

IMPORTANT

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| Interviewee Surname: | Roman |
| Forename: | Laszlo |
| Interviewee Sex: | Male |
| Interviewee DOB: | 7 December 1940 |
| Interviewee POB: | Budapest, Hungary |

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REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV269
NAME: Laszlo Roman
DATE: 20 June 2022
LOCATION: London
INTERVIEWER: Clare Csonka

[00:00:00] *Today is the 20th of June 2022 and we're conducting an interview with Laszlo*

Roman. My name is Clare Csonka, and we are in London. Laszlo, please could you tell us your full name?

Laszlo Roman.

And was that the name that you had when you were born?

Yes.

Where were you born?

Budapest, Hungary.

And what date was that?

7th December 1940.

Laszlo, many thanks for having agreed to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices Archive. It's greatly appreciated. Could you start by telling us something about your family background?

Yes. Well, way back they came from north Slovakia, Hungary. My grandmother on my father's side is in fact a descendant of the famous Rabbi of Bratislava and my father's father – no, my father's grandfather was also from Slovakia, but my grandfather and my grandmother were already born in Hungarian territories. So – and on my mother's side I think we also have somewhere from the East, but they've been there for – by the middle of the 19th century, so. My grandfather was born – both of my grandfathers were born in Hungary. Not in Budapest. In fact, my father was born in Budapest and my grandfather I just discovered was also born in Budapest. So, and then we lived in- my mother was born in south-west Hungary and I was born in Budapest. [00:02:08]

And you were born in 1940.

1940, yes.

So the War ended five years later in 1945.

Yes, I mean, we must bear in mind that Hungary was an ally of Hitler, Nazi Germany, and the Hungarian army was fighting on the east, but Hungary was not occupied. The Jewish – anti-Jewish laws, like the numerus clausus I mentioned earlier which prevented Jews from entering university in the mid-thirties onwards or the early thirties onwards, and then they took away Jewish properties. But there was no physical persecution of Jews really until March 1944 when the Germans occupied Hungary, and then they went full blast. And very efficient, unfortunately, because considering March '44 they were losing the War and they still managed to murder half a million Hungarian Jews.

So you were very young during the War really.

I was young during the War and my memories up to '44 were – I can sort of describe it [inaudible]. It was not unusual for little children when they went to walk along the streets with their mum, if they had to do a pee then they went to the side of the road. And I was always told I mustn't do it because someone might see that I am circumcised. So I couldn't pee on the road [laughs]. And the other thing which I recall that my father was of course in the forced labour brigade. Jews weren't taken in the army, they were in the *munkaszolgálat* labour brigade, and they were supporting – I mean, in the east they used them to clear mines. [00:04:11] They marched them across and blew them up so the army – anyway, my father was lucky and he only stayed in Romania and in eastern Hungary so he sort of came home but most of my time he wasn't there. And my father's photo was up on the mantelpiece and that was your dad. And on one occasion I am told that he came home and he wanted to kiss me and, 'Who are you?' He said, 'I'm your father.' I said, 'No, no, no, that's my father, the photo. You're not my father,' [laughs]. So that was 'til March '44. Then of course, it became harder, but I stayed with my mother. My father was in this forced labour brigade but they were – he was fortunate that they were garrison not far from Budapest, and the head of the brigade was probably paid by the Jews but he was a decent man, so he had quite often managed to come home and see us. We stayed in our original apartment, which was a Jewish house, was marked, but we stayed there 'til October.

October?

Of 1944.

Right.

And then the first thing I sort of remember – so my memory then when I was young, and I was not hungry, there was always food, and my mother had a very fortunate nature in that she never sort of said, 'Oh, my God.' She always smiled. And I looked at her and as long as she was there, the world was fine. And then one morning they came and – oh, two of her sisters stayed with us [00:06:04] because of course all their husbands were in the labour brigades, and one morning they came and collected the three women and took them to the brick factory from where they were to be deported.

So when you say 'they' who was 'they' at that point?

