

IMPORTANT

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AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Surname:	Dobai
Forename:	John
Interviewee Sex:	Male
Interviewee DOB:	6 Januar 1934
Interviewee POB:	Budapest, Hungary

Date of Interview:	12 June 2017
Location of Interview:	London
Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
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REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV206
NAME: John Dobai
DATE: 12nd June 2017
LOCATION: London, UK
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[Part One]

[0:00:00]

Today is the 12th of June 2017. We are conducting the interview with Mr. John Dobai. My name is Bea Lewkowicz, and we are in London. Can you please tell me your name?

John Dobai.

And when were you born?

I was born in 1934. January the 6th.

And where?

In Budapest.

John thank you very much for having agreed to do the interview for the AJR Refugee Voices project. Can you please tell us something about your family background?

They- on my father's side, going- going back just to my grandfather, he was a greengrocer, and he lived in a particularly poor area of Budapest. Brought up four children, running a not very prosperous greengrocer's shop. On the- on my mother's side- my mother was born in

southern Hungary and her father entered the k. und k. [*kaiserlich und königlich* – first k is for emperor of Austria and second for king of Hungary] railway service. So... they lived in southern Hungary. And my father- my grandfather achieved the rank of stationmaster in a small town, which was a position of some standing. Interestingly enough, he was an observant Jew, and the railway service said, "You can of course continue with your religion, but please change your name change your name to something more Hungarian." So, he changed his name from Bleier – German [Blei] for “tin” - to Balog. Whereas my father- my grandfather changed his name from Kupferstein to Dobai.

[00:02:27]

Roughly about the same time - did they change their names?

No, I think the- my grandfather on my mother's side they changed their name between 1900 and 1910. And the- my father's side, they changed their name after 1920. So, on my- on my mother's side, she had four or five brothers and sisters, and they lived in this small town. And their town was on the main line from Budapest to... Rijeka which was then called Fiume. And it had all the troop trains that were going from Budapest to- in the First World War when the Austrian Hungarians fought the Italians in- in... Istria. The- the children on my mother's side were all very bright. And they grew up to be engineers, scientists and teachers.

And what was the name of the town?

It was called Csurgo, and it was near the, near the Drava River in southwestern Hungary.

And did the children- what's happened to the children? Did they then move out?

Oh well, the children- of course they couldn't get the sort of education they needed. So, they moved to Budapest. And it's relevant to the story that three of the children could not get a place in university, because Hungary in 1920 brought in a law, which said that the proportion of students from Jewish families going to university could not exceed five percent, which was the general level of- of the Jewish population within society. So, all three had to go abroad

for their stay in universities.

In- when?

Well, in- in the twenties they had to go to- two went to Berlin and one went to Vienna.

And did they come back to Hungary, or...?

Yes, they did.

Yeah...

[00:05:18]

So, this... this was the background from the grandparent side. And as is common... for the period, none of my parents or any of their friends were observant... Jews. They didn't observe. They didn't go to shul, they didn't observe the dietary conditions and customs. They had- they simply disregarded it. And- and one of my friends said they had to be more Hungarian than the Hungarians. So, they weren't enthusiastic flag-waving Hungarians, but they felt that by being good Hungarians, so assimilating as far as possible, they would not be noticed. And of course, they were very wrong in that. So, my father fought in the First World War as an officer. And in 1917 he was captured, and spent five years in Siberia as a prisoner of war. Which was the one benefit of that was that he learned English and German and Russian. And on returning, he joined a bank, where he stayed the rest of his life in, in- in Hungary.

What was he doing for the bank?

He was, I would say, a- a middle manager.

And which bank? Where?

It was called the City- City Bank. And... he...He became- the bank had English shareholdings. So, my father, because of his knowledge of English, was representing the

shareholders English share-holders interests in the bank. And he visited companies where the bank had loaned lots of money. So, it- he became more important in that sense.

And how did he meet your mother?

My mother worked in a... textile wholesale industry. So, industry. And my father was very keen on rowing, and so was my mother, and then met at the rowing club. But according to my mother, it took six years to wear him down... so that [laughing] they would get married.

And when did they get married?

[00:08:35]

In 1931. So, there were... they were 33 and 34. So... not quite so young. And my father, because of his very poor background, he was absolutely determined to escape this... background. And we bought- oh, no, not bought- they rented a flat on the Buda side up- up in the hills. And they furnished it with the best they could. There's a chair behind you. That is in the style of Biedermeier. And there are a lot of Biedermeier pieces. And there they had two children. But one of them died as a baby, and I- I was the second one. So, they were delightfully happy, and they went to- for their honeymoon, they went- took a boat on top of a Danube steamer. Took- took it to Passau, and they rowed from Passau to Budapest. And they went to places like... Melk, and Kufstein and Vienna... and the Großglockner. And they went down to Venice and even Naples. So, it was a... a comfortable middle class... life.

And you said that on your mother's side, that her father had convert- was Catholic or had converted?

No. Her father remained... When he got older, he stopped going to synagogue. But didn't convert.

He didn't convert...

No... But I was born in 1934. And Hitler came to power in 19- January 1933. So, I have a

class photograph somewhere, and it shows- we are standing there, in white uniforms, holding candles. It was called, "The Ceremony of the First Communion". And about half the children come from Jewish families. And the parents went there - not in an organised way - just one pair at a time, and asked the local church if we could convert. Because their family, their parents knew that as anti-Semitism grew in- in Germany, and Germany was the most powerful... country in Europe, it's going to have an effect on Hungary. So, they thought that by changing their religion, which didn't have much meaning for them anyway, at least it might produce some sort of... saving for- at least for me. But of course, they were wrong.

[00:12:04]

Yeah... So, when you were young you were christened a- in a church.

And, and as a small child, I went - not every Sunday but maybe once a month - I went with my mother to... the church services. I later on even became an altar boy.

That brings me to my next question. What are your first memories?

My first mem- my father was a very good sportsman, so he had an Olympic trial for athletics. He rowed, he played tennis in the Davis Cup. So, a lot of my memories are connected with the open air and sport. So, we would be going on the Danube. And I don't know if you know Lake Balaton... It's a lake about 100 kilometres long and two or three kilometres wide in southwestern Hungary. A beautiful place to have holidays. So, those are my first memories.

So, you'd go on holidays in Balaton.

Yes. And in the winter of course, if you were lucky, we would have the possibility of skiing.

Yes- where? Where?

On the hills outside- outside Budapest.

And what was the address? You said they lived in- in Buda. Where was it?

It was in a- a very- probably in London terms it was the equivalent of Highgate or Hampstead, called Rószadomb - the "Hill of Roses".

And you remember the flat?

Oh yes!

Yes? So maybe- can you set the scene? Can you describe...?

[00:14:05]

Well, the...The scene. The flat that we lived in just before we left, was a flat of three rooms. That is... a dining room where I slept as well, as sitting room and- and the family room plus kitchen and bathroom. And it was surrounded on at least two sides by open fields, which hadn't been built on at the time. Now of course they- they have been built. And about a 100 metres away was an open square with a children's play area and a tennis court and some very, very elegant houses. So, it- it was a beautiful place, because as opposed to down in the town that this place was about 400 metres higher than the town. The air was much cleaner. There's less traffic, so it was a much better place for children to grow up in rather than in the town. And then came- and my parents, because I was an only child, my parents found the place for me in a- in a kindergarten. And it was- it was run by a child psychologist so it was all very natural and wood and so... She took great care not to introduce plastic or things like that. And... so there I got to know other- other children. And incidentally, because of the history of the time, all my friends with the exception of one, we were all only- only children. Their parents didn't feel they wanted to bring more than one child into the world.

Yeah...

So, the big change of course came, when we first went to school. And the school was about 200 metres away. And it was a school where boys and girls were educated separately. I mean different classes. But it was a mixed school in the sense that there were boys and girls in the same establishment. And it was very exciting to be able to learn to read and write and learn

about numbers. And... But we started school in 1940.

[00:17:17]

By that time... the... Hungary had really taken part in the invasion of Czechoslovakia, where they had occupied a strip of Slovakia. The Germans said, "If you join us in invading southern Slovakia, then we will reward you by returning that strip of land." And the Hungarians were very enthusiastic. And- and the propaganda was so strong, that we, as schoolchildren absorbed it. And so, there were three sorts of propaganda which affected us. One was patriotism the- the flag and the royal crown and these symbols of power. Secondly there was an anti-Soviet propaganda, because the regime said, "If we don't support Germany eventually the Bolsheviks will invade us, and will take everything away from you." And thirdly there was a very strong anti-Semitic propaganda. And because my parents and the parents of my friends did not tell us that we were Jews, we became anti-Semitic as well. But it- it seemed the normal thing to do.

