

Darmora Ballet.

*Darmora?*

Darmora.

*How do you spell it? D A R...?*

D A R M O R A

*Darmora Ballet.*

That's the ballet company. And apparently- we have some newspaper cuttings. They actually performed in the Royal Variety Performance in- once or twice.

*So, he came here with them and then he just stayed?*

Yes. But her- her performance was too daring for the official- officialdom here and they were banned.

*But they stayed here?*

But they stayed here. Yes.

*So how big was this dance group?*

Oh, I would think she- she- he was recruiting girls for the dance group from all over the country here in England. And they- they probably about had six or seven girls permanently on- on call.

**[0:45:32]**

*And did it keep going here in London?*

Oh yes, it- it went on for some time. But it was a small- it was a small business. I remember they were making the clothes for the show themselves.

*Yes, so when you came it was still going?*

Yes, they were sewing garments for the dancers. And eventually I inherited their sewing machine. [laughs]

*Right, so that's another brother.*

That's another brother and the other sister who came out early - well. Ok, I tell you the story. She was very ambitious. Well before the war. And she had two daughters and a son, later. And she decided to take the pretty sister and leave the ugly sister behind. And went with the pretty sister to Vienna, trying to... trying to make a success. And she did. She moved- she, she married a film producer who was working in America and... Fanto. That name is, is Fanto. And through there, they got into reasonably high society in Vienna where she introduced her pretty daughter, and married a Count. A Hungarian Count. But the grandmother wasn't very happy because the Count didn't have any money. Had the title and no money. So decided to persuade the daughter to leave the husband and go to England as a Countess. So, she- they have arrived in England and they were seeking high society. Eventually she met and she fell in love with Doctor Simpson. And...

*The daughter?*

The daughter. And they lived a very comfortable life and they had one child, Georgina. And Georgina married Anthony Andrews who is an actor. And if you know, *Brideshead Revisited*, he was one of the stars there. Anyway, the long and short of it is that Georgina and I are still in contact with each other.

[0:49:04]

*So, she is your...*

Second cousin.

*Second cousin.*

That's that side of the family.

*And was anyone deported?*

No...

*Of your family?*

No.

*So, everyone managed somehow.*

Everyone managed somehow to get through. It's the men that... died off. My father died. But most, most- most of the family have managed to- to-

*So, you think your father could have survived if he'd stayed there?*

Yes. Yes. The other father survived- in that flat.

*He survived.*

Yes.

*Well not everyone can be in that situation.*

That's right. People are different.

*And you said you remember the moment when the Russian soldier came.*

Oh yes.

**[0:50:10]**

*Can you tell us a little bit more in detail about this- that moment?*

They- [with emotion] they opened the door and they said, "You are free." And they brought bread. And then we- we almost immediately moved out of, out of there and we went to... we went- we went back to the flat.

*And what did you find in the flat?*

Oh, everything was cold and broken and very, very derelict. And... my mother had made friends with some men who have helped to... get the family going. I remember one of them was going to the country for food. Trying to get life organised. But my mother didn't like him sufficiently - so they split up. Yes, I remember, then the Russian occupation the, the Russian soldiers were very nice. They took me into- they took me into the next- next door and they gave me a little toy car and they- they were very friendly.

*And how soon after liberation could you start school again, or?*

Very soon. Very soon. I... continued going into- into school.

*And when did you realise- when did you find out that your father hadn't survived?*

Oh, I knew that at the time when we were hiding.

*Your mother knew that?*

Yeah. Yeah.

**[0:52:40]**

*And so how- how did life become sort of normal again? What- what happened?*

Well, my- my mother had various boy- boyfriends. And with, with- with those boyfriends- And one of them she actually married. But he- he was a crook. And we had some family jewellery hidden and he, he- he found it and he, he- he sold them and he- that's how he brought money in. And then they divorced and my mother had other boyfriends. And there was always- after the war there was always a man- a man, who- who was helping my mother to- to survive. She was an attractive woman.

*And did you stay together with the grandmother?*

Yeah.

*So, they- you lived together.*

Lived together. Right to the end. And my mother had a very tough time with her, because she suffered from Alzheimer's and... occasionally violent. And eventually my mother found a partner, about three years, 1953, and, and got married and settled down. And they were very happy together.

*In Budapest?*

In Budapest, yeah.