Nazis, the Hungarian Arrow Cross. Collaborators. And, I mean, it was a Jewish house so they came there and they took the three women there. And I stayed there with my grandfather who was a First World War veteran and had the – and also, he lost a leg so he was disabled from the First World War which gave him a certain amount of protection. But of course I was terribly desperate because they took my mother. As luck would have it my father came to visit us, that is my grandfather and me, and he was told what happened. And he managed to get back to his brigade and got three armed men from the brigade and they went down to the brick factory to collect my mother. And I'm told the story that the guards in the brick factory were saying to this other Hungarian soldiers, 'What the hell are you doing here, bloody Jews?' And they said, well, they had the order and the letter requesting our [inaudible] Roman to the kitchen of the labour brigade. So, they said, 'All right,' and they went around shouting, 'Aranka Roman, Aranka Roman,' and my mother said no, she doesn't want to leave her sisters. And the sisters said, 'No, you must go because Laszitka is at home.' That's me. So she came out and later on when she told this – she was a short woman – and said, 'I didn't come out from that place because these two soldiers lifted me up, so I came in the air,' [laughs]. [00:08:10] Anyway, I got reunited with my mother.

What happened to the sisters who stayed?

The sisters went to – got deported, went through the lot but survived. And...that's another story. They came back after the War when they got liberated by the Americans, so they were somewhere in Germany. And then I stayed with my mother and then we were moved from our original address to another one where they really – because this was a Jewish house where Jews sort of stayed in their apartment. But then later in October or early November they moved us to another house not far from there, where there were a lot of people in the apartment. And in fact, my cousin who now lives in Los Angeles and her mother, we stayed in this apartment and she was- I was what, not yet four, she was six, and our grandfather who as I say had only one leg, and we slept in the same bed. And Judy occupied the legless side of the bed which was of course more comfortable. So, afterwards and even now I say, 'You've

got to be careful because you were nasty to me. You occupied the legless....' [laughs]. So, we have a laugh about that. Anyway, we were there and then various things happened and on one occasion – because even then Jews were allowed, I don't know, half-an-hour in the morning to go out and buy bread or potato, whatever – and I was out with my mother with my yellow star and her yellow star, and Hungarian apartments are sort of – you go in the main door and there's a courtyard and the apartments are around. [00:10:10] And as we approached the [inaudible] we could see in the courtyard that all the women were there because men weren't – they were already in the labour brigade. All the women were there and Arrow Cross soldiers. So my mother said, 'Hold on, we're not going in there. Take off the yellow star, keep quiet, don't talk.' I mean, I was not yet four. And we took the tramcar which we weren't allowed since, I don't know, earlier and moved a few stops down the road where one of her sisters was in a protected house because there were these protected house. And it turned out that all these women were taken down to the Danube, tied together, and shot, and pushed into the Danube. Which later on resulted that whenever I crossed the bridges from Pest to Buda, because we lived in Pest, I could always see bodies floating in the river because these people were shot there. And they shot them not to kill them, just to harm them so that they in fact choked on the Danube, drowned rather.

And you remember. You were so young but you remember seeing these bodies as a –

No, no. The body seeing was sort of after '45/'46 when I learned what happened to these people, and then when I crossed the – then I could sort of –

Imagine.

Yeah.

Yes.

Even '57 when I left Hungary it crossed my mind, I mean –

So, you had a miraculous escape with your mother. [00:12:02]

Well, I keep on because at one time I was lecturing, I was talking to pre-bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah boys, girls in my synagogue, and I always tell them that Jews you see who were alive at that time are [inaudible] because we were all meant to die. So, this was fine. If we got back to that place five minutes earlier we would have ended up in the Danube. And my father had a similar escape because around this time – yes, in sort of early November, his brigade, the 109-19 labour brigade was brought into the railway station and on their way to – well, to Auschwitz. And they were told to get on to the train but he sort of helped. He helped load this, that, or the other. They were even bringing people on stretchers from – Jewish people on stretchers from the hospitals and loading them on to the trains. So, he helped with that. His sister's husband also came in his group and my father said, 'Zsuzsi, don't get up. Stay down here.' And Zsuzsi said, you know, 'I'll stay with my friends. We are together,' and he did stay and he died with his friends in Auschwitz. Anyway, my father pottered around there and when there was nothing more to do he started going towards the fence playing around as if he wanted to have a pee. And he was so lucky that they didn't shoot him because in those days they didn't ask many questions. [00:14:00] And he managed to get to the fence, jump over the fence, and they still didn't shoot him. And then he walked and joined us in this protected house where I was with my mum, and subsequently my grandfather also came there. So, you know, these were all occasions. So, my fourth birthday was celebrated actually in the basement of this place in Budapest, on the 7th of December. And I was a good boy. And there was a children's shelter where all the children were crying. I was allowed to stay with the grownups because I was quiet and didn't make any noise. So they produced I don't know what, but chocolate. I don't know where they got it from, but there was something for my birthday. And then later on in December we had to evacuate that place, and I don't know whether today but in those days the big block of flats, four/five/six storeys, their basements were connected. And we went about six or seven houses, and the connection, the hole there was just big enough for me to walk. Grownups had to go on all fours, and of course my grandfather with the leg, he was pulled through. They pushed and pulled him. I remember that. And then we ended up in another house opposite the western station of Budapest, and we stayed there in the basement. By that stage the Russians and the Germans and the Hungarian Nazis were room-to-room fighting. And on one occasion – and the Germans tended to come to the Jews and ask for clothing because they wanted to change their uniform