Can you elaborate that? For example?

[00:19:11]

Well... There were posters on the wall, and it showed people with blood dripping from their hands and sitting on bags of money and saying, "These Jews are robbing you of your- of your life." My parents taught me never to speak badly of somebody who looks or behaves differently. So that was a very strict rule in our house. Because the other objects of derision were gypsies.

Yeah.

So, we- we continued. The Second World War broke out and the Germans invaded Poland from the west. And the Red Army invaded Poland from the east. And as the two armies approached each other, there was a flood of refugees coming south... through Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. And these were- a lot of them were Jews but they were a very different type of Jews to the Hungarians. These were Orthodox Jews. They were

wearing tall hats and they had the ringlets and beards, and their long black coats... and various things around their waist. And the Hungarian Jews did their best to help them on their way as they were trying to get to Palestine. But at the same time the Hungarian Jews said, "This- this is never going to happen to us; we are not...we are Hungarians who happen to be Jewish. We are not Jews who are living in Hungary. We- we have done military service. We've contributed to the country. We've built industries and commerce. We've got..." - to give you an example – fifty-six percent of Hungarian doctors came from Jewish families.

Yes.

And... seventy-five percent of lawyers came from Jewish families. So, the Hungarian- the Jewish- the family- the population who came from Jewish families believed that their assimilation was so great...

Yeah...

...it could not- nobody's gone to harm them. So- we continued to 1940. We continued to live there. And then on the 21st of June 1941, the- the Germans invaded the Soviet Union. But I forgot to mention that before that, Hitler offered to reward Hungary with Voivodina, which is northern Serbia, provided Hungary took part in the invasion of Yugoslavia. Because he had to invade Yugoslavia to destroy the Yugoslav Army before he invaded the Soviet Union. And so my uncle, cousin, aunt suddenly found themselves back in Hungary after living in Serbia. Anyway, so in the 21st of June '41 Germany invades... the Soviet Union.

[00:23:37]

But a few weeks later, Hungary is drawn in through a frontier incident, and Hungary declares war on the Soviet Union. And my father who was on the reserve list because he was a 44, is called up as an officer. And officers in those days would go to their tailors and have a uniform made to measure...

Yeah...

And their bootmaker. And they would have their boots made to measure. And off he went to the...

This is 1941...

1941. And about two months later the Hungarian parliament passes, I think it was called the Second Jewish Law which declared that people who are - declared following the Nuremberg Laws - declared to be Jews, cannot be officers in the Hungarian Army. So, he was dismissed. And a couple of months later, he is called up and sent off to a labour camp in northeast Hungary- a place called Munkacs. I think it's now called Mukachevo in Ukraine. But he was very lucky, because the camp was organised- was run by the Hungarian Army. My father was a fit man, and the work didn't bother him very much. The Hungarian Army were on the whole- they didn't- they were not very punitive. But there were thousands of Hungarians of a similar age who were sent into Ukraine to support the German war effort behind their lines. And sometimes in front of their lines. And one of the worst things that happened to those people -and these were people between 18 and 45 - they were told to form a line... and they were driven across fields, so that their feet would explode landmines. And about 55,000 Hungarian men were killed that way. But we- we didn't know about that at the time. My father continued to work there. And we- my mother and I continue to live in... in Budapest.

At the time, when your father returned from his service, did you know why he had to come back? Did he talk about it with you?

[00:27:02]

Yes... yes.

So, then you knew that he was Jewish or did...?

No, no, no my.... My mother couldn't- couldn't - and my father couldn't - could not bring themselves to tell me. They said, "This is another part of the Army service... where they don't wear a uniform. It's part of the Army."

And how did he...? In retro- how did he feel about it... to be degraded and... like that?

It... He felt that, "We will live- we'll have to live through this."

Yes...

There's nothing that- we didn't- didn't- we didn't have any money. There were some rich people who were able to buy exit visas, and passports and so on and so forth. We didn't have that. So, we- my father said, "We just have to do our best to live through this."

And what happened to the- the siblings on each side? Were they in similar situations or... your- your mother's?

Yes. Similar...yes. And then... at the time, on the greater picture, the German Army at first seemed totally invincible. They arrived at the gates of Leningrad, and Moscow, and Stalingrad and Odessa. And... And oh God, I can't remember the island- semi-island down there. Anyway, it seemed as if nothing was able to stop them. But finally, in 1943, the Red Army managed to stop and defeat the German 6th Army at Stalingrad. And very gradually they started to drive back the German Army. And the situation looked so serious for Germany, that Germany asked its allies, the Italians, and the Romanians and the Hungarians to send... armies to the Eastern Front.

[00:29:52]

And Hungary sent 200,000 young men who were... very poorly trained, very badly equipped... to the Eastern Front. And the Russian intelligence recognised this weakness in the front, and defeated the Hungarians in a couple of weeks. And out of the 200,000, 120,000 were killed, injured, or taken prisoner. And suddenly of course Hungary had lost its appetite for the war. So, the government then sent... secret- some secret diplomats to try and negotiate with the Allies so that Hungary could change sides. But the Allies refused to negotiate. In any case, this- these negotiations came to the attention of the German intelligence service. And on the 19th of March 1944 the German Army invaded Hungary. And immediately, two days after they arrived, a group of German officers led by a man called Adolf Eichmann arrived,

and started to organise the- the final solution for Hungary.

Because just- up to then, no Jews were deported from Hungary?

That's right.

Yeah... But some anti-Jewish measures...?

Oh, yes!

Did you- so, we didn't talk about it. Tell us- you personally. What did you experience? What anti-Jewish measures were there before the Germans invaded?

[00:32:07]

Me personally, none.

There was nothing?

No. ...So, it was a school holiday around that time. And a few days after Eichmann arrived, I went- I met a classmate, and I said to him, "I'm looking forward to going back to school." And he said, well, he was going to go back to school but I'm not, because his father told him that I'm a dirty stinking Jew. So, although I was ten, I started to cry. And I rushed back to my mother. And that was when she told me that we, in fact, come from a Jewish family. And, and a few days later there came out vast... posters, detailing the anti-Jewish legislation. You had to hand in your bank accounts, and your precious stones, and any gold, and hand over motor cars, and cameras, radios, carpets - anything of value. And of course, we couldn't go to school. By- around this time, the Royal Air Force started the bomb- bomb Budapest, which of course was- and the Germans put an anti-aircraft battery near the house, so it was very frightening.

But you were still in the same flat?

Yes.

You and your mother, or was there somebody else?

No, just- just my mother and I. And... about three weeks later, we... we were told to leave our flat taking only what we could carry, and move into a larger house: a villa which had room for about twelve parents and about twelve children. We were fortunate; it was a detached villa with a garden all around it so we could- the children could play. Although we could not play near the front garden, because... people would throw stones at us - or spit. So, we tended to play in the back. And the parents organised lessons for the children, and games and- to try and live a normal sort of life, as far as possible. And of course, we had to go down into the air-raid shelter quite frequently. And all this time, my mother who was a very serious letter writer, used to correspond with one of her brothers who lived about sixty kilometres east of Budapest. Another brother who lived in- in former Serbia- and there was a regular exchange of letters. But then the letters stopped. And she knew there was something seriously wrong. So... she decided that... she and my father were going to be murdered... in the whole process.

[00:36:19]

I mean, as a child of course I didn't know about extermination camps. And as far as I knew there were no- there was no knowledge of extermination camps. They used the phrase "resettlement in- in the east", but there was no... stress in my personal hearing, nobody ever said about "camps". So... My mother decided that she must take action. She got some false papers. Oh yes, and of course we were told to wear the yellow star, Star of David. We took off the Star of David. And because I was rather fond of... chattering, she said, "You've got tooth-ache, so I've got to tie up your jaw." So, I won't talk when we go on the train. And she took me into the country, and handed me over to this organisation who in turn gave- handed me over to this peasant family. And they lived in a semi-underground thatched cottage with tiny windows. And they had pigs, and sheep and geese and chickens.

And how did you feel, being sort of handed over, as a...?

Well, my- I said, “My- if- my mother knows best; if she says it's good for me that's- that's how it will be.” Of course, and there was rationing. And the rationing in the town, the rations for Jews was less than the non-Jews. But in the country, there was a bit more... food. And it- there was no bombing. So, it was a- for a child, it was a much more peaceful place.

But it came in a- in a quite short period of time. First you found out you were Jewish, then you couldn't go to school.

