

IMPORTANT

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AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Forename:	Peter
Interviewee Sex:	Male
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Interviewee POB:	Budapest, Hungary

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REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV222
NAME: Peter Frankl
DATE: 1st May 2018
LOCATION: London, UK
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[Part One]

[0:00:00]

Today is the 1st of May 2018 and we are conducting an interview with Mr Peter Frankl. And we are in London.

Can you please tell me your name?

I am Peter Frankl.

And where were you born?

I was born in Budapest.

And when?

The 2nd of October 1935.

Thank you Mr Frankl for having agree- agreed to be interviewed for the Refugee Voices Project.

Pleasure.

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

Well I have- my parents were both musicians. And my father was mainly playing light music. She had a light orchestra where- where he played the accordion. My fa- mother also studied at the Liszt Academy playing piano. And my first experience of music was when I was very small, and we had at that time two pianos in our apartment. And my parents were playing on- on two pianos Mozart Piano Concerto. And I- that was the first thing what I heard. And somehow I was inclined to be... studying music. And I already started with a family friend at the age of five. And I always wanted to be a musician. And interestingly enough, when I was... around six years old, I was already entered at Liszt Music Academy as a special talent. And I was studying there until 1943, April, interestingly enough, because that was a very difficult period. And by that time Jewish children were not allowed to be in- in the Academy. But then the music director, Dohnányi, who was a great musician, he somehow was fighting to keep Jewish musicians there. And I managed to be there until 1943. And then I had to stop because that was already too dangerous. So actually I, I was studying until '44 – April. I always wanted to be a musician and later on I continued my studies at the Academy. And I became a concert pianist.

[0:03:39]

So there was a lot of music in the house?

There was lots of music. And my... father always thought that I will be a- a- a, a famous musician. And I understand that when he passed away, in a labour camp, a- a friend of his met him there. And his last thought before he died was that he is terribly sorry that he won't witness his son's development as a- as a- as a musician.

So he pushed you, or he supported you?

Well, he supported me very much and- and it was never any question that I will do anything else.

And which instrument? Was it clear which instrument you-?

I was always inclined to- to be a pianist. But throughout the years, I found out that it's not enough to be only playing the piano but you have to be a- an all-round musician. And I really- early on I went to the opera houses and I attended many chamber concerts, symphony orchestras concerts. Because just to be a pianist is not enough.

And tell us a little bit about the grandparents and where the families had come from. Your own grandparents.

[0:05:46]

My own grandparents. My grandfather of my father's side, was born in Transylvania in Arad [present day Romania]. And... they were not musicians. And... also my mother's side, they were... just ordinary people and I- I don't remember really what they were doing.

And how come your parents developed in that way?

Well, it seems that it's not necessary to do- to be inheriting musical talent. In my case, I- I was an exception because my parents were musicians.

Yes.

But it's not necessary. There are so many other... ways to be a musician.

And you said your father composed some music and he...?

My father had a real gift of doing kind of entertainment music. Composed songs. And there was for instance, a very popular song which was a radio signal. And- and that he heard all the time on the radio between- between programmes. And- and as a tune, he made up a very popular song which was sang... internationally, in a way. And they did later on a radio programme about him. A posthumous radio programme about this song and my mother was very proud to- to listen to that.

[0:08:04]

What was the name of the song?

That's in- in Hungarian. ... Well, it's a pity that I don't have this music. But there is- there are- other music what I have which is- is called... I- I don't know that. I'm sorry that I-

Don't worry. But was it commercially...? Could he live on his music or did he... ?

He didn't live on that, but it- it was obviously performed and I am sure he got some commission. And he played- he- he had a, a mixed orchestra, well, what he was conducting and also played the accordion. And when he was taken already to the- to the camp, he entertained his colleagues playing the accordion and I have a picture of that too.

He took his accordion with him?

Yes, he was taking the accordion. So that...

And tell us where did you live? Where did you live?

We lived in Budapest. I was born in a different place, but then quite- quite young I moved to the place where the- where we lived actually. My mother lived there until she died in- in 2000. That was a two-room apartment. And the- as I said before, we had two pianos. But after the war, we had to give- get rid of one piano because we had to live on something. And- and the second piano was sold when I finally left Hungary. So that it was not an easy way, after my father died, that my mother was working in a company where- just to be able to support us. Fortunately, at a very early age I got a high scholarship at the Music Academy. So I was able to- to contribute to the- to support the family.

[0:10:50]

Yes.

And, and- and that was extremely good but, and- and I start to earn money with concerts already from 1953. And that was the first time when I- I entered competitions still at the- the neighbouring countries. I went to Romania, to Bucharest in a competition. we were not

allowed to- to travel to the West until 1955, when I first went to Paris. And- and by that time I was able to earn small money to- to support the family.

But let's just stick a little bit with the pre-war. So who lived together in the pre-war in your flat? Was it...?

At the beginning, just the- the three of us. And my sister was born in 1943, which means that as my father was in- in the camp, on and off, near Budapest since 1940, so he came home occasionally. And- but then, in the same house, my grandparents lived with an aunt, with my grandmother's sister in the same house, different floor. And- and when we were- and, and when we were taken to a- a yellow-star building, then of course all of us stayed at the same place. But that was for a very short time, because we were taken to the ghetto. And, well, obviously we were staying in- in the same one- or two-room apartment until it was destroyed by bombs. And it- it was very lucky that I escaped. Cause I was just standing at the place where suddenly in front of me the half- half of the house was demolished. And-

By a bomb?

And- and fortunately I stayed alive. And my sister, who was a baby, was not in- in her cot. My mother was taking her and therefore she survived. And- but we couldn't live there any longer. So we went to a- we were allocated to another apartment when- and there were twenty other people living. It was a horrendous experience.

But just to come a little bit to before the war period. What are your earliest memories of growing up in Budapest?