*Did she stay where she was or did she-?*

Yes. [S]he moved in with us- his- his family has been completely wiped out by the- by the war. All her brothers, her parents, they, they- they were all taken away to Auschwitz. He was the only survivor. He moved in with us and he, he was very nice and they, they- they stayed together till the end.

*So, he was in fact your stepfather?*

Yes.

*And did they try at that point- I mean it was not possible to leave Budapest then?*

**[0:55:16]**

No, the, they, they didn't. There was- in 1956, when the revolution broke out I was already at university. But I, I didn't- I, I refused to take weapons. I, I remember at university when the revolution started, anybody who wanted to participate could take up weapons and I, I went home [laughs]... And watched it from the window.

*And what did you see?*

Oh, terrible things. Terrible things. At first, all- great excitement, and then subsequently I have seen people being hung on the lamp- on the lamppost and... those are horrible memories. But it's... I, I, I, I was protected really from any participation and I didn't have the guts to... to join in. That's, that's how I- that's how I look at myself if I look back. I had the opportunity, but I felt that I, I wasn't-

*But the opportunity to do what?*

To- to participate. To go and fight and... and so I didn't. I-

*And what about the communist times? So, how did it affect you and your family?*

**[0:57:30]**

Well, the, the- the communist time protected us as Jews. We didn't have any formal legislation which... which prevented us from doing anything. So, all of a sudden, we were free. Again, my mother had- I, I- I, I went to- I wasn't very good at school but I managed to get my matriculation. I wasn't good enough to do what I wanted to do. I wanted to go into engineering. There was no question. They established a new university of economics and with a great deal of difficulty, my mother managed to get me in there. But because of my background I was never really- I was never really accepted into the new Hungarian framework. Because I was neither worker nor peasant nor communist nor- nor anything. I was in- I was in-between. The family was in-between and there was no, there was no- and I sort of did two and a half years of economics there. The, the economics university was a very impressive building. All I did is to read- Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and the Hungarian leader [Mátyás] Rákosi and the university library contained no other books to, to, to- to read. And that determined really the fact in 1956- people started to leave all of a sudden during this. And all my friends left and I mean I didn't want to be left behind. My mother got in touch with my uncle in London, and eventually managed to get a group of people who will help me to cross the border. At that point it was still illegal. I had the first attempt to go and this, this- this chap took us to a little town near- near the Hungarian border and put us into a hotel. And, and the Hungarian police raided the hotel. They got me. They got me, they arrested me. They put me on a train and they said that, "Don't do this again." I arrived back to Budapest and that I shall never forget, because I arrived back to Budapest to the southern railway station in the middle of the night. And the place was dead. There were no streetlights. There was no movement of people. And I was on the other side of the city to where my home was. And I found that frightening. The, the walk back from the railway station to- to home was... a terrible experience.

**[1:02:02]**

*By yourself?*

By myself. And then, a couple of weeks later, got together with some friends and my mother found another route out. And they got us together with two girls. Two boys, two girls. And, and then we, we- we went to a little- a little village near the Hungarian border, where another group of people were waiting for transport. And they walked us- they walked us to, to, to, to



cross the border. It involved us crossing a river. And about ten of us in the boat. I remember the gap between the water and the edge of the boat was probably half an inch.

*It wasn't safe?*

Yes. Yes, but we managed to get across and our guide was not dishonest. They took the money at the end, and the four of us arrived to- to a small village. And again, I was told not to go into any camp or any crowd. We had- five dollars sewn into my friend's pocket, because in Hungary in those days you just couldn't have foreign currency. That was highly illegal. And with the five dollars we bought our first orange and Coca-Cola. I didn't want any. The Coca-Cola was a great disappointment because we have only heard about Coca-Cola. It put me off Coca-Cola for the rest of my life.

*And the orange? [laughs]*

No, the orange was alright.

*So, where was this, in Austria?*

Yes.

*Where exactly? Where did you get to?*

**[1:04:33]**

I, I think it was a... A... It was a camping complex. Oh, yes. And then we didn't go into the camp. We went to the bus station. And we used the rest of the five dollars for the four of us and we took a bus to Vienna. And there again, we arrived in the middle of the night and the contrast was... unbelievable. The lights, the buses, the buzzing city. And I had a contact, with a lady, who used to be living in the same block. And I rang her and she said, "Yes, I, I help you, but it's the middle of the night. We live a little bit outside Vienna. There's nothing much I can do tonight, but we'll pick you up tomorrow. So, you just have to- go to the police and report." So, we went to the police and with our very limited German we said, "Well, we just arrived from Budapest." "Well," they said, "You can stay in one of the prisons overnight.