That's right...

So, lots of things happened.

Yes.

So, what was your reaction to the first – that news of being Jewish, which...?

[00:38:52]

Well, I was totally devastated, because the anti-Semitic propaganda was so strong, that I felt... I felt totally degraded. That I was somehow- that I - I was dirty. You know. That I was covered in dirt. That I was dishonest. That I was rude and that I didn't behave properly to my friends. So, in every way, as- I was declared to be rubbish. And this was very, very- it was a huge blow. And... you know, to be- have- to walk with this yellow star. And we were not allowed to share the pavement with non-Jews. So, if you have this star on, you have to get into the gutter, because you are not allowed to walk with non-Jews on the same pavement. So, this was all very, very degrading. So... I lived there for about some six or eight weeks. And then...

And they treated you well?

Yes, but I mean they were simple people. The woman would bake. She had her own bread oven and she would bake huge loaves of bread. And they made their own sausages. And so, there were sausages hanging from the rafters. Sometimes they would kill a chicken. So, it

was hard work because you had to look after the animals all the time. And then one day the woman, of course I was wearing short trousers, and the woman looked at my leg and saw this rash, and declared that it's typhoid. And she went into to the local town and asked me to pack up my things. And she took me and then handed me back to this organisation who somehow - I can't remember - sent me back to Budapest. And... Then my... Have you heard of the Yiddish word *teiglach*?

Teiglach?

[00:41:45]

Yeah. No? I don't know, well, *teiglach* is a, some hiding place. So, we went into a hut into hiding for a couple of nights, but it was so terrible that we gave it up, and we went back home. But then my mother found this children's home... and there I caught... something awful. I caught tapeworms, and it was an... awful condition. So, I was sent back to my mother and I understand that two or three days afterwards, the Germans or the Hungarians came and took the children – the Jewish children - and shot them. From that home.

Right then and there? Where did they take them?

I don't know. They took them to a quarry.

Where was the children's home? What was it called?

It was- it was called "John's Mountain Children's Home".

So, there were Jewish and non-Jewish kids together, or were they...?

Yes. I think it was a Christian organisation. And- there were- there were many non-Jewish Christians who took in children and whole families! So, it wasn't the Hungarian non-Jewish population was not... individually anti-Semitic, totally. A substantial number, or perhaps even the majority might have been. But people took in Jewish children and families pretending to be refugees from... somewhere else.

Yeah. So, you went back to your mother.

[00:44:09]

I went back to my mother. And by this time, the- and I was very, very ill with these tapeworms. By this time, we were being bombed not only by the Royal Air Force during the night, but by the American Air Force during the day. And the rationing was... quite strict. So, we, as children who were growing up, we felt very- we were hungry all the time. And then one day, we were told to form a column in front of the house, and carrying only what we could carry. So, I had a small rucksack and I think a pillow, and my mother had a duvet. Winter was coming so these- bedding was seen to be the most obvious. And there were a number of non-Jewish people who were watching us. And some of them were crying because they- they knew us, and they were ashamed that this was happening. And there were others who were laughing... because they were rather glad to be able to take over Jewish property, Jewish flats or workshops, and so on. And... one event that was quite- quite... serious for me because a man came and shouted at my mother and I, "I hope you die." And this was- I always felt until up to then, that anti-Semitism was- happened to somebody else. But here it was this man, who I didn't know- he was determined to show that he hated Jews. Anyway, we set off, guarded by the gendarme... police and gendarme... But I'm sorry, I forgot to mention that this was the second half of October. But on October the 15th... or the 14th the front- or the front... reached the Hungarian frontier. And the Head of Hungary called the Regent broadcast to the Allies that Hungary is surrendering. But again, the Germans knew all about this, and they arrested the Regent and his family, and... handed power over to their Hungarian Nazis called the Arrow Cross, who were a bunch of Nazi hooligans... who would- who were encouraged to kill Jews without any reason. Then there was no justice system.

[00:48:06]

So, there was a Nazi government was in Hungary, and they- these bands of criminals were roaming the... streets with machine guns and so on. And anyway, we were- we formed up this column and we walked down the hill, and along the Danube on the way to what's called the southern railway station to be taken somewhere. But on the way some snag developed... and

we were put into a block of flats. So, there were- there must have been about ten flats and there were 600 people. So, we were... In a room like this, there would be 20 people sleeping.

And was your father with you at the time?

No. No. He- as the fighting crossed the Hungarian frontier, the commander, of this camp he was in said, "I can't look after you. I hope you can look after yourselves. Do whatever you want." And my father walked and got lifts and came to- back to Hungary- to Budapest. And he traced us and he- he found us.

So, at what point did he re-join you? Where were you...?

When we were in this block of flats. And the situation looked so bad, that... a number of old people climbed up on the- on to the roof, and jumped off.

Did you see that?

Yes.

[00:50:04]

And... I mean, a low point came at this stage when my mother... was taken away... and- by the gendarmes. And of course, I didn't know where my father was, my mother's been taken away. But it turned the women were taken away to scrub the floors of the barracks. So, she came back in the evening. So, my father arrived, and great rejoicing. And he heard a rumour about the Swedish embassy. So, he went to the Swedish embassy and... at first, this Raoul Wallenberg, who came from a very rich and powerful Swedish family, he volunteered to come to Hungary and try and save lives. At first, he gave people passports if they had any connection with Sweden. But afterwards he handed out simply small certificates with photograph to say "This person is under the protection of the Swedish government". So, my father went to the... embassy, and got one of these pieces of paper for each of us. And also, a place to go to a Swedish owned house where people like us were accommodated. So, we set out from one side of the Danube to the other side with trepidation, because what with the

Nazis, and the Germans, and the police and the gendarmes, you never, you know, we never knew who was going to object to... a piece- a piece of paper or something. But anyway, we reach this... house. And... we- my father- my parents suggested that we should go on the upper floors because... the air raid shelter was so overcrowded. And also, the people behaved so harshly to each other. You know, people stole bread from one another and... a piece of sausage or something. So, it was really people... safeguarding their own family. So, we lived upstairs and my mother tried to make a campfire in the yard and make some soup. And I was breaking up furniture so we could make- make a bonfire. And there was bombing and shelling. And then, as the Russians encircled the whole of Budapest of course there were bigger guns, and now smaller guns, and then machine guns and then the house-to-house fighting. And... we were starving, really. And on Christmas Eve a horse was killed in front of the flats... and- just outside the house. And it was carved up very quickly, and I got a piece of horse... as a Christmas present.

[00:53:58]

And- and on the 13th of January, a rather frightened young Russian soldier from Siberia came. And he asked questions that my father was asked to interpret because he could speak Russian. And he explained that we were in fact victims of the Germans. Because Hungary was the first enemy country they came to. You know, Russia and Ukraine- they were all part of the Soviet Union. So, Hungary was the first enemy country as far as the simple foot soldier was concerned, all Hungarians were enemies. So, my father explained that- who we were, but fighting was still going on. And some Hungarians appeared with some food. And... three days later Raoul Wallenberg went off to the Soviet Army headquarters to try and organise more food supplies for Budapest. Not only Jews, but everyone. And the Russians arrested him. And he disappeared into the vast Soviet prison system and... it is thought that he was shot on Stalin's orders in 1947. So, we continued to live there for some days. Because there was still fighting, it wasn't safe to go out. And then we went out - where it was a bit safer. We went to the ghetto. There was a- a traditional- the Hungarians and the Germans had a ghetto built with wooden walls and people were in an even worse state than we were. And... the Swedes and Raoul Wallenberg are reckoned to have saved the lives of over 20,000 people.

In those safe- in those houses?

[00:56:35]

Yes. And in other houses too. But they were not the only ones. There was a man called Carl Lutz of Switzerland, who saved over 10,000 and smaller numbers were saved by the Portuguese. And neutral countries - the Spanish. And even the Vatican. So, we continued to live there and really- and the we, mother and I, ventured to go to the ghetto to try and find the rest of the family. And... I remember ...going into ruined shops and trying to find something to take. And there were- people took revenge- revenge on each other, so they were strung up from lamp posts. So that was essentially the moment of liberation. But fortunately, everybody in the ghetto - my grandmother, and my aunt, my cousins - survived. We moved- Budapest- the Siege of Budapest finished around- in March, and we were able to find some accommodation. The Germans blew up all the bridges so we couldn't get back to our side of the- of the town. And we found- really walked into our flat and stayed there for a while.

So, you said they survived. Did they survive- were they deported or they were not deported?

Not the Budapest ones.

Yes...