[0:14:08]

I- we were in a- until my... father went away, so until I was five years old I- I had very happy memories, because we were a very close family. And my parents loved each other. And- but unfortunately it was interrupted very- very quickly. And the postcards what my father wrote from the camps quite- several dozens, proved how he missed- he missed his wife. And when I was also- he wanted to be with me as well. But unfortunately it didn't happen. So it- we had a- a very- very difficult time at that time.

Yes. Because you had- you were very young.

Well I- I was born in '35. And from '40 my father was on and off. So it- it was very, very difficult.

And what were your feelings as a child, do you remember? What were you feeling in that time?

I- I wanted very much to be with my parents, but I- I- I was already concentrating very much. I started playing the piano at the age of five, and a family friend taught me who was a great friend of my father. And although she was complaining that I didn't behave well, but it seems that I made a progress. And when I went to- to the Academy in '41, I was very happy there. Although the- the main teacher was a very strict woman, who- but only young people taught me who were- who wanted to be professional music teachers. And every year a different one taught me and, and that was a very happy time - all the time.

And how often would you go?

Pardon?

What did it entail? How often would you have lessons and...?

How?

...often would you go to the Academy?

Well, I went several times a week. And during that time I was practicing at home. And of course I went to- to elementary school in the mornings. So that- that was very- a kind of normal life but when we started to wear yellow stars and et cetera it was- it was not- not the most pleasant thing.

[0:17:44]

No. And so, when did things change?

Well, it- it changed- I don't remember exactly the- the time, but when everybody had to wear stars, when was it? In '43, I think.

So that was the beginning of-

Yeah.

But your father was already gone before?

He was gone, but occasionally, as I said, he came back.

Yes. Yes, and you said you were in school. How did it impact the school? Did you feel anything?

In the school, mostly Jewish people were there. And, and I- I didn't feel any rejection that time.

Yeah. And what sort of area was it where you lived in Budapest?

That was a- quite a Jewish area in this- that time it was the 5th District, which later on was ...called- changed into the 13th District. I don't know that-

Right. So you didn't- at school you didn't have any problems?

I didn't have much problem. No.

And at the Academy?

At the Academy, as I- I- there were hardly any Jewish people, but- but- but the Director really, who was later on accused to be a Nazi sympathiser. But he wasn't. He was just- I suppose- in a way a- a- a weak person. Because he was- at the same time he- he was fighting to- to keep the Jewish people. But then of course in '44 he couldn't do it any longer.

[0:19:45]

Yeah. So the yellow stars and then you said you had to- do you remember when you had to leave your flat?

Well, after '44, April, when I got my last... kind of diploma of- of the yearly studies, I was not able to- to go there anymore and- and I resumed only the- the studies after the war.

And how- did you understand why you couldn't continue?

Well, obviously I understand- I understood it.

And talking about being Jewish, what- what did it mean to be Jewish for you, as a young boy, in Budapest?

Well, we were thinking that we are- we were assimilated as Hungarians. And we were- always thought that we are Hungarians. It just happened to be that we are- we are Jewish. But... unfortunately it wasn't the case, because they treated us differently. And even some people tried to- to change relig- religion. And I didn't- I never wanted to change but many people thought that if they change- if they confirm- convert, they will be treated differently. But they were not. And then we applied for some kind of- but we didn't get the- the Swedish papers which were the most effective. But- so unfortunately, we were not protect- protected.

[0:21:48]

You didn't- your mum didn't manage to-?

No. We didn't manage.

So you had to leave that building to go first to-

Yes.

- the designated yellow-star building?

Yes, which was in the neighbourhood. But- and... that was not a happy experience.

So can you-

Sometimes...

- describe us a little bit?

They accused us for- hiding some people. And they wanted to- to- even to take us to the Danube to- to be executed. But then, somebody accepted the- the fact that they did- they did something. So somehow, we were escaped.

Did you know about shooting people in the Danube?

[0:22:45]

I- we heard about it. There was someone who was, and-

And then you said you were taken to the ghetto?

Yes.

So how far was that from that yellow-star house?

That was a different area. That was a totally different area. And that was where- nearby, the- the great Dohány Street Synagogue. And... Of course we were restricted for everything. So that that was- we didn't know how long it will- it will last, and of course I didn't have - we didn't have our father with us and we were really desperate. And even after, we didn't know what happened to my father. And it took several months that we found out that he- he passed away.

And how did you find out?

Some friends came back who escaped. There was one good friend of- of my father who- who actually my aunt never wanted to see him, because he was- she was so jealous that my father didn't come back and that this friend came back. And there was another acquaintance who was wearing the same name as, as us, Doctor Frankl, who was a dentist, who- who apparently saw my father a day or two before he passed away. And that was- that's when he said to- to him that he was so sorry that he wouldn't, wouldn't see my development.

Yeah. But in the ghetto, how did you, how did your mother manage with a small, with a very small child?

[0:24:57]

Well.. it- it was- I don't know how we get- he- we were able to get food and I, I have- I have no recollection really of this. I- I know that really we- we had a very bad, very difficult time, but-

What do you remember? Do you remember being hungry, or-? ...Do you remember anything of that time? Or maybe you just...?

I somehow don't- I- I don't remember. I- I don't know. I- I don't think I was hungry... I- I- I don't know.

Do you remember what you were doing the whole day, I mean, what you did there?

Unfortunately, I couldn't play the piano. [ironic laughter]

No, that's... for sure.

So that I- I somehow was- I- I don't know, really.

And what did the adults talk about? Do you- was there fear of being deported while you were there? Did people say- was that part of the discussion?

We didn't- we didn't know what happened to people at that time. We were really enclosed so much in that- that place. And I ...I am a very bad interview, I must tell you.

No, it's interesting, you know, what people remember. So obviously you don't remember the details...

[0:26:35]

Yeah, I- I- I really- somehow it's escaped - this ghetto time. I remember when I- when we were liberated somehow we were told that we can go home and we didn't know whether we will find our home. We were walking back, carrying my- my sister. And my sister was really more sort of interested to find out things- what happened. And...

Because she really can't remember.