That's perfectly all right. [laughing] But you will get up very early in the morning." So, we were put into a prison cell for the night and at six o'clock in the morning they, they got us- they got us up and then, then we were eventually able to contact and be picked up by this lady. And he had a- she had a big house in, in- just outskirts of Vienna. And she was kind enough to accommodate all the four of us. And I, I got in touch with my... with my uncle, who went to the British Embassy... and pulled some strings and sent me some money. And I- I got to- to the first flight. And I tell you one more little story. [with emotion] But I find it difficult to tell. When we arrived to- to an airport in London, I don't know which one, I phoned her- phoned him- to say, we arrived or I arrived. And he said, "Get a taxi and come here." So I got a taxi and he was standing... on the street [becomes emotional] I, I- I... I find it very difficult to tell this story without being moved.

*Take your time.*

**[1:08:23]**

He was standing. He gave me a hug and a kiss. And then turned to the taxi driver and said, "What do I owe you?" And he said, "Give him another kiss." And that was my arrival to England. And that was very nice.

*And when was that, when did you?*

Well, it was- I only spent a week in, in...in, in Vienna. So, it must have been early in '57. And then he- we- he found me a job at Harrods. And I was working at Harrods for about six months and then I applied to go to university- to continue my studies. And I applied to three universities – Oxford, Cambridge and Leeds. And lo and- lo and behold I only got into Leeds but I mean I could never have coped with anything more academic. It, It- it...

*And what happened to the other three people?*

Well, my friend had gone to New York. Much later. They stayed in that villa for a long time. Eventually he- he got to New York. He was very ill. He had a heart operation. An open-heart surgery, I think. And he- he ended up to be a- a stockbroker or ...something. Not- working for another firm. He is still in New York. I occasionally speak to him on the phone. The two

girls, well, that's another story. We- we flirted with them. We became sort of very close in, in and I, I exchanged correspondence. The one which was my partner during this- this period, she went to Holland and then to Israel. And then our correspondence faded. Because when I got to university, I met my, I re-met my...my wife and every- all other- all other flirtations have been sort of... [with laughter] ...been abandoned. And I don't know what's happened to the fourth. And I don't know what's happened to [inaudible].

*And when you arrived, do you remember what your first impressions were of England?*

**[1:11:52]**

Yes. I- I do. I, I think I- I found it absolutely fascinating. I didn't speak a great deal of English. I went to a- an English school and I got this job. I got this job at Harrods and I mean, that- that was a revelation. I wasn't- I wasn't allowed to go into the store, because I was working down in the basement. And the basement was like a city. There were... traffic lights and... trains were going, carrying goods from one department to another department. From the reception. It was a maze. Very, very impressive. I don't know whether it still exists or to what extent it still exists. And then I applied to university and I, I- I went up to Leeds.

*And did you- where did your uncle live, in London?*

Rose- Rosary Gardens in South Kensington.

*So, close to Harrods.*

Close to Harrods.

*And you stayed with him?*

I stayed with him for the six months and then I went up to Leeds and...

*And did you have contact with your mother at that time?*

**[1:13:20]**

Oh, contact with my mother- whenever we could, yes. Telephone and... I- when I was preparing for this interview, I found one letter from my mother amongst the various files that Erika has so carefully put away. And I- I thought, well, what a great pity that I destroyed all my mother's letters, because there were hundreds of them. But I did; I- I got rid of everything. And that must be in my- in my attitudes too. Because my mother destroyed all documents that involved her Jewish background. She said after the war that "I don't want to be Jewish. I don't want to have anything to do with it. And I have no- I have no papers left at all." She destroyed her background - completely. And when my daughter got married, Erika had a tremendous amount of difficulties to find the *Ketubah*. But money was working in Hungary, and eventually, eventually all the documents that the synagogue needed...

*Right...*

...were produced.

*When did she destroy all these documents, your mother?*

Straight after the war.

*So, she, after the war, cut her...*

Cut her- wanted to cut everything...