The ones from the country- the ones who were 60 miles east of Budapest. The father was sent to forced labour in Germany. His wife and younger son were taken to Auschwitz and murdered straight away. The other family from Voivodina in Serbia, the father was sent to Austria as a labourer, and the- the mother and daughter were sent to Auschwitz and declared to be fit for work. But my aunt fell over and hurt her leg, and the- the wound turned septic... and she went to the gas chambers. And the two grandfathers- sorry, I did not mention this that towards the last few days of the war, the Hungarian Nazis discovered that the- these houses with big Swedish or Swiss flags outside- there was no sanction behind them.

[01:00:07]

Carl Lutz and, and... Raoul Wallenberg, said they threatened people- said, "I will make a note

of your rank number and I will make sure that you get prosecuted.” They argued, and they gave them money to save lives. But the Hungarian Nazis and the Germans realised that this was a- they didn't have any army or anything. So, towards the end of the- last 10 days or so, when the war was lost! And yet these people still were intent on murdering Jews. So, they started emptying these houses, just like us, and taking people down to the Danube and tying them into threes. Making them stand on the edge of the Danube shooting the middle one, so that the weight of that body would drag the other two into the Danube.

Did you- did you see that, John?

I saw the procession going past the house. I didn't see the shooting, but I could hear the machine guns, and I could see the soldiers coming in and even remember they wrapped up their guns in sacking, because it was too hot to carry. And about 6,000 people were killed that way. And if you go to Budapest, there is a memorial of bronze shoes on the riverbank to...

And it's for those- and they came from those safe houses? Those 6,000?

Yes. ...And, and elsewhere.

Yeah...

So, we- eventually we moved out and we found this flat. But we didn't realise about extermination camps until people started coming back... from the camps. And people were standing near the railway station and saying, “Have you seen this person?” and so on.

You were going to tell us about your grandfathers. What happened to the grandfathers?

[01:02:49]

Well, they were dead- dead by then. Oh, no, this was from a wider family. There were two grandfathers who were taken from one of these houses, and- and shot into the Danube.

So out of those 6,000...

Yes. But it was- it wasn't until the survivors came back from Auschwitz, and my cousin who was in Auschwitz then went on this so-called death march. And she came back from Ravensbruck. And others came back from other camps. It was only then we realised that people were gassed, and shot, and starved and beaten. So, it- we didn't realise that until then. And of course, when finally, perhaps in April '45, we were able to go back to the flat which had been stripped of everything of value apart from the furniture. And that chair behind you comes from there - that Biedermeier chair. And we didn't- didn't have any clothes. But rather strangely, little parcels of sheets and towels used to appear. But the situation was tense because you didn't know who you were living next to. And you didn't know-if you ask them what you did during the war, everybody was suddenly in the Resistance.

But can I just ask you before we move on to come back to the safe houses: How as a 10-year-old- how did you experience it? Did your parents- did your mother shelter you from most things or were you- were you scared, or...? What...?

[01:05:15]

Oh, I was absolute- on one occasion- there were two occasions of conflict. One was, I shouted at them that they're the most heartless cruel people who allowed their only child to be put in such immense danger. And they very patiently explained that in their view we are safer where we are. I mean, downstairs... people used the staircase. There was no water. There was no electricity. There was no gas - no windows. So... the sanitary conditions were simply awful. And my parents decided that from a health and safety point of view - maybe safety, not - but from the health point of view, it would be better to be above that.

And you thought it was unsafe because of the- the bombs?

Yeah.

And what was the second one?

The second one. My mother managed to get hold of four slices of bread. So, each had one.

And I tried to steal the fourth one. And my mother took it out of my mouth. And I thought it was very unfair.

You were very hungry.

Yes. Well... When I give my talks, I sometimes ask people, "How long is it... that you- in your life, the longest you've been without eating?" And the younger people when they think about it, they say, "Twelve hours?", "Eighteen hours?" And I say, "Well, just think about not eating for three or four days?" I don't want to make a horror story, but three or four days. And then they have an inkling.

And do you remember, were there any other children with you? Do you remember, or are there other people who feature in that time- in- for you?

No, but... one of my best friends lived, without me knowing, about three doors away. George Soros lived five doors away. I don't know him. And... several writers - famous writers - lived nearby.

But for you, in your mind, you're with your parents. Mnn. And how did you pass the days?

[01:08:27]

Well, I was- I was- see, we didn't have any water. So, we devised a method of... of sort of sitting on snow, and collecting the melting snow. So, it had water. I became very skilled in making Roman lamps. Do you know what Roman lamps are?

No.

They are sort of little boat shaped things.

Yes?

And they contain oil. It could be molten fat.

Sort of like a clay...

Yeah, but I used empty food tins.

Yes.

And then you're put a little- you make a boat shape. And the sharp end you put a little piece of tin across, make a hole in it... and thread a piece of wool. Dip it into the fat or the oil, and you'd have a light! But I became quite good at it and I had orders from all through the house... to make these lamps.

So that was your main activity, or...?

And- and collect- collecting water. Breaking up furniture. Getting wood.

Yeah. But you didn't go outside?

No.

You stayed- and your parents- everyone stayed inside that house?

Yes. Yes. And this is it.

Where did the food come from?

Well...

The little food there was?

[01:10:12]

The Red Cross sometimes came round. Before liberation, or after liberation, the local bakers

started to produce food... again. But it was- it was mainly bread. There was no vegetables and no meat. It- it was- and then, when we moved out, and we found this flat- and that was a- a sort of a... 'petit palais'. It was a house, four sides, with a courtyard in the middle. And a gateway through which carriages could drive in. And we moved in and soon- a day later, a Russian artillery unit... came in. And they parked their guns in the middle. And every- every morning at about 8:00 o'clock, they got their guns – they were very small guns - and they would... take them down to the Danube and spend the day shooting at the other side where the Germans were, and then they'd come- come back from work. And my mother made the huge mistake that... she asked, "What have you got to eat?" And they said, "Whatever you want, we can get." And my mother said - was so grateful, that she said, "Have you got any flour?" And they said, "Yes." And they brought this sack of flour. And they [she] said, "Have you got some milk?" And they brought some milk. So, my mother made a very large quantity of pancake mixture... and she made hundreds of pancakes. And the Russians thought that was lovely. And every day they said, "I'm sure you know the word '*palacsinta*'. So, they asked for '*palacsinta*' every day." And the Russians- the Russians were very kind and they- on the one hand they were very kind. But my father went out one day, and he was so hungry he fainted. And at first, he woke up because somebody was trying to remove his boots. And secondly, he was thrown onto a lorry, and he was on his way to the Soviet Union as a labourer. But he explained his way out of that in Russian- so was able to. So, it was a chancy business to be- to be out- out and about.

So, it went on from January, when the first Russians came, then there were another three months, or...?

[01:13:32]

Yes.

Yeah. So that was a dangerous situation.

Yes.

He was so hungry that he fainted from hunger?

Yes. ...And then in about April, we moved back to the flat... and started- started to... see if we could get some sort of life together.

John, I think let's take a little break, because we've reached to a good point to break.

[Audio break-not noticeable]

So now we are towards the end of the war. But I would like to go back a little bit...

Certainly.

... and find out- I mean you were- you were young- you were 10 years. You said you were afraid. What other... emotions or what other things you actually remember... from that time... and from that shock when you found out you were Jewish?

It's difficult- not difficult- it's difficult for people to understand how much of that, say 1943 to '45, especially for a younger child, how- the importance of food- how important that was. So, it seemed that- I felt it was unjust and unfair, that people should be depriving us of food. And- but there's nothing I could do about it. So, one thought about food, and could we find some wild spinach? You could eat spinach not cooked- spinach leaves. And how you could suck the sweet out of the base of... flowers, because there was no sugar. That was the way of extracting sugar. So, so much of our- us as children, our effort was devoted to getting food.

*But of course, those things you couldn't do once you were in the house... before that time...
The field and the spinach...*

No, that's right. And after the war you could roam the fields and... try and find spinach. Or- or you could find then- of course once the fruit came in, cherries, and...

Yeah...

...steal cherries.

But what- what, in that time - again to come back - what was the- what were the positive things, in terms of food? What do you remember getting? Was there anything on the piece of bread? Do you remember?

[01:16:51]

Bread certainly. And some potatoes... and then carrots. And then... cabbage. And then if we were- people would go into the countryside and try and barter for ... Do you know the word “*kolbász*”?

Kukuruz?

No, *kolbász*.

No...

It's... Hungarian pork sausage...

Aha...

... dried and smoked.

Aha, yes. Yes.