She- she can't really- she- she was born in July '43.

Yes.

And...

Yes.

So I...

And do you think this time it affected her in later life? And you?

I am sure it did. And it's really- it's very interesting to read what- what she had to write about this period. What he- she found out. She was more, in a way, interested for the past than I am.

Yes. Yes. But you remember the liberation?

Which?

The liberation-

The liberation I remember. We were walking back- back to our home. And we found our flat totally empty. And I don't know how we got back the furniture and the- and the pianos were saved by a tuner, a piano tuner, who apparently gave it back to us, after the war.

Really? Both- the two[inaudible]?

Yeah. Both pianos.

But the flat, did it belong to you or was it rented o-r?

It was a - I think everything was - rented flat. But it- it was occupied by Germans and- but they escaped. And the Russians, I don't remember when they came. Because Annie [Peter's wife, also from Budapest] was not in the- in the- the ghetto but she remembers how the Russians came through the- the shelters. And- but we- we only heard about that they liberated us, the Russians.

You were not in a shelter? You didn't-

No.

What happened when they were bombing?

[0:29:50]

Well, we were up there, most of the time.

You didn't go down in any-?

We didn't go down. And therefore I was up when this bombing. We went to- in the yellow-star house we went to- to the shelter.

But not in the ghetto?

No- pardon?

So you must remember maybe the sounds of the sirens?

Yes, of course, that I remember. The sirens and et cetera, yes.

And then tell us what happened after the war? After liberation?

Well, we were, we- we- we were- we had a very hard time to live on. And my mother tried to find a- an occupation where we had some kind of company to make minor- minor jobs because she couldn't- she was not that good of- as a musician, to- to- to be- and then we enquired whether I would be able to get back to the Academy. But of course it took a long time to be in good shape. Because those few months of not playing the piano I thought that I forgot totally what- how- how to play. But finally I got back to the Academy.

And were you very eager to start again?

Yes. I was very, very- and- and everybody was very hopeful that after the liberation it will be a good life. Which actually lasted two, three years and- until '48, when we discovered that the Russians were not so much better than the- the Nazis.

In which way?

[0:31:54]

Well, but it's really- everything was... really- we were not allowed to travel. We- we had all kinds of restrictions. And we had to study even in the Academy, the- the Bolshevik's Party's history, and political economy and Marxist philosophy and things like that. And it- it was a very strange time.

And as Jews, post-war? How, as Jews?

Well, it was not open anti-Semitism at that time, but I think they- in this respect also they were not much better. So many people in '56 escaped, that... now it will be openly anti-

Semite regime. And... Well, unfortunately the Hungarian people are mostly anti-Semitic. And of course there are exceptions but really they were sometimes worse in treating people than the Germans. Like the Austrians are- were also.

So did you at the time think you have to leave Hungary, or?

I never, never thought of leaving Hungary, because there was no possibilities at all. And we were really escaping in the musical life, and enjoying camaraderie, making music together. And as there were no possibility to travel, all the best Hungarian artists, opera singers, instrumentalists, et cetera, they were sort of- they had to stay there. And we were able to- to hear them all the time. And...

Yes.

...and at the same time, foreign visitors were also not allowed to come. Occasionally, of course Russian artists came, which is- which was very good, because they were wonderful artists. Occasionally French pianists came. I don't know why those French pianists – women pianists were allowed maybe because they belonged to the Communist Party in Paris. I have no idea. But, so that- and even certain music were restricted to play in the Communist area. Even the great Hungarian composers, Bartók's, some of his works they thought it was not really according to the Socialist Realistic way to- and- and some of those Modernists like Strawinsky, Schönberg, we were not allowed to play at all. Like they- the Nazis, they also didn't allow to play Mahler or Mendelssohn... at that time. It is- it- it came up to the same. So even I- in- in 1956 it didn't occur to me that I will- I was in a way, afraid to- to face the world. I thought... but- but finally there was a time when- when it was impossible to- to stay there both politically and professionally. And it was dangerous to go back and forth. So I- I- I decided finally in 1958 to- to- to stay out.

[0:36:56]

But you had a passport so you were allowed to travel?

It was not easy to get passports, but because I already travelled in the West. And when I went back I- I went back always with an invitation from 1955, 1956. So then I was able to- to come- to travel.

So just to jump back a little bit. What -you said you had a Bar Mitzvah, in...?

Yes. It was- it was very unusual, because that time- maybe that was a kind of a borderline- in that year, maybe, they tolerated to have Bar Mitzvahs but la- later on practically religion were really not allowed. They- they did everything... in hiding, sort of.

Yes. So where was this- the- your Bar Mitzvah? In the big synagogue, or?

In a- not in- in the big- it was... in- in the neighbourhood. It is a very nice synagogue where- and there was- there is actually I had the Bar Mitzvah with a friend, a school friend of mine, who is also living in London.

You did it together?

We did together. But there was no sort of celebration afterwards. Just privately at home. Because still it had to be in- in secrecy.

Right. But who, in your family- for whom was it important? Your mother, or...?

My- maybe the, the- we were not a religious family. But maybe the most religious was my grandfather.

Okay.

That- so-

And he survived?

Pardon?

Your grandfather was alive?

[0:39:22]

Yes. He died after I left Hungary. And my sister, particularly, was very close to- to, to him.

Right. So you think maybe he organised it, or...?

Yeah. So... I- I had that.

And then you said 1956, so then did people start to leave? And not come back, or-?

In '56?

Yeah.

Well, several hundred thousand left Hungary, escaping.

Yes, I meant among your friends- among your friends and family.

Lots of friends left, and- and we met in- in Paris as well, London as well.

So by the time you decided it was two years later?

Two years later. And then- and- and then in Par- we settled in Paris first, because that was my only connection with the West. And that's where we got married. And we moved to London in- in '61.

So what did your mother and your sister- your sister think of...?