and put on civilian clothes hoping thereby to escape. [00:16:01] And we were there in there, my parents, my grandfather, me, yeah. And then suddenly a soldier came in who turned out to be a Russian – a Soviet soldier. And he asked whether there were any Germans. And we said, ‘No, no,’ we said, ‘we are Jews.’ And my grandfather had a moustache and didn’t look Jewish, and he said, ‘You, Jewish?’ And he talked to the Soviet soldier in Yiddish. And it so happened that he was a Ukrainian Jew who spoke perfectly good Yiddish and he said, ‘Okay now, you stay here. Don’t go out. Don’t do anything because we are fighting on the streets. When it’s clear to go, I’ll come back and tell you.’ And he left and a couple of days later he came back. He said, ‘Okay, now you can go.’ But, I mean, how lucky that – because, I mean, in those days the Soviet soldiers, they shot people because after all by then they had enough suffering themselves by ’44 when they were in Budapest. But this was a Ukrainian Jew [laughs]. So, then we got as it were liberated and came out on the 6th or 7th of January.

That was ’45.

’45, when most of Pest was liberated, but in Buda they were still fighting. So, several people died crossing the road because bullets were coming from the other side. And that’s how we got liberated in January ’44. Of course, Hungary got liberated in April because they had to go west.

You mentioned protected houses. I wonder if you could tell us a little more about that.

[00:18:01]

Well, Wallenberg of course was there and he gave protective papers, and there were, you know, Swiss protective- Swedish protective houses where for a period at any rate they claimed to give nationality to these people or that they have connection with. So they were protected for a period, and then most of them then said, ‘You know, this is all rubbish,’ and they took them. But for a period. Now, the one we stayed – and I could never figure out quite how it was, but it was German protected in the sense that the Wehrmacht guarded the doors and wouldn’t allow the SS entry. And from what I remember the women were cooking for the Germans or doing some administrative work, but again as far as I remember we had perfectly good time in the sense that I don’t remember being hungry or I don’t remember

being scared. I mean, we lived God knows how many in a room and sleeping how many in a bed but, I mean, I was four so I slept with my mum and that was all right. And, you know, that's why even when I was in Budapest subsequently, I couldn't quite understand or establish from the Jewish organisation in Hungary what was this, but it was protected by the Wehrmacht.

So the War came to an end, you were a little boy still, you were in Budapest.

Yes.

Do you remember knowing, being told, that actually this terrible period was over?

[00:20:05]

Well, I didn't have to be told. I mean, I observed it. I mean, the first few months weren't very easy. We were within walking distance of our original home so we went back there. Windows were gone but the building was there, and for some reason in the food storage area there was a large bottle of beans I think. And, I mean, food was very scarce but the Russians who for a few days occupied, used that bottle as a toilet. But in those days they were just taken out and washed and consumed. But I remember my mother saying, 'What animals! Look!' And there was a toilet there. Probably one was on the toilet and the other one... And what else? I mean, the Russians weren't particularly nice. I mean, they were in the War, they occupied Pest but they were still fighting on Buda. So, if you were unlucky, they caught you on the Pest side and made you take stuff across the river into the Buda side. And the Danube was frozen so you could walk on it, but of course sometimes the ice was not thick enough and people went down by which time the ice would cover so they died. However, for each journey they gave you a slice of bread. So on one occasion my father came home with, I don't know, eight slices of bread which was very nice [laughs], but he did it not by choice but nevertheless the risk of their life, because he was taking it across the river. **[00:22:13]** So these things happened. They were robbing people on the street. Life started to become normalised and on one occasion- which again I remember- my parents and another couple went to the theatre and they were sort of dressed up. And the Russians came and made them undress and took away their watches and their clothing. And my mother always said that