Well, if you're- if somebody's very rich they could... swap a... a bracelet for a piece of *kolbász*.

So, hunger was really a very important part of... and dealing with hunger.

Yes. And then of course, the difficulty of... ..establishing some sort of rapport with other people. Because my parents would say, “You see that chap across the road? Don't talk to him, because he was a big noise in the censor” Or, “You can talk to her. Because...” Well... Obviously, you didn't want to cause conflict. And... when my parents decided that I should go

to a boarding school, my father said, “We don't know how much anti-Semitism there might be in the school.” So, when the school asked me about religion my father said, “John is Roman Catholic.”

This is post-war?

Yes. So, I started going back to... Catholic Church. And from that moment to about ...1980-late 1980s, we didn't talk about it. So about- four- more than forty years we didn't talk about it. It wasn't a family edict that we shouldn't, but it was decided that we won't.

Talk about anything Jewish, you mean? Is that...?

[01:19:34]

That's right. Well, we would say, “I met so-and-so and he's a- he's a good Jewish man.” But it was by way of illustration.

Yeah. So, your parents made the decision to continue... say...

Yes.

...on that path, in a way.

Yes, and when we came to England...

Yeah...

...and we went to Northumberland and the headmaster of the school where I was going to said, “What about religion?” And my father said, “What is the usual religion?” And the headmaster: “Well, Church of England.” So, my father said, “I think that will suit John very well.” So, I- I went along to a Church of England church, and I joined the Boy Scouts. And it wasn't until university I decided not to go to church. But I didn't- I- I did not declare that “I'm- I'm Jewish.”

But did you feel- what did you feel, actually? Because in a way, it was linked in your case to Jewish, and the war and danger. And you didn't have any - I would think - any positive association with it. Or did you?

I did, because... I knew that the Jewish- the Jewish presence in the family produced mutual support, and understanding and love. That was very important. But whether that would have helped- happened anyway without being Jewish, I don't know. But it was certainly- it- it produced enormous help and support.

But-so in your mind, from that time when this boy told you, "You're Jewish" to the time later, what did it mean, actually, for you to...?

[01:22:03]

Even today... I don't- if somebody asks me, "Do you have a religion?" I will say, "No." I will not say, "I- originally I was Jewish." I'm not- I can't-

Yeah...

I can't reveal that. I mean, as a joke, when I give my talks they say- they say, "Do you believe in Judaism?" And I said, "No, but I'm one of the very few Jewish Roman Catholic Church of England humanists you are likely to meet."

Is that how you see yourself?

Yes. Certainly, a humanist. I don't see... a need to refer to... a god. I feel that... we can do so much for each other, that we don't- we don't need ...others.

We'll talk about it at the end of the interview. Just to come back now to the- the post-war era. Did your parents- did they ever post-war in Budapest go to the synagogue or did they have any dealings with the Jewish community?

No.

No.

But it's difficult to explain... but for- I don't know whether you've seen pictures of the big synagogue in Budapest?

Yeah...

The big synagogue in Budapest in say, 1941, already was disused. It was shuttered. It was not used. It had no... importance within the community. ...It wasn't necessary. And it- now there is a vibrant, living, Jewish community in Budapest. But that is not my community. Neither is the community in Golders Green.

Right. So, at the end of the war, when your parents tried to reconstruct their lives, how did they- how did they do it?

Oh, immense hard work. My father went back to a bank. My mother took up weaving... and she produced some beautiful woollen cloth - for sale. And she made woollen dresses for people. And became a skilled dressmaker. My father worked very- a lot and he went to the countryside to visit factories and installations where the bank... had outstanding loans. But of course, all the time... it was clear that Hungary is going to fall under communism. And it was clear that communists would label a family like ours as a bourgeois family. And it meant that people like me would be expelled from school, and not allowed to go to university. So... my father started moves.

[01:26:13]

He had to go every- come to England every year, to talk to the English shareholders. And he started putting out feelers – “Could you help me to get entry and a work permit?” And they said, “We can arrange that.” And a company in- on Tyneside offered him- oh, sorry. Three- three people... a chemical engineer, a man with money and my father agreed that they're going to come to England before the war. And the chemical engineer and the man with

money did come, But my father was too young, because he was still on the reserve list. So, the other two said, "We'll establish this factory, and join us when you can." So, he had a job waiting for him on Tyneside.

And they'd left before the war?

Yes.

And- Hungarians?

Yes.

So, he knew that he didn't want to stay in Budapest?

Yes. Well, he was always an Anglophile. He was slightly- slightly vain; he had his suits made out of English cloth. So, he had a- a great feeling for England.

But in the meantime, you sent was sent to the boarding school?

Yes.

And why did they send you to the boarding school?

Well... three reasons. One was- the main reason was that the- this school was a very famous school. The school founded in 1531. And it's got a great... caring for their pupils. And it- although it was nominally Protestant, it wasn't very religious. So, it had great caring for the pupils. And it specialized in the teacher- teaching of English. And thirdly, there was more food in the country. So, we- in the school we lived in peace, with a bit more food. And... able to... read books and get to know the- the world of... learning.

Yeah. And what was the name? Where was it? What was the name of the school?

[01:29:07]

It's called Sárosptak and it's about sixty-five kilometres south of Kosice.

And were you happy there? What was...?

Oh, very happy. I was really happy.

And who were the other children?

Well, they were- about a third of them came from Budapest. So, they were- and on looking back, quite a few of them came from Jewish families. But we didn't talk about that. But we were very, very happy and... I was in a thing called "The English College". It - that was a house... where people from Budapest were lodged. And we were given extra English lessons. So it was a very, very happy time.

And you knew that the aim was to leave?

No!

No, you didn't...

No, I didn't- I had no idea.

Aha. So, when...?

So, I- so I was there 45-46, 46-47 and 47-48. And coming home in the end of July- end of June '48. Middle of July my parents said, "We have to tell you something. You are not to talk to anybody about it, but we are trying to emigrate." And... And I was roped in because in those days you had to... go down to the passport office with a number and say, "Any news on this application?" And they said, "No." And then you had to [half laughs] go in the next day as well. And in the end, towards the begin- a month later, we were given passports. And then we got a- the visa for England and a work permit. And we left at the end of September.

And did you want to leave, or did you...? Did you have any particular...?

[01:31:55]

Oh, yeah- No, I mean, on the one hand it was very exciting because we were going to travel on the overnight... sleeper train to Prague. And then we were going to fly... to London, which- I didn't know anybody who was- ever been on an aeroplane. So, we- we came out. But my mother was absolutely heartbroken, because she had to leave behind the two brothers... her sister and most of all... her mother. And she was heartbroken.

Can you describe the journey? Or what do you remember?

Well... a... In 1948 an argument broke out between the... Do you know the word "Comintern"?

Yeah.

...Between the Comintern and Yugoslavia. So, there was... no way of telephoning or even sending letters, from Hungary to Yugoslavia. So, my mother became the post-box. She could write to Hungary and she could write to Yugoslavia. So, the people in Budapest would write to her and then she would forward those letters to Yugoslavia and vice versa. And I have some of those letters upstairs. And... they are very... very moving, because her two brothers lost their wives in Auschwitz. And the two brothers had a... tough, tough time in forced labour camps. They were in rocket factories or something. And... you mentioned about... the numbers. And my father- my uncle was- he wasn't religious but he was very active in the Jewish community in his town. And there were 268 Jews in the town who were taken away, and twenty-one came back. So... The- the family came much closer together even though we were separated from one another.

The journey... your journey.

[01:35:04]

Oh, the journey... Well, we- we went to the so-called Eastern Railway Station one night. And

quite- quite a few uncles and aunts came, and there was... heavy use of handkerchiefs. And we left on the overnight sleeper. And my parents found me talking to a Russian soldier on- on the train. Because I learned some Russian, after all. And then in the morning we arrived in Prague. And we sat beside the... river there. And then in the afternoon we went to... the airport. And there was this tiny plane - a two-engine plane which flew to London airport - Northolt. Have you been to Northolt?

No.

Well, it's towards Ealing. And that was London Airport and it had... had... Nissen huts, or prefabricated huts. And at last minute, a friend of my mother's said, "Could you take this fur coat?" And my mother always trying to be helpful, she took this fur coat, which turned out to be mink. So, the British customs charged us fifty pounds duty on the mink coat... which my parents didn't have. But fortunately, our friends were waiting outside and were able to bring fifty pounds. So, we arrived in the UK with minus fifty pounds. And we spent the first few nights in Richmond with these friends.

And who were the friends you stayed with?