[0:40:40]

They stayed there and actually when I left Hungary, I didn't even tell my mother that I am going to leave. But although she encouraged me always that- and, but- and she never wanted

to leave. And even when my sister escaped in- in- well, she came out with an official visiting visa, but then she didn't come back in 1975. She left mother behind. And she really was wonderful with both of our departures. Because that time, we thought that we will never see each other again. And when- when it started to get easier to get a passport, of course she came immediately... Visited us in London. But we wanted to persuade her to stay with us. But she always wanted to- to go back because she had her friends and she had- all the distance and- and she could go to- to the theatre in the Hungarian language. Although she was quite good in German and in- even something in English. But, well-and- and when we started to get back, I, I went back the first time in '72. And when- after a few days or few weeks when we were there and we left she never really complained whether we will- lived- we will see each other again. And she was really wonderful until the very end.

And your sister? Did she go back to Budapest?

[0:42:41]

She went back also regularly after '75. And I don't know when the first time she went back because when- when she got the amnesty of- of returning. But we never gave up the Hungarian citizenship. But- but we- we never in case- we never asked for the Hungarian passport to- many, many friends did that.

Now, you mean?

Yeah.

To re- to re-obtain the Hungarian...?

Yeah.

Is that something you would be interested in or...?

No. No. Interestingly enough, although I never wanted to leave, when I left I was never was homesick. It's always good to go back for a few days. But- so from '72 onwards I- I regularly went back, mostly for concerts but even-

And what was it like to come back for the first time when you returned?

It was very touching in a way, because of course it was again very professional and I went back. And my first exposure was to appear in the same Music Academy concert where I had my first concert. And- and- and all the former teachers and everybody was really there at the Academy and they were always expecting what- what happened to me? And it was a real emotional experience. And I- when I saw these people and all looking up the- the- the loges and et cetera I- I- for a few minutes I couldn't start the concert. I was really so... so much... emotionally affected. But it turned out very good and-

[0:45:11]

What did you play?

I don't remember these programmes.

And you said you had connections to Paris. What was the connection to Paris?

Well I- I met people when I went there in 1955 the first time. And I was participating in this competition which two years later I won First Prize. But I was only a finalist with two other colleagues of mine. All three Hungarian pianists was, were prize winners. And I had a very special connection because the French people protested on the street with placards on- that I was supposed to win it. And they were really against the jury that I didn't win. And so I was quite popular there. And- and... of course I met quite a few French people there- musicians. And of course I met Hungarians who were living there. And they were very- we became very- very friendly. And- and obviously when I second- I went there the second time I all knew these people. And it was quite- quite a- a homecoming there.

So where did you settle when you stayed in- in Paris?

[0:47:18]

Well, when we finally stayed in Paris, a few months later we got married. And we rented a small places outside of Paris. Two different places in two different times, during these three years when we lived there. And it was very elementally really- I was lucky, because... my wife also studied piano in Paris at the Conservatoire. I- I didn't study by then. And because of my connection with the competition, I- we were given two pianos to use, free of charge. And we- this small apartment with two different rooms, we were practicing the piano. And- and... enjoyed- although with very small money. But enjoyed the life in- in Paris. When- whenever we go back we love Paris. But it was in a way- in way the wrong time when I left Hungary for Paris. Because it was not a kind of- of course the French – the French... were receiving Hungarians with open arms in '56. But in '58 it was not so interesting anymore. And I found life quite difficult there. Even so, I- in '57 I won the first prize of this same- same competition. And I had quite a few important concerts. But it was really quite difficult because two excellent Hungarian pianists already established themselves there. George Cziffra and George Sebök. And they didn't need a third Hungarian pianist. So I entered another competition which I originally didn't want to go, because it's always risky winning a competition and then entering another. But it was far away, and they paid the expenses there to go to Rio de Janeiro. And there I was fortunate enough to win also first prize. And then I met a lovely Hungarian lady who was in the jury of the competition, who was a well-known piano professor in London. And she said that it would be maybe be-better if I would come over to England. And I came already- I came over several times to look around. And I thought that although there were lovely concerts in Paris, but musical life in general was much more developed here. And then we came over here which we never regretted because everything which happened to us and here- everything, I owe it to the fact that I- I- I moved to London. Really I gave my debut recital. And with that, I was fortunate enough to get that time the daily papers all reported the concert and I got wonderful write-ups and which started me. And- and then, eventually, all English-speaking countries came to me and- and therefore I was able to make my debut in America, in- in Australia, New Zealand, in South Africa and all these- these places. So I was lucky enough.

[0:52:29]

So you think in a way coming to London opened up this...

Yes.

... the English speaking world?

Yes. But then of course English-speaking, and then I made recordings. And I became at that time international.

So what was your debut concert and where was it, in London? Was it in London?

I was in London. I played a mixed programme of Haydn, Mozart, Schumann, Debussy, Bartók if I remember correctly.

Yes, and where?

At the Wigmore Hall. And- and interestingly enough, the- after these critics appeared, we were in- staying in a rented apartment here in West Hampstead. And somehow I got a phone-call from an orchestra manager from Liverpool that they saw that. And- and then it started for me. That's-

And when was your debut concert? When was it? Which year?

It was in '63. It was in '63. And interestingly enough, privately, a very lovely Greek woman pianist heard me play and she said - her name was Gina Bachauer. And she said to me that she- I should play in America. And I said, "Very fine." And so somebody is saying such things. And within a few days later I got an invitation from Dallas, Texas. A friend of this woman, that he wants to present me in an international series where he always presents a young artist. And- but all the other artists are world-famous. Are not only pianists but singers, instrumentalists. And it was really- I got a shock that- so I already got an offer to play in- in 1965 in Dallas, Texas. And so I- I was lucky.

And how did your wife get to France? You didn't tell us. How did she manage to get there?