*And her husband also?*

**[1:15:12]**

Well, her husband- that- that's a few years later. When, when they got married in '53, by, by that time... things had been destroyed. My, my stepfather's- had nothing anyway. He, he- he came from a small Hungarian city and it just happened that he was in Budapest when the rest of his family was taken away. And that's how he survived.

*So, did they have any dealings with the community or not at all? In the 50s, or... when they...?*

You mean the Jewish community?

Yes.

No. No.

*Anyway, communism, it was also...*

The communism also...

*It didn't help, I suppose.*

No, it- it didn't encourage, or in fact, strongly discouraged any- any sort of religious activity no matter what. It, it, it- it wasn't. And in fact, because of all these years of denying and... and covering up and, and not being Jewish I found it very, very difficult when I came out here. Erika found it much easier to blend in with some of the... Jewish way of life. And I was really a reluctant- a reluctant follower. And you know, basically it's to her that I can thank that... our children, or most of our children, found a Jewish background.

*So, do you feel it had a big impact- or how did it impact, the hiding – your war experience?*

**[1:17:20]**

Well, that, that- that's part of the attitude that- I had, that no I don't want to have anything to do with religion. And I didn't all the way through. And especially not organised religion. Couldn't deny my Jewishness, but I didn't- I didn't like- I didn't like organised religion. I was dragged into the synagogue even in Manchester. And I- I did it for the family. And I, I stuck out; I, I didn't get myself involved.

*You felt you didn't belong?*

No.

*And related to that, what about your name? When- tell us when was your name changed?*

After the war when my- my, when my mother destroyed all the documents, she decided that she's going to be called something else. And she found this name and she registered it and...

*So, she did- it was her?*

She did, yes.

*And were you happy about that at the time?*

I didn't care. I- not been an issue.

*So, is that a very Hungarian name or is it...?*

It is, it is a very Hungarian name. In fact, it- if- if it was finished with a 'y', she wouldn't have been allowed to use it because that would imply... traditional Hungarian... noble- noble family. But with a 'y' [an 'i'] it was alright, and that's how the name came about.

*So, to come back to here- so you went to university?*

Yes, I went to university. I, I- I had to learn the language. I found the first year very, very difficult. And we- we got together with Erika right from the beginning.

*And you said you re-met. So, did you know each other?*

Yes, we knew of each other. Socially we went to the same swimming pool and she was amongst a... younger group of kids. I- I was a little bit older and my crowd was a little bit – a different crowd. But I knew of her. And in London I found- in Leeds I was told by somebody that she is- she is in London. So, I... And then she came up and really from the first year on we- we went together, all through.

[1:20:47]

*And you said also you studied economics in, in Hungary...*

Yes.

*... and economics here?*

Well, that's the only entry I had. It had its difficulties, because [laughing] my background with Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin writings is not really the- the fundamentals of...

[laughing] Yes. But as I was picking up the language, I found the university quite adaptable to, to my needs. After the first year, I, I was advised by one of the professors to take a year out, learn to speak English better, and come back when I can understand the jokes in the *Punch* magazine. Well, I didn't take the advice. I carried on with my course and after the third year I got my degree.

*And what were your- what were you thinking and what did you want to do?*

[1:22:05]

Oh, I didn't have any plans. I just sort of went on to apply like most other students for various jobs. And went on for interviews and whoever will offer you... And it's very interesting that it's a Jewish company in Manchester who offered me- offered me a job. And that's how I, I got to Cohen and Wilkes. And they sent me to this course - a residential course - in Guisborough because they were very closely associated with the Burton Group and the Burton Group ran this course. And I took a diploma in clothing management- a post-graduate diploma in clothing management. And then I worked for them for a while and then I worked for an umbrella company and managed them for- with their management for about eleven years. And then I had a, a break. I was teaching- lecturing-

*In economics?*

Economics and business management. By that time, not Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. By, by that time I'd- [laughing] I'd been advised about the differences. And...And after the university, we got married. And we remained married... ever since.

*And where did you settle?*

At first in Manchester. We, we, we- we had a couple of flats. Moving from one flat to another. And- because that's where my job was. And Erika came to Manchester. She- she also got a job in, in- in Harrogate. But I'm sure she will tell you about that.

*And then from Manchester to...?*

Well, we stayed in Manchester for thirty-five years. That's where we brought up our children. That's where- that's where we got into the synagogue and the Jewish Society and... And then our children moved to London one by one, all the three of them. And then my wife- my wife couldn't- couldn't stay in Manchester anymore [laughing] and so we, we came to London.