Mr and Mrs Kálmán?. And, Mr Kálmán was a- came before the war and was a very successful importer of agricultural machinery. And they were- well, to me, it seemed, immensely rich.

So that brings me- what were your first impressions? What do you...?

[01:37:44]

Well, I - I thought it was- everything was amazingly clean, and quiet and well-organised. And people spoke quietly and cars drove quietly.

And you spoke English by then?

Yes, quite well.

Yeah...

Quite well...

And you knew where you were going? They knew you were going to the- to the north?

Yes. After about ten days we got on the train, and went up north. We went into a boarding house... for a while. My- my father's job was waiting for him. The school was organised for me. And so, we... And of course, the fact that I joined the Boy Scouts, I got a lot of friends. And it seemed a good change, apart from the fact that it was so cold. In Hungary in those days, fourteen-year-old boys always wore short trousers which caused a lot of amusement in the school. Because no fourteen-year-old boy in England would dream of wearing shorts.

Which school did you join?

It's a- called "Tynemouth High School". Tynemouth is at the mouth of the Tyne. It's got ruins of a Benedictine monastery, several glorious beaches and is sort of a middle-class area. But of course, further up the Tyne, there were shipyards and a bit north there were coal mines. It- it was- it was quite a working-class area.

But this was not a boarding school? An ordinary sch...?

No, no. This was a day school.

Yes. And you lived with your parents?

Yes. And then... two years later, I sat what was called "School Certificate". And I passed... everything. Because you had to get a certain standard to proceed to towards university. I passed everything except that the first lesson when I went to school, was French. But since I couldn't even speak much English, I didn't know there was such a thing as French. So, it caused a certain amount of confusion. So, I passed all these exams. I had to have a foreign language, so I came down to London and took Hungarian as a foreign language.

[01:40:45]

We didn't talk about languages. What-you said your father spoke many languages. Your mother did. Apart from Hung- You spoke Hungarian to your parents?

Yes.

Any German at all?

Yes. They- they both spoke good German. My father also spoke Russian and - and German.

And your mother stayed in touch with her family?

Yes. All through- and of course, once things became easier... she went back to Hungary to see her mother, and her sisters and brothers. And then she travelled a lot to Yugoslavia to see another brother and- and his children.

In which years? When from...?

It was in the mid 70s onwards.

Yeah... later. So, they remained? They stayed?

Yes.

And how did she manage? How did your mother adapt to - to Britain?

Oh, very well. My father joined the... tennis club. He was a good tennis player, so he was very welcome there. As, yes - sorry - my father joined the tennis club; my mother joined women's clubs. And we acquired a number of English friends. And of course, I made lots of friends at school.

So, what circles did they mix in? What...?

That... I'll find you another.

That's fine...

Well, they had- the two people who ran the- this factory where my father worked, they were Hungarian and they were ex-Jews. So, they visited each other. There were people in London who used to come up and my mother used to go down to London. My father, he wanted to sort of assimilate. So, he was happy with his... tennis club. And later on, when he became older, he was happy with bowls.

What is bowls?

[01:43:23]

Well, bowls is a- is a... Do you know the French '*boules*'?

Yes.

Well, it's similar to that.

Oh, I see, OK. And where did they actually live?

In Tynemouth.

In Tynemouth...

And... at first, they- they rented a flat. And then came a- my- my parents decided to open a boarding house. My mother worked extraordinarily hard... to run this boarding house. And then about 19...53, (19)'52, they actually bought a house in Tynemouth. An elegant Edwardian house. And they were- they were so happy, that, "Here we are. We got- bought our own house."

Is Tynemouth a holiday resort, or...?

It is... it is. ...Yes, it is. It's a beach and- I mean it's not quite traditional of donkeys and roundabouts, but it's- it's a bit more upmarket.

And they stayed there...?

They stayed there until my father had an argument with the owner of the factory. And he started looking for a new job and he found one in the City of London with a Hungarian seed importer. So, he came down here. I came of course as well. And they bought a house at the other end of this road. And then I started work. I met June. And when we got married, we looked around for something we could afford. And this was... the one house we could afford to buy. I'm not going to tell you how much it cost... [Bea laughs] ...Slightly above one pound. No- ...It wasn't very much, anyway.

Yeah... And why did they decide to move here, to Kew?

No, my- my mother went up- went off to Blackheath and here... and then she went off to Ruislip. And she went to Hampstead. So, she travelled around.

Yes...?

And this happened to be- and she loved- she loved the river.

Yeah...

And at the other end of the road is a tennis club. So, my father immediately had... a tennis and boules club so... immediately had.

So, when they moved here, had you finished school already?

Yes, I- I finished university, yes.

Aha. So, tell us, what did you study and where did you go?

[01:46:55]

Well, I went to Durham... And... Have you been to Durham?

Yeah.

Yes. Well Durham is- not only has it got the most beautiful building in the world, Durham Cathedral, but it's a collegiate university in the sense- somewhat similar to Oxbridge. So, it's a- of course the university was probably less than tenth the size it is now. So, it was very much smaller. It was a very, quite... A lot of ministers of religion were trained there. So, it was a nice place to- to be. You know, there weren't any discos, or dance halls or any of that sort of thing. And it also, because you were near the... coal mines and the steel mills...

Yes...

...you- one- we acquired a sort of left-of-centre politics... which was a- a good thing. Which has kept us- kept with us ever since. Then I came down and I found a job in the east- east end of London. Stayed there for about... four years. And found another paint factory nearby. And the day after I joined the smaller one, the bigger company on the other side bought this one. So, I was back with the same company. And then in... two or three years later they suggested that they need a person like me in the export division. So, I left the factory here and two days later I found myself in Athens. And I thought that was marvellous.

Stationed? I mean, to live there?

[01:49:24]

No, no.

Just to travel...

No, they had a big problem and it was up to me to sort it out. And there I was, at the foot of the Acropolis, in a luxury hotel. And I was being paid for it... And I sorted out the problem, and people brought bottles of champagne. We were dancing... And I thought this was... a good thing.

So, you worked in what capacity for this company?

Well, I was- at that time I was sort of Technical Manager. And then later on I became Manager. And I've worked a lot in... eastern Europe – Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania... mostly the Soviet Union.

And you studied- it was chemistry you studied?

Yes. But I- we didn't- this wasn't paint for rooms. This was paint for refrigerators and... aeroplanes and... ships.

Right. A British company?

Yes.

And where did you meet your wife?

I was a very keen oarsman... Rowing. And I was rowing in a four. And June was engaged to the stroke, and I was the bow man. So... she changed ends. And we got married... and June was a teacher then. And we had to restore this house. And then in... two years before I went to exports, Anna our daughter was born – '62. And one year after I changed jobs, our second daughter was born.

And you raised them here?

Yes. They went to the local school. They went to the school where my wife was teaching. And then Anna went to do English at Manchester. And Sarah did History and History of Art in Hull.

And having children- and you talked about this Jewish, not Jewish. How- how did you want to raise them, in terms of their identity or... how...?

[01:52:10]

Well, we- we decided that... we didn't want to sad- saddle them with a Jewish heritage so early. And we didn't want to saddle them with religion either. So, when most of the children went off to Sunday school, we asked them, "Would you- would you like to go to Sunday school?" They said, "Yes, because Jenny and Mary are also going to Sunday..." so they went to Sunday school. So that was their introduction to religion. But we didn't- force it on them. They joined the Girl Guides, which was also a sort of introduction. ...And ...Now, in about- so we carried on like this, not being religious... not being Jewish. We carried on like this to about.... 19...92 or so, when there was an announcement in the paper, that a group of MPs are forming a committee, to try and find out the fate of Raoul Wallenberg. So, I wrote to this MP saying that... what happened to me, and if I can help in any way, please, let me know. And she wrote back saying, "Thank you very much for your offer." And then, there was news that a statue will be erected to Raoul Wallenberg. And to our en- an enormous surprise - we got an invitation to the unveiling [1997]. And... it was a big affair. And... so we met... I had- I was deemed to be old, so I had to sit. But June, as a- only a partner of a survivor, she had to stand behind me. And- and so... we were introduced... Oh, the- the Queen came around, and she... shook our hands. And then we had the Duke of Edinburgh and Kofi Annan- because Kofi Annan married the niece of Raoul Wallenberg. And then we had President [Ezer] Weizman of Israel, the Chief Rabbi of Israel, the Chief Rabbi of Budapest and the Chief Rabbi of... London. And then the Queen unveiled the statue. Have you seen it?

Marble Arch. Marble Arch, yes, I have.

That's right.