[0:55:11]

She will tell you that I suppose. But that was quite a unusual thing, because she came to Paris three weeks before the Hungarian Revolution. Of course, it was easier then to get a passport. Still not easy, but she had an- an uncle living in Paris who already in the summer invited her. But it had to correspond- first to get a passport, and then to get- get a visa. And then to be able to come out, because the Academy started in the 1st of October that year, because there was a competition in September usually. September it started. And she got a permission to leave- leave of absence from the Academy for the month. So the whole month of October. And the Revolution came out, it came on the 23rd of October and then her parents said, "Stay where you are." And then how she- so she had an official passport. And just by luck she met former colleagues of Budapest who escaped in 19- straight after the Revolution. And they asked her whether she speaks French, because they got an address where they apparently were giving some money for- and the possibility to study, for the new refugees. And she accompanied them there and- and- and they asked her whether she- she is belonging to them. And then these friends said, "Yes!", and say, "Yes!" And then- and then she also got a scholarship and- to study at the Paris Conservatoire.

So she was there before you came?

Yes. So we started dating about- we were colleagues in Budapest, but we started dating...in one of my visits in- after '56.

Yeah. In 1956.

After '56. So I- '57 I- I- I went to Paris again. And- and then I still went back and forth. But '58 when we- we decided that that's enough. And then-

Yeah. And did you receive- were you registered as an official refugee in fifty- when you finally left? Or what papers did you have?

[0:58:50]

Yes. I became a- a refugee in Paris. And I- and we wanted to get married practically immediately in July. But this refugee status was only valid for three months. So the- the police didn't allow for such a short stay to get married.

Yes?

So- but it was actually quite a- a hectic thing, because we already sent out the invitation for the- for the wedding - but that had to be cancelled - in July. But then we wanted to get married because I- we had a friend who was a family friend of Annie's parents, who was staying in Monte Carlo. And I had a concert nearby in Menton Festival in- in August. And- and we booked a- the hotel that we could combine this concert because it was the one-and-only income for me that time, that we will get married and we will get honeymoon in Monte Carlo. And we were waiting the- that they would allow me to get married, and this paper never came. And by that time, Annie's parents emigrated to Paris. And- even her grandmother. And... I tried to persuade the parents that, still we don't have the marriage certificate yet, but let's get, let's- let's go for a honeymoon first, and we get married afterwards. [Bea laughs] So of course they didn't want to hear about that. So my mother-in-law had a very good friend who was- who was working in a Jewish organisation in Paris. He said, that although it is not official, but he is going to try- she is going to try to arrange a Jewish wedding.

Aha.

[1:01:49]

Which will be before this concert. And that happened in a flat- in an apartment in Paris, and in August then. And by that time there were hardly any French people, and even our friends, in Paris. So with a Jewish wedding we need- we needed to have ten people as a *minyan*.

Yes?

So we asked people to come up from the street, because there were no- so they were satisfied that - specially the grandmother - that we could go to this concert and the honeymoon. And when the honeymoon was over and we came back on the train, my father-in-law was waiting with the paper; we got permission to get married. So we got married in September 9th. And we keep both wedding anniversaries.

Aha, that's nice. So the September one you registered.

Yes, that was a- so it was totally illegal to get married in- in France at least, before that time.

And did you- what papers then did you get in France? Did you get a-?

So we got a kind of a 'Nansen passport' or whatever, so we travelled- we travelled with this. And- and we came over with that to London, in '61. And- and then we applied for the citizenship after five years and I- I got it. I was swearing in when I had a tour in Australia in '67, in Sydney.

So did you get any help? So when you came to England, how did you manage to? Did you know anyone?

I, I knew this woman who- who persuaded me, Ilona Kabos, a wonderful lady who later on studied- who was teaching in- at the Juilliard School in New York as well. So she was very famous. And- and of course we had lots of Hungarian friends here.

[1:04:15]

More than in Paris?

We had in Paris Hungarian friends as well. [laughs]

Yes. So was it...?

It was interesting in Hungarian- in Paris, Hungarian friends were in an older generation. And- and this was our contemporaries here. The ones whom you- you are interviewing.

Yes, so how difficult was it to settle here, for you, in England?

It was wonderful because immediately it was- of course nothing is easy. We rented a- a- an apartment and shortly afterwards my daughter was born in '62. And- but slowly I got- I got some spare money from the competitions what I won, both in- in Paris and in Rio de Janeiro.

And that was at least the easy thing was that it- it was guaranteeing that we would have a certain living standard for a couple of years. But then after my recital in in '63 I started to get small engagements and gradually I was earning money. And my other child, Andrew, was born in '64. And then we moved into our first house in Hendon. And here we moved in in '69.

To Golders Green?

Yes. That house.

And why Golders Green? Why here? Why did you come here?

[1:06:10]

Well that was- we wanted always to stay near our friends and of course we knew about Golders Green as a Jewish neighbourhood, but we- that... And we were able to- we liked this- this house particularly because in- there is an extension up there with a kind of a small flat which eventually were thinking of- that Annie's parents will move from France here. And that's what happened.

They came?

Later. Yes. They came already when when we were in Hendon, but it was a little bit of a- too small of a house and then it was not the- the right solution.

So you've been here from 1969.

So it was very- very good that we- we were able to manage. And my- when my mother came she was already coming here to this house- I think, the first time.

And then tell us how did you then get to America or to your engagements in- more and more in America?

Well, with this introduction in '65, at the very same time with also a special connection I auditioned for a great conductor in- in New York, George Szell. And- and he liked my playing and invited me to- to play with his orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra both in Cleveland and at Carnegie Hall. So I- that was a- a nice introduction. And so then I got a, a very famous management and I did my big American tour in '67.

Yeah?