**[1:25:12]**

*And what was your legal status when you came?*

Oh, I was stateless for five years. And then I was called in to the Home Office and I was to swear allegiance to the Queen. And I did. And when we got married, she didn't have to do that, because she was marrying a British subject. [laughs]

*And was that important for you to get a British passport?*

Oh, yes, yes it was.

*And did you receive any help from any organisation as a refuge- as a stateless person?*

No.

No.



No. The help and influence that I received was from the family. My uncle helped me quite a lot, but not financially. I got a- I got a grant for the university and I had to manage on that.

*And did you ever go back to Budapest?*

Oh yes, yes. Went back when we could. I did business. I, I- I bought some Hungarian goods for my wholesale business and- and I'm still in contact with Hungarian manufacturers.

*What did you import from Hungary?*

Leather goods. Small leather goods.

*So, bags, and...?*

Purses and- coin purses and little knick-knacks which they are- have a unique- unique look.

*And you imported them here to...?*

Yes, I brought them in here.

*So that was your own company?*

Yes, that was my own company.

*Did that have a name or...?*

'Gustav Botkai' was the name. Gustav Botkai Leather Goods.

*In Manchester?*

**[1:27:02]**

In Manchester. And I had a warehouse there and- and with my business partner, we had- well I, I might just tell you the story of how we started off because that's also very interesting and it's relevant. We started to play bridge. And we had- Erika- Erika went to work in Harrogate and got a lift from a neighbour who is also- was also working in Harrogate. And he was a big bridge player and he persuaded us to learn to play bridge. And in- in our various bridge games we met a man who was the local manager of the Nat West Bank in Old Trafford. And by that time, I- I had the idea of buying a house to- for renting. The idea came from my uncle who lived in South Kensington. And he had converted it and he had three flats on top of their flat. So, I, I, I thought that's a very nice way of earning some extra money. But I mean, I had not enough money for, for, for a house. And then the friend who took Erika to ICI every morning and with whom we played bridge said... [recording cut off]

**[End of interview]**

**[1:29:02]**

**[1:29:04]**

**[Photographs and documents]**

Photo 1

My father, my father's brother and sister, in the 20s.

Photo 2

My mother in- in the late 20s.

*Where?*

In the late 20s. No idea. I don't know where.

Photo 3

My father in the mid-30s. That's all I know about it.

*Don't know where?*

No.

Photo 4

My father and my mother in 1937. –

*With who?*

With me. [Imre Birnfeld and Klara Vogel Birnfeld]

Photo 5

Me, with the first car of the family. Probably 1939.

Photo 6

It's me, but I can't remember when.

Photo 7

This is me and my cousin Paul, probably 1940, in the zoo. Budapest.

Photo 8

This is my seventh birthday party at home. The address is at home: Andrásy út. Andrásy út harminchét [37].

Photo 9

My great aunt Sólyom Janka.

*When was this?*

I haven't got the date.

*Before the war?*

Oh, well before the war. I would think in the 20s.

Photo 10

My mother in 1944.

Photo 11

My grandmother, Polly, in the late 30s.

Photo 12

My father with the army unit in 1942. Yeah.

Photo 13

On excursion with friends in Budapest - in the 50s.

Photo 14

My mother with Béla, my step-father, 1954, approximately.

Photo 15

My uncle Sándor in London. I don't know the date. I won't put a date on it; it's bound to be wrong.

Photo 16

With my aunt Aranka, 1959.

Photo 17

Our wedding photo, 1962. Leeds.

Photo 18

Our three children in 1972.

*[Erika Botkai:] '74 - '74.*

Sorry.

*And what are their names?*

Mark, Robert and Karen. Reverse order.

Photo 19

My grandmother in the early 1900s. Paul- Paula, later Polly.

Document 1

David Schlom, my great-grandfather. Probably in the early 1900s.

*What is the significance of this document?*

He wrote the music and he, and he acted as the Chazzan. He was singing in the synagogue.

**[1:33:48]**

*Gustav, thank you very, very much for sharing your ...*

Oh, I'm- I'm grateful.

*...photographs.*

I'm very grateful for- for all this.

*Thank you.*

**[End of photographs and documents]**

**[1:34:10]**