[01:55:54]

And then... I was interviewed by the Swedish television and various other people. And then I

got a letter from the Imperial War Museum saying have I got any documents I could give them, because they were opening this new gallery.

Yeah...

So, I- I sent them some things. And we've been in touch ever since. And then about- perhaps two years later, the Holocaust Educational Trust came and said could I give these talks. And then it, sort of... went on from there.

So, until then, did you ever talk about your past with your children?

No. No, and in fact the- in fact when I retired, I retired about the time that computers came in.

Yes...

I had a computer at work but it was a rather specialised thing. And Anna said, "Why did you buy a computer?" And our children are very forceful, so I bought a computer. And I said, "What do I do with it?" And they said, "Well now you can write down what happened." So, I wrote that... book. And we- I printed out four copies. Gave one to each daughter and one to June. ...And- and deposited one at the Imperial War Museum and one at Bet Shalom.

And what is it called, your book?

I don't know. I'll have to find it. I think it's called "*Childhood Memories*". So, I haven't- one or two other people read it, but I don't give it out, as it were.

But it was important for you to write it down, or...?

[01:58:12]

Yes, I wanted to... organise my thoughts. Organise my memories. And of course, that since the children were not very old, I didn't want to say... you know, that... I saw rows of corpse- you know, a bloody... affair. But neither did I- because I have no... great skills in writing, or

at least I didn't have. So, I wanted to see if I could write something that is a reasonable account, without being either sentimental or full of hate or... something balanced.

And did you find it changed- did it change something in you writing this- your memories down? Did it...? Were your parents still alive when you wrote it?

...No. I don't think so. No, I don't think so.

So, they never wrote down their memories?

No.

And they didn't talk about it... much, or...?

I mean... No. No, they- they- they didn't volunteer it. I mean, if the girls were- were... When the girls were younger, and the girls would ask, they were- they couldn't tell- tell it all. So, they sort of skimmed over the...

Yeah... ..So what I mean, is it related? Could you only write the memories once your parents were not there or is it- do you think there is any connection?

Oh, I see.

You see what I mean? Sometimes that's what happens... in some way.

You may well be right. I never thought about that. But certainly, it was- I retired in about 1994.

Yeah...

Yes, and my mother died in '92. So, it was about '95, '96 I started writing. So, you may... May be- may well be right.

But also, you said the Wallenberg- it was very important for you. You wrote to the MP... when you saw that.

Yes. Yes, that's right.

So, was that something which was in your mind? That must have stuck with you...

[02:01:11]

Well, you see... ..There's a- especially in those days when Holocaust Educational Trust was- The Holocaust education was very primitive. I had a traumatic experience when we were still in Tynemouth.

Yeah...

I- somebody asked me, "What was it like during the war?" And I said something... not very- not very detailed. And this man said, "You know it was hard as well; sometimes we couldn't get any cigarettes for three weeks!" And I thought, if this man thinks that's hard, then there's no point in me talking about it. So, I didn't- so I didn't. So, there was a lot of- a lot of abysmal ignorance. But of course, you know the Holocaust Educational Trust, schools and universities, documentaries and so on... Sometimes in fact I think there's... maybe there's too much, in January in particular. Maybe there's too much. So... I think there's an enormous need for this. And, and- and Germany has done a marvellous job. And Austria and Hungary and Poland have done an awful- awful job. Yugoslavia has done a good job. I've got a book assembled by my cousin. They've done it so well! But, you know, there are graffiti... outside Auschwitz, with smoking chimneys.

Mnn...yeah...

And just beside the river here, a month ago there were graffiti saying, "the Holocaust is a lie". ...So, there's a lot to be done.

So, it's important; that's why you want to do this Holocaust education. It's important.

Yeah. Yep.

And I don't know whether you get asked this question, but for me that's an important question. How do you think did your experience affect you in later life?

[02:04:12]

First of all, I'm... oversensitive to... but- almost potential insults. ...I- I worked in a- I worked in an office environment. And the people were- some middle-class people. There were some who came from the sea. There were office- officers, and Merchant Navy and so on. And others were university educated. And yet you would hear people talking about, as they were going through the door, "I'm off to see the Pakis." And I had a hard time- in fact, to one man I said, "What does the word 'Paki' mean?" And he said, "Nothing in particular." And I said, "Then why use it?" And there was another man who used the phrase, "Well of course, Mr. so-and-so, he is a Red Sea pedestrian." Have you heard that? A 'Red Sea pedestrian'? In other words, he was- he was a Jew.

I've never heard that... Yeah...?

And I'm very sensitive to this. ...Maybe too much so. I mean these people were perfectly decent. So, I'm oversensitive to unfairness and discrimination.

And you said also politically you were interested, or...?

Yes, I've always been left of centre. Because the left of centre is more en- engaged in... in striving towards equality, and equality of opportunity. So, I could not possibly be anything else.

Any other ways you think your experience had...?

Well, I- but I- and I also... value the contribution that... world-wide that the Jews have made... to culture, and art, and music and... literature. I- I'm very proud to be associated... with, not

the religion of Judaism, but the peop- Jews as a people.

And how do you feel towards Hungary today? You said- do you go back to Hungary at all?

Did you...?

[02:07:36]

Yes. Yes. ...Hungary- ten- Hungary has a population of ten million. And they have ethnically nothing in common with Slovakia, or the Czech Republic, or Poland, or the Ukraine, or Romania or... or the former Yugoslavia or Austria. So, they're- almost emotionally, they feel very alone. So Hungarian governments, over the last... 140 years, have always fostered the idea of, "We are the defenders of Western civilisation against the barbarians." Against the Slavs, and the Bolsheviks and the Romanians. So, they- they foster this victimhood. So, on the one hand, you... about two-thirds of Hungarian Jews were killed. But the one-third is about- was about a 150,000 - maybe more- survived, and have prospered. Prospered in the sense of larger numbers and they were, especially since Hungary joined the European Union, they live in- un-menaced by discrimination or persecution. So- so they've done all right. But still, there are examples of anti-Semitic... politics and treatment of Jews. So, I would like to... think that in the future, not only anti- anti-Semitism but anti-Gypsy, anti-Roma propaganda and discrimination will- will cease.

How do you feel when you go to Hungary? When- when have you been last, for example?

Well, I went a year ago when I took my granddaughter.

Yes...

So- because I took the two boys. Two boys. I took the two boys and the daughter said, "I need - I demand - equal treatment."

Yes?

So, I took her as well.

Yes. And where did you take her? To Budapest?

I take her to Budapest. But I underestimated the... power of the screen. Because she was walking with the screen in front of her. And I would say, "Look Esme, there's the famous chain bridge!" And she said, "Yes." [bemused half-laughter] And went back to the screen.

Yeah...

And it was not helped by the fact that Esme is a vegetarian. [Bea laughs] And Hungary is not a vegetarian country... So, it- it wasn't an enormous success.

Yeah. But was it important for you to take the grandchildren?

[02:11:42]

Oh yes! Yeah... And of course, the fact that both girls- I'm sorry - Sarah is using her maiden name as her professional name. Because her married name is Desjardin. Her husband is French. But she retains as her... artist's name 'Dobai'. And there I was, the last of the Dobai-s. And so, Sarah uses Dobai. Anna has gone back to using Dobai. And her two boys have changed their name to Dobai. So, I'm not the last of the Dobai-s.

How come? Why did they change it? Why do you think?

Well, because their- their father did... was called... his father came from Lebanon.

Yes...

And... About a month after the younger one was born, he disappeared.

Aha...

So, when they go to sixteen, they decided to... change their name to Dobai.

And John, how would you... You said you describe yourself as a humanist, so how? How- That's the best description? Do you see yourself as British? How do you- how would you?

[02:13:20]

We are... British Europeans. Anna speaks fluent Spanish and French. The two boys speak fluent Spanish and French. Esme's got a French father. Arnaud speaks French of course, and good Spanish. Anna speaks Nepali and... Creole... and- and we are- we regard the house in France very much as our home. I feel a kinship to Hungary. Not- not patriotism, but the love of- emotion for the country. So, I don't- I think to label oneself purely English or purely British is a bit... It... detracts from the reality. I mean, when I go to... ..Bratislava... or [inaudible] or Kosice or Karlovy Vary, I feel as at home as I am in... in [inaudible] or- or Debrecen. So, we are- we are Europeans!

Yeah, and the question connected with your quote- is there anything you would say you miss from Hungary, or from that central European milieu?