[1:08:41]

And then I went to- I played at Carnegie Hall and I played in Chicago, I played in San Francisco, I played in- in Washington DC and- and then it established me in America. And... later on, when I was already fifty years old and past fifty, I got an offer I- that- up to then I didn't teach. And because I- I had too many concerts to consider teaching. But then I was always complaining that generally the music-making is not all my liking and specially with the recording industry. Everybody is seeking only for perfection, and so the emotional content of the music is in the background. I was complaining, but I didn't do anything about that. So when I got an offer that I should go to Yale University in America, I thought that maybe that will be an opportunity. But of course that was only for the one season because they were looking for a permanent... professor. But I went there and what I liked, it was the fact that though this famous university, the school of music is very small. And it is not like some of the great music schools in America like Juilliard School, or Eastman in Rochester, and Bloomington in Indiana, when there are thousands of- of musicians, pianists And- Here, there is only twenty-four pianists. And it's never increased throughout the years. But of course I was engaged only for the one year. And during that year, they were searching for a permanent person and I didn't- I didn't apply for it. But somehow it fell through, that search. And they asked me whether I could come back the following year, which unfortunately I couldn't because I had too many concerts. So I said it's irresponsible to- to give- to- to teach people when I am not there. So I thought that that's the end of it. But it seems that they didn't fill the position, so next year they asked me again. And I said yes. And it lasted for thirty years. And as I- I was travelling from here - because I never wanted to live in America-

Why not?

[1:12:07]

Because my roots were here, because of my children. They both were born here, and somehow I didn't like living- I didn't like that much America. And New York I like to visit and but- but I was not- I- I- I was thinking that London is my home and that- and, so I was sort of a permanent visiting professor for thirty years. And I never thought of retiring until- until I happened- it happened, my heart attack in Hong Kong - last year. And from there I wrote to them that with my great regret I- I- I don't want to continue permanently. And- and they were very sorry and they gave me a wonderful farewell. It- I- I would have finished already last May, but when my health condition improved, they asked me whether I could still do one semester. And I- I stayed there until November. And at that retirement party and concert and et cetera, they wanted to invite me back in a way regularly to give master classes and- and playing. And the first of these, playing, I already did it in- in March. So that-

Fantastic! But- so how did you manage? Did you teach a term there and came back or how did you work it?

[1:14:06]

So I- I went six times a year. It depended also on my concert engagements.

Oh, I see.

Whenever- whenever- sometimes I stayed there for a couple of weeks. Sometimes I stayed there for three weeks. So that I had the- I was- I had to stay between six and seven weeks altogether a semester, so it came out about three months a year. So I was able to continue. But it was obviously tiring, because I didn't feel it that time but obviously - something happened. So I had to- stop. But I loved- because I had at the beginning, especially, two wonderful colleagues. And with them, I was able to ...we were a kind of a team. If we all three were giving lots of concerts, and- and when we were away, we were able to advise the pupils to- to go to- to them to... So that, that was a nice sort of collaboration with- because that couldn't have happened in Hungary, because there was such a jealousy between teachers that if you are teaching with one teacher you cannot go to the other. But I believe very much that different advice is- is helpful for the pupils because I don't want to- to be a bible that

really I, I give advices and they should find their own way what different instructions. That's my philosoph-

Did you find it- was it- in America do you think it was- there are more opportunities, compared to England, in terms of [inaudible]?

For me, well, I- I- always, when I was 'concertising', I don't like this word concertizing, but-

It's a funny word. [laughing]

But, I always said that I don't have time- time to teach. So obviously, they didn't ask me to teach. Although there are wonderful schools here to teach. And I am sure if I wanted to do that, I would have been able to do that. Either at the Royal Academy or the Royal College where now I am in this month I am going to give a masterclass at the Guildhall School of Music. So I-I, I would have been able to do it. But I got- before, actually, I got several offers in America as well. But again, one of them was in- in- in Indiana and one was in Cleveland where I played regularly. But I- it was never attractive enough to me. But Yale was. So- but it was an- an interesting decision that I would do it from a year. And even more that I went over not only six times, because even now, I go regularly every summer. One of the summer festivals is the Yale Summer School. But other summer festivals I go when- so, it's lots of travelling.

[1:18:03]

That's wonderful. And did you travel with your wife and children or was it mostly yourself?

Well, at the beginning when the children were small, Annie travelled very little. And there were times when the two grandmothers were here and that was- she was able to travel. And- but when- since they were grown-ups, and particularly now, she is coming always with me. At my farewell concerts and- and retirement party, my children came also. Also to- to dismantle my studio and et cetera, they helped very much. And, and- and that was a- it's wonderful when they are also with us. But she comes now regularly with me. I did with... after this health problem what I had, that I won't go very far away places. It happened in Hong Kong where I had many times, many tours in- in Korea, in China. In- and even in

America I- I think I- I might not go to the West Coast. I-I think Chicago might be the furthest. And the other decision what I made was that- what I mentioned that I- I won't play solo recitals. Because to be alone on stage and playing everything by memory, and it's a bit too stressful. So I would like to play as much as possible with other people. With me, different kind of- either it's a singer or other, or a string player, or wind players, an ensemble or one person. As much as possible, and with a limited repertoire. I would- I wouldn't mind to play with orchestras either.

So in terms of your career, what was your personal highlight for you?

[1:20:45]

Well, there were great highlights. My greatest highlight was this Cleveland debut with George Szell, who was a fantastic musician. And- and I played with him two seasons in Cleveland. And unfortunately after, once he died then I still went back to Cleveland regularly to play. And that was maybe the most highlight. But- but to appear with great conductors it's- it- it was always a special pleasure. And I had my own chamber ensemble for twenty-three years. A piano trio with violinist George Pauk, Hungarian and Ralph Kirshbaum who is American. And we had wonderful things. Also highlight that I recorded the complete works of Schumann and Debussy. And many other wonderful- one was also a a very good time when I had three years touring with the great Korean violinist Kyung-Wha Chung. And- so, I had many highlights.

You said that you felt London was your home and you didn't want to relocate again. How do you feel today in terms of your identity?

I- as I said I never was homesick for Hungary. I like to go there I like the food there. I still have very strong Hungarian accent and- but still I- I feel more at home here. Although I made my career from here, but lately, that's a place where I- I play the least. It just happened, because many- many people still thinks that I am living in America because I- I spent so much time there for thirty years. Obviously, I wouldn't mind to play more in England, but- but that's how it is. I- I had enough. I played twenty-one times at the London Promenade Concert at the Albert Hall. So I- I- I don't feel bitter about that. But- but I- to play in England

it's- is- it means that I am more at home. And less travelling. And I love the English public and- but I- I love to go to America, but as I said, I really never felt at home there.