there was one particular man who was a doctor or something, and he always walked like that which was fine, but he was in his underpants and he stilled walked like that [both laugh]. So they were laughing at him [laughs] half naked as they were coming home, and my mother always said, 'You know, we were in real trouble,' – they didn't threaten them physically, they just took away everything, but they laughed because this guy was still walking as if he was fully dressed. And I remember sort of shooting on the street, but that sort of quietened down by mid/late '45. And then I started school. You know, I wasn't – I never experienced a trauma or a shock of the War. It all happened and as long as my mother was there – the traumatic day was the one when she was at the brick factory. Otherwise, you know, I don't remember being hungry and I don't remember being sort of afraid because even when we went, when we took our yellow star and went, I don't remember being frightened. [00:24:06]

So during this time you went to school.

Then in '46 because you start there the age of six so in September '46 I started school.

So how do you remember relating to the non-Jewish children because after all, many of the non-Jewish Hungarians had been very bad to Hungarian Jews?

I had friends obviously, some Jewish some non-Jewish, and what I do remember unfortunately and I was reading in the paper now they have the Vatican archives of the Second World War opened up and whether the priests or indeed the Pope himself did what he could have done. That was all right but on one occasion in '46/'47 there was still religious education so there was ABC classes and in each class there were one, two, or three Jews. And when religious education came we Jews came out, went down to the class where we had a lady teaching us Hebrew reading or singing, and then the bells rang and we went back to the class. And I opened the door and some of them including my friends came and attacked me. 'Oh, the murderer of Jesus.' Now, that was all right, but there stood the priest in all his regalia with a huge cross and he didn't say a word. He didn't sort of say, 'Children, be quiet,' he just observed this. [00:26:01] They pushed me. They didn't physically hit me and it only was a short – you know, a few minutes, but I looked at him and he didn't tell the children to be quiet. He was obviously telling them that Jesus was murdered by the Jews, and they

opened the door and in comes the Jew. So, the children think – you know, the following day I was with them friendly and nothing, but it left me with an impression.

Yes, I was going to ask if you remember how that made you feel, that episode.

Well, as I was telling all my life to my children and grandchildren, ‘Whatever you are, you are a Jew and never forget that. Because even if you forget it, they will tell you,’ [laughs]. So yes, I suppose – again, I don’t say that I’ve lost too much sleep. Yeah, for a couple of days I was trying – and even today when I look at a priest I have this image, which is very sad but, you know, that’s an impression I have. Then later on my father built up a business. Because that’s typical in Soviet systems, after the War they allowed- so that the economy could build up. So my father could build up a chemical business. And then in ’48 they nationalised it and then later on we became class aliens which was – our life wasn’t threatened or at least we thought it might be but it wasn’t really. And then in 1951 we were deported again, this time for not being Jewish but because being class aliens. [00:28:07]

But what does that mean exactly, class aliens?

Well, it meant that they came one morning – well, first of all they took his business and then they said, ‘Oh actually, you’ve so many millions of taxes you haven’t paid,’ which was all a lie but as a result they took from our house, they took away the piano and took away the fridge and whatever. But in ’51 one day they came and said, ‘Okay, tomorrow we are taking you to your new location and you are allowed to take one suitcase and one piece of furniture.’ So, we took one suitcase and a double [inaudible], a double bed. No cupboard, nothing. And by train we were taken to north eastern Hungary. And at the station they had the *Kulak* – which is the peasant who becomes class alien because he had more than the allocated amount of land – with his horse-drawn carriage and he had to collect us and take us to his house where one of his rooms was allocated for us. And another of his room to another so-called deported family, and he ended up also with one room in his own house. So, we lived there for two years and I went to school there. On the way from the station to the village – and it was a village about 2,000 people, a small village – and asked various question, and the chap said, ‘Okay, and what religion are you?’ So, we said, ‘Jewish,’ and Mr Szalanczy [ph] said, ‘Oh