No, it's- I've- I've got everything that I need. I- I- the sort of thing I can do without. Have you heard of a town called Eger? Eger is a very handsome town. It's about twenty kilometres south of the Slovakian-Hungarian border. It's a medieval town with a castle and the cathedral and so on. And I- June and I were in Hungary, and we went into a small hotel. And... a man was in the- in the pub. It was sort of a pub. And he said- he heard me speaking Hungarian and he said, "Where did you learn Hungarian?" And I said, "Here. That's- I was born here." And he said, "And where- where do you come from now?" And I said, "Well, where do you think I came from?" And he said, "Israel." Well... It's probably my oversensitivity, but I can do without that. Maybe he didn't think, or... whatever it is. Is that over-sensitive? Is it?

I don't know? ...But did you- have actually-in Britain did you feel- did you ever experience any anti- foreign or anti-...?

[02:17:24]

No. No never. Never. And this- you know I... as I moved up the company ranks, I

encountered people who were at so famous public schools like Winchester and Marlborough and so on. And who were at Oxbridge, and- and never have I encountered any overt or covert any discrimination. And nothing but warm friendship and... and a feeling of together.

And where would you consider your home today?

Here. Yeah. Here in Kew. While we are not, you know, we are both over eighty, and we are not so mobile. So, in a few years' time we'll have to stop going to France. We've already given the... the house to the girls, you know, legally.

Yeah.

Because probably we won't be able to go. ...So. We'll stay put.

Is there anything else we haven't discussed that you think we need to add? We didn't discuss the field. The field. Maybe say something about the field, because you said it features in your book.

I'll go and get...

You're still miked up. We'll do it afterwards. Just tell us about it, then we'll look at the book.

This field was- is, no, was... about say, 120, 130 metres square. But not only that it was it sloping like that, but it also sloped- it became steeper from one side to the other. And in the summer... you could run in the long grass, and- have you heard of May bugs?

Yeah...

[02:20:11]

And you could- the Hungarian government would give prizes - money - for 100 May bugs. So, we would have... huge fun... collecting May bugs. And then of course in the winter when there was snow, we would go there to learn to ski. And when you were a learner you would

choose the shallower end. And as you became more skilful, you went onto the steeper end. So, it- you know, to young children, it became im- vitally important as to how far along you progressed. So, the donkey field- it was necessary to cross the donkey field each time you went to school. So that's twice a day. And then in- in the summer we played there and then in the winter, we skied there. So, it was an ever-present field. And you could look over the houses and see Budapest below you. So of course, a... a vital piece. And on the left-hand side was cobbles, and then cobbles- a cobble staircase. The donkey field is gone. It's full of blocks of flats. The only thing left are the cobbled staircase. So... that's why... I write about the... the field, and that's where I met this boy who told me about my not being able to go to school but- because "I'm a dirty stinking Jew". So, it's got many happy memories and one very unhappy memory.

But it was a central element in your...

Yes.

And why was it called 'the donkey field'?

Well, I imagine that a local person tethered their donkey there.

What was it called in Hungarian?

Csacsi ret. Csacsi is- is a- is the donkey equivalent of a puppy. So, it's a young donkey.

And just following on, do you still read Hungarian? Do you speak Hungarian?

Yes. Yes, I do. I don't read Hungarian with enormous pleasure... because my knowledge of the language has not expanded. But I can read a novel quite well. And watch Hungarian films. So, I'm- I'm attached to... the literature, the music most of all.

Aha. We haven't talked about music. Yeah...?

[02:23:48]

Did you know that when the Hungarian government brought in these anti-Jewish laws, there was no protest from the universities, or churches, or colleges or academies of science. There was one letter in the newspaper signed- signed by two people who knew that nobody could touch them: Bartók and Kodály.

And what music are you attached to particularly?

Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms... Smetana... Wagner. Good, heady stuff.

OK, John, I think we've covered many different topics. Is there any message you'd have for anyone who might watch this feature- this interview - based on your experiences?

Well... In the last part of my talk... I say, "I want to talk a few minutes about why I'm doing this. What's the point of traveling three hours to Durham tomorrow and three hours back?" - fortunately not in the same day. What's the- and it's quite hard to remember these- and not relive some of these things.

Yeah...

So, what's the point? And... I mention that each time I tell the story, I remember my two aunts, and my cousin, and... two cousins and my grandfathers... who were killed - not because they were- they had committed something but - because they're simply Jews. And they were Jews. And they weren't even religious Jews. Racially, they were, they claimed a- to be Jews and b- to be inferior. *Untermensch*. And then I mention that while we had... genocide in the world; since the Second World War we had Biafra and Cambodia and Bosnia, and of course Syria and so on, in- in large numbers. We- the- the Holocaust is unique in several respects. One, is that the numbers are so enormous. Secondly, that it was a state policy. That was a state- a state with the highest standards of education. That was the country of Beethoven and Kepler and- and- and Bach, and Goethe and Schiller. They declare that their salvation depends on the extermination of an entire people. ...So... I would- so I- sometimes I'm asked, "Will the Holocaust return?" And I say, "No, I don't think... I cannot imagine that a state would declare that a certain part of its population is- is... evil and has got to be killed. But the

discrimination- well, it's likely to continue. And it's up to us... to fight against it." And that's the message I- I try and leave.

[02:28:28]

John, thank you very much for this interview and sharing your story with us. Thank you. Now we're going to look at some photos.

OK.

[02:28:40]

[End of interview]

[Start of photographs]

[02:28:58]

Photo 1.

A photograph of my mother. And they were living in southwest Hungary, at- near the railway. and the photograph was taken about 1912.

Photo 2.

That is a picture of my mother wearing a nice decorative apron and her friend who's fooling around by putting on my grandfather's railway uniform. My grandfather was then Stationmaster in southwest Hungary. And the photograph must have been taken about 1913.

Photo 3.

That's a photograph taken in the backyard of the flat we rented at the time, on the Rószadomb - the Rose Hill – a good part of- of the town. And it- that must have been 1935. I was a year and a half.

And who else is on the picture?

That's my mother.

Photo 4.

That pram- that picture of the pram and I... has as a story. Although I'm quite young, I suppose about just over two, I went to kindergarten which was run by a famous for the time child psychologist. And this child psychologist said, "Whatever the weather, the baby or young child must be out of doors for one hour a day, regardless of the weather." So, there we are. There's snow on the ground, and I'm- but my mother follows the instruction, and puts me outside for an hour. So that must have been 1936, in Budapest.

Photo 5.

So- my first grown-up bicycle and I was immensely proud of it. It's got something called we don't have in England called a "back-pedal brake". It's deadly dangerous because if you- if you use it too strongly, you will fall off. Which I did. But I was very proud of that. So that must have been about 1946.

[02:31:42]

Photo 6.

That's a photograph of a little excursion into the... hills and woods around Buda. And the people are with us, they are our friends, who are just about to emigrate to England. And... And they left before the war, lucky people! And they offered a job to my father when- when circumstances allow it. And eight years later, we were able to come and my father was able to take up the job. One side issue: The family who came to England one of their children authored a- a book called, "The..." something... something like... Oh, I can't... Something "in the Yemen" [Salmon fishing in Yemen – Paul Torday]. It's quite a famous book, published recently. Something like, "Surfing in the Yemen".

Photo 7.

That photograph is taken on the terrace of a rowing club. My father is quite clearly wearing the colours of the rowing club – blue and white. And we are about to embark on an excursion up the river, in the morning. Lunch, and then gently drift back in the afternoon. And probably it was within months of the end- of the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany, which of

course changed life for us and as indeed everybody else, forever.

And the names of your parents?

That's my father, Zol- Zoltan, and my mother, Jonka Dobai. So that would be spring 1941.

Photo 8.

After the Second World War, for reasons of peace, and quiet and... and the community, I went to a boarding school, an ancient School [Sárospatak] with excellent teaching. And we were looked after very well. And this is a picture of the English class. The teacher was Hungarian, but spent some time in Pittsburgh, USA. And I'm sitting on the ground to the right. So that must have been taken about 1947.

So, which one is that?

It's you and your mum. Yes, what is it please?

[02:35:07]

Photo 9.

That is a picture of my mother and I. Must have been taken about a month before we left Hungary. So, we are at the open window of the last flat we rented in Budapest. And the address is the 2nd District, *Kupeczky Utca het, 7* Kupeczky Street, and it was taken in July 1948.

Photo 10.

Here we are, June my wife, and I. And we are dressed up to go to a Masonic... do where it's a dinner and dance somewhere in this part of London. It was very nerve wracking because of the Masonic connection, which we never understood. But it was a happy evening. And I will say modestly, we look quite nice. About 1974.

John, thank you very much again for this interview.

[02:36:27]

[End of photographs]