[1:24:17]

And where do you feel at home?

Pardon?

Where do you feel at home?

I feel at home here, where I am right now.

And what is the most important part of your Hungarian Jewish identity, or- in which way-?

I- I love my friends who are mostly Jewish and are mostly Hungarian [both chuckle] but obviously, I- I have other friends as well. And it's- it's- it's a- a tradition. I love to go to- I love to go to Israel. My highlights were also when I played with the Israel Philharmonic many times. I was just there now in- in Jerusalem to give- although I wouldn't live in Israel, but I- there I feel at home, without living there. [both chuckle] I- I had a wonderful time and-

What did you play?

I- I played- that was the- the minor things I played now a chamber music concert with an Israeli cellist and four-hand with an Israeli pianist. But the main thing was now masterclasses, where I had interestingly enough which is unusual, twenty-one Israeli pianists played for me. And of course when you are in America ninety percent of the students are Korean, Chinese and occasional Japanese. But it was nice to have twenty-one, and very- very high level.

Where was it, the masterclass?

[1:26:16]

In Jerusalem.

At the Academy?

In Jerusalem Academy. And I was also taking part in the- in international competition. I was in the Rubinstein Competition in Israel. And I was lucky enough that the- the most talented person won that year's competition who made a big international career: [Daniil] Trifonov. A wonderful Russian pianist who studied in Cleveland actually, mostly. And I was in the... most- some of the most important piano competition juries. The Queen Elisabeth in Belgium, in the Leeds Competition in England, the Van Cliburn in America and many others. Maybe two exceptions when I was not there. It was in the Tchaikovsky in Moscow and the Chopin Competition in Warsaw. That's the two which is missing, but otherwise-

And how do you feel- I asked you before, but maybe again, that, how your experiences, your war-time experiences, also maybe your post-war- the post-war experience of Hungary- how did that affect your later life, or your career – or your music?

Well, it-

How did it affect your music?

[1:27:51]

It's affected very much. I, I, I- I think all these emotional contents what- what I can- I hope I can express in my music making and the suffering, I think, is- is quite part of the musical profession. And I think one is enriched by all these experiences. Good and bad experiences.

And do you think it- it makes you a better musician or-?

I think so. I think so. The more emotional contents. And when somebody had an immediate success and immediate- I think suffering is part of the- part of the musician's upbringing, I think.

Yeah, that's interesting. But- and do you feel- do you have a special, because of your Hungarian origins do you feel, more special rapport to certain music or do you see yourself as international in that way?

Well, obviously Hungarian music is very much a- a mother language. So I- I think Bartók can be played with great foreign musicians as well, because he's such a universal composer. But specially the folk elements with the accents and the prosody of the- of- of his music, is naturally Hungarian. So that's definitely an advantage to play Bartók and it's a privilege because that's really such an incredible composer. Other music is, of course, Bartók was influenced by, by Liszt. And interestingly enough, French music had lots of influences in- mostly in Kodály's music. And that's what I had, because I knew Kodály's works, I, when I lived in Paris I had... big affinity with French music. And especially I love Debussy's music, what I recorded - complete works. And that's definitely... very much a part of me now. And- but basically, I think every music- we had a nice European tradition in- in- in, in Hungary. Sort of German music was quite natural and we grew up with Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms. That was, again, bread and butter for us.

[1:31:21]

Yeah – yeah. And how do you think your- how did your mother cope after the war, I mean, emotionally? How did it affect her?

Well, it- it was- she never wanted to remarry, because she really felt so- so much love for my father. And really- it's- really she was fantastic with both of us. And it- it affected of course her- her life very much that- that she didn't have a husband. And- but she coped fantastically well and as I said, she was always very supportive and it was really wonderful.

But again, it's quite interesting. It seems that in your generation, that the parents stayed in Budapest.

Yeah.

That while the younger generation came and emigrated the older generation stayed.

Well, but for instance Annie's parents - they wanted always to emigrate. Actually, they- even after the war, they were queuing up in front- front of the Israeli Embassy to emigrate and- and- and then they closed the quota. And they really hated the regime so much. Both the Communist regime- mostly the Nazis especially- because I'm sure Annie will tell you all this, how they were affected.

Yes.

Because the father saved their lives, and he was a doctor and- and at the first opportunity they left Hungary for France. And- and they had difficulties there, because they didn't accept immediately the doctor- the nostrification. So he had to- after living really without any work in Paris, he was accepted in a sanatorium to- in the Alps, where- where they accepted elderly people that- to work in a sanatorium. But she will tell you that.

[1:34:24]

OK. OK. Peter, is there anything else I haven't asked you which you think is important?

I don't know. I mentioned-

I mean one question is, what do you miss from Hungary? Is there anything you miss or you feel nostalgic about?

I was not nostalgic because especially since I can go back. I- I never accepted the- the- the situation, the present situation also in- in Hungary, politically. And- and- but I am not going to protest. I, it's not my job to protest. I am- my, my job is to play, and as they want to hear me and they- they are filling the halls the entire, I am- it's of course not any more the same emotional experience that when I went back the first time in '72. It is more of a kind of a normal procedure to- to- to give a concert. But- but still, I like the atmosphere in the- in the Music Academy what I always liked very much. And I am- I don't want to deny my Hungarian Jewish background.

Yes.

That's-

Is there a message you have for anyone who might watch this, based on your experiences?

[1:36:18]

A message?

Mn-hnn.

That I think you should be your own, and you should really... you should feel yourself and to be a good person and- and helping others. And- and- and enjoying life and not doing harm to anybody. So many people are- are unnecessarily killed all over the world. And I think: be a human being.

And in terms of- of music, would you recommend to become a pianist, or-?

Of others?