dear, that's a problem.' [00:30:00] We said, 'What's the problem?' He said, 'Well, we haven't got a Jewish cemetery.' To which my mother replied, 'Mr Szalanczy, don't worry. We didn't come here to die,' [laughs]. Anyway, we lived in this village as I say for two years, and during that time for really- I don't know what reason because it wasn't common in Communist times, but the teacher had to make a list of religions. So, I should enter that fairly early on I got friendly with a girl who was probably the nicest girl in the village and every day I went to their house. Because, I mean, we only had one room so I went to their house and we did our homework there together. And they had a garden and then, you know, and cherry- fruit trees. And it was common that Kati brought a note to say, you know, 'Are you coming?' or 'What time are you coming?' and gave it to his friend who was sitting next to her, who was in fact the daughter of the reformed priest, not the Catholic priest. And then she handed it over to the guy who sat next to me who was the son of the teacher. And then I had the note, I looked at it, I nodded, and everybody knew this performance. Anyway, on this occasion the teacher said, 'Okay, be quiet. Catholics.' And they put their hands up, he counted them. Reforms, Protestants, Unitarians. Added up the list and of course it didn't add up. So he said, 'All right, sit down. Catholics stand up.' And he went around, touched them on the shoulder, the list still did not add up. [00:32:04] So he said, 'Have I missed anybody?' So, I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Well, what are you?' I said, 'A Jew.' So, there was quiet in the class and the teacher himself sort of appeared to be shocked. 'Oh, Israelite,' because official name is Israel, 'so one Israelite.' So, the statistics was done. And in front me sat Somoni, a boy, and he always copied my homework. He was very stupid. He looked at me, I can see his face, and he said, 'Oh, Kati has a Jewish boyfriend.' So Jewish. I don't know why they didn't know because it was no secret, but obviously they – or the chap who I went to with didn't sort of publicise that you're Jewish. After that for a few weeks I had the problem that I went to see- people- my classmates or they would go, [makes a noise]. And I asked them, I said, 'What are you doing?' Apparently when they told their parents that Laci is Jewish, the parents said, 'Oh yes, we remember before the War the Jews they used to pray like that,' I mean, with the beard. Although there were not – I don't think there were too many Jews in this village. There was a nice synagogue three kilometres away in Szikszó where all the Jews were liquidated, but on one occasion we somehow went there and [inaudible]. Anyway, so that was the other sort of antisemitic episode. Oh, and after that immediately Kati's family, the girl's family were told, 'That's not on,' and I was disinvited. [00:34:07] And one of the

teachers talked to the mother of Kati saying, 'You know, you can't have this guy, a Jewish guy, coming here every day,' so...

Do you happen to remember the name of that village?

Aszaló.

And what large town or city –?

Szikszó was next to it and Miskolc which is a fairly large city. So, this is about, I don't know, twenty kilometres or something from Miskolc which did have a Jewish community. And Szikszó as I say also had- because there was quite a nice synagogue there which we went and saw, and it still was sort of a building. Aszaló, I don't think ever has – certainly had no synagogue or – it was a small village of about 2,000 people.

So you were with your parents.

With my mum and dad, yes.

And antisemitism was very present.

Well, as I say, these were my experiences. There was no – you know, nobody threatened us or anything, and I can't say that – these were the antisemitic incidents that happened to me. Otherwise, there was no – nothing antisemitic. I mean, my – [laughs] after this incident when it became known I was Jewish, there was a gypsy boy from the end of the village who somehow got to know me. And he let it be known that should anyone ever touch me or– and he was a big boy. Not six foot three, but six foot two. But there was – you know, apart from this [inaudible] business, there was nothing. [00:36:05] My mother worked as a seamstress, did things for girls getting married, so we made a few pennies there. My father worked in Szikszó in fact, loading timber on to trains for which he had to have special permission because in fact we were not only moved into this place, but it was our restricted location and we weren't allowed to leave the area of the village. So he had to have a permission in case

somebody on the train ask him does he have permission that he can go there to work? And I used to walk with my friend and the daughter of the Protestant priest on nice weather to Szikszó, and the girls were preparing for their – whether it's called – what Christian girls do?

Confirmation?

Something like that.

First Communion, something like that.

Yeah. And I was sort of – I had the paper and I tested them and by the time we got to Szikszó I knew it better than they did [laughs]. So it wasn't too openly or blatantly antisemitic apart from these incidents I mentioned.