Yes. [laughing]

It's a difficult question, because there's- the difficulty is what are they going to do? Because we are educating by the thousands of people, and there are not so many opportunities for youngsters. And I- I hope they will succeed maybe not necessarily to be a concert pianist but somehow to get involved with music in- in- in one way or another. Either to be a recording engineer or a chamber musician or a teacher or a- or a member of an orchestra. Or, or somehow to- if you have a vocation, you cannot discourage you to- to do something else, so you have to have a special love for the music and, and determination that you- you are going to do it.

And do you have any regrets yourself in terms of your career or anything you think?

[1:38:37]

I- I have some regrets that... I should have learned more. I have a big repertoire and really the- in the concertos what I played with orchestra what- I- I played all what I wanted to play and I- the chamber music what I played also. But of course the piano literature is so big, and there are some gaps which I, if I wouldn't have been maybe too lazy, I should have learned. And- and of course I am teaching those repertoires but I would have taught them better if I would have known it... first-hand.

And tell us, what- what music?

There are some great pieces, like Beethoven Hammerklavier Sonata, some of the- one of the last Schubert Sonata and many others - pieces. But you cannot do everything.

No. And is there something you still, you still want to do-?

I still want to play- learn in the- in the chamber field as much repertoire as- as I can absorb, and I am physically able to play. I had- I played one piece which was a very difficult chamber works which is César Franck's Piano Quintet. And I said I- I played it once in my life and it was a very, very bad per-performance and I decided I will never play it again. Now I heard, that my great colleague and friend, Menahem Pressler, who is going to be ninety-five, just played this Franck Quintet. I cannot imagine how he could play it, but he played it. And I- I was so envying him, that I decided that whatever happens, I am going to re-learn this piece and- and play it. [Laughs]

[1:40:52]

OK. And one thing I wanted to ask you also, have you ever played your father's compositions?

No, because- well, privately I played because there was a kind of a birthday- No, a kind of a school reunion, where it happened that a school friend of mine who was there- unfortunately this boy committed suicide. But his father was doing the lyrics of one of my father's work. This one which actually it's on the wall, which I will show you. That as we both were there at this school reunion, we asked a, a school friend's wife, who was a singer, whether she would

sing the- this- this piece and then I can- I a-accompanied her. And of course the son of the lyrics writer was there, too. It was quite emotional.

When was that? When did you play that?

It was one of the- I think the fortieth school reunion, or whatever.

OK-

Good.

Is there anything else?

No, no. But I would like to show you all this stuff what my sister wrote also, because there are lots of things what you asked me and I couldn't answer. And maybe that would give you an answer.

OK, Mr. Frank thank you again-

Pleasure.

-for this interview, and we're going to look now at some of your photographs

Yes, OK.

-and other documents.

Good.

[End of interview]

[1:43:04]

[1:43:19]

[Start of photographs and documents]

Photo 1

So this is my mother [Laura née Rodosi Frankl] when- when she was very young I suppose. I don't know when it was taken. Besides being a pianist, she played quite well the piano but she played very good tennis.

Photo 2

That is my- the only picture with my father [Tibor Frankl]. I was very young. It must have been just before the war, I suppose. That's- it must have been a- in a tourist place, but I don't know where exactly.

Photo 3

Yes, it was my parents' wedding. Close relatives are with them. I think the elderly gentleman is my grandfather, who - from my mother's side, whom - I didn't know cause he died in the meantime. The other man behind my mother is her brother. Her two sisters are not there, but one of the sister's husband is there. And the- the boy is their son. And the girl is the, the daughter of the other sister of my mother.

Photo 4

That's on the left side is my father, who this time, doesn't play the accordion. Usually he plays the accordion, but that was a band what he obviously conducted. I don't know when it was taken. I am sure that I was very little then. I don't know any of the members of the group.

What was the name of the band?

I don't know whether there was any name.

[1:46:04]

Photo 5

That's myself. I don't know exactly when. There is this official photographer who did it. It might have been in a kindergarten. I don't know.

Photo 6

Yes, it's a little later, myself. I think it was- as it was put in the back already, in 1941.

Photo 7

Here is my father entertaining his fellow labour camp workers in 1940. Well, they still had entertainment at that time.

Photo 8

That was one of the latest pictures of my father. The drawing was made in 1944. Maybe one of the times when- when- when he was at home between services as a labour camp worker.

Photo 9

Yes, this is me and my wife [Annie, née Feiner] and two children, when we visited Vietnam in a New Year's Eve party. It was I think in 2014 or '15.

Photo 10

My mother and my sister in Budapest, the flat where my mother lived. I think it was after my sister already returned there as a visitor. I don't think it was before she left in '75.

[1:48:12]

Photo 11

I am playing the piano this year, 2018, March, after returning to Yale University, where I taught for thirty years and retired the previous November.

Photo 12

At the same concert I was playing Mozart double Concerto with Dean of Music at school- the Yale School of Music. With ensemble of string and wind players from the school.

Document 1

That's one of my father's compositions, light tango music. The libretto was written by a friend of his, also a father of a school friend of mine. He wrote dozens of compositions like that and it was very popular and- and played all over the country.

Document 2

My father wrote dozens of postcards for my mother and- and to me as well from the labour camp. Of course those postcards were all censored. This one was one of the last when he mentions that they are going to move now perhaps for a nearer place where- where we can visit him maybe more often, and of course mentions that we shouldn't worry about him. But he had to write all these things because it was censored.

Photo 13

Entering the Liszt Academy, when I was a special student at the age of six. And I stayed there for the- for the three school years, and ended up that time in 1944, which was quite exceptional. Because by that time, Jewish students were not allowed to take part. But the previous director and the present one, Ernő Dohnányi and Ede Zathureczky, they were fighting to keep the Jewish students still, up to the last minute.

Mr. Frankl thank you very much again-

Thanks.

For this interview-

Thanks.

And for sharing your photographs.

Pleasure.

[End of photographs and documents]

[1:51:32]