And so this was obviously after the War.

'51 to '53.

Right, and then what happened after that time?

Well, in '53 when our father Stalin died there was changes and they removed the restriction. They didn't – we weren't allowed – they didn't give us back our apartment or anything, but we were allowed to leave the village. [00:38:07] So a lot of these or deported people moved near Budapest because we couldn't – Budapest was restricted. You couldn't go and live there unless you had some special permission which was very difficult to get. I mean, that was in a way logical to the sense that it was – you know, they didn't have apartments or places where people could live. So we ended up living in a place called Budakeszi which is just outside Budapest, sort of half-an-hour bus ride to the town. And we lived there from '53 'til '57 when we left.

So, what do you remember about the build up to the 1956 uprising?

Okay, I don't remember much but my life, I finished – primary school is from aged six to fourteen. So, I started in [inaudible] utca where we lived and the school was just across the road. I did five years there. Then year six and seven I did in Aszaló, and from '53 to '54 I did it in Budakeszi, this place just outside. And then one had to make application for further studies for the high school, *Gimnázium*, whatever, from fourteen to eighteen, and then university. So, I applied because my grandfather had a soap factory and as I said my father had a chemical business, so it was all chemicals so I applied to the chemical high school. And you made your application and then, I don't know, in late May/early June you had the result. [00:40:02] And the week after the results came out – oh, no. The week after you had to submit your application the headmaster called me and two other ex-deported in the Communist sense, into his office and he pulled out [inaudible] showed us our application, and he said he was sorry but he was instructed not to send it on. And he showed us the letter from the District Party Secretary instructing him that these class aliens, their application is not to be sent forward for further education. And that was after closing date. So, we said, 'Well, what do we do?' And he said, 'Well, they were looking for miners, they were looking for fire brigade people.' And there was a chap and my mother was there, you know, he said, 'What do we do now?' And this chap passed by my mother and whispered, 'There are still religious schools.' Because we didn't even know. Anyway, this is how I ended up in the Jewish *Gimnázium* in Budapest in September 1954 where of course they didn't ask any questions, and I had full, top marks so that was no problem. And that's where I was 'till '57. And it started in September and by November or December of '54 I walked home a girl because it was on my way to the bus which took me back to Budakeszi. [00:42:02] And it was cold and there were some frogs jumping on the ground, and this girl sort of, 'My God, frogs!' So I went, I got hold of the frog, I said, 'What's your problem?' And that so much impressed the girl that seventy years later she is still with me. Anyway, this is how we met, my wife.

That's your wife.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

So you met your wife –

At the Jewish *Gimnázium*, yeah. And we've been together [laughs] since '54.

So thanks to a frog.

Yes, yes.

Initially, thanks to a frog.

Yes.

So they wouldn't –

I often talked her out of the – if I knew I would never have caught the frog, but what can I do?

[Laughs] So they wouldn't accept you in the regular Gimnázium.

No.

You say not because you were Jewish but because you were this class –?

Class alien.

And just go over that again this class A alien. Just to recap exactly what it meant.

Well, I mean, it's political but in 1948 the – because initially it started as a multiparty system. And relative freedom building up. People sort of built up businesses and, you know, a normal – but then – and it's interesting because I've just finished reading a book about the Soviet revolution and it's exactly the same. They did the same pattern in all the occupied countries, and what Putin will end up with we don't know. Anyway, then they declared that all people who were in business or all peasants who had more than a certain amount of land and for some reason didn't willingly join the collectives because they formed collectives where

nobody had private property but they all worked in the collective and had allocation so that they don't die of starvation. [00:44:10] They will be – okay, and ex-army officers and priests and – they became class alien. Because the system was labourers, peasant, intelligentsia so if you were a teacher or – and class aliens. So, whoever didn't easily fit into the groups or workers, peasants, and intelligentsia, were class aliens. And if any of those did anything against the Party rules, also became class aliens. So, 20,000 people were relocated, deported. Relocated from Hungary – from Budapest and I think some of the other big towns.

So it was really to do with being too well off, having property, that kind of thing.

Well, the Communist system is based on the idea that is – and you can't have opposition, so any opposition – I mean, Stalin sent them to the *Gulag* and murdered them by the millions. In Hungary they didn't murder them, just relocated which then meant that some Party official and I never knew who, got our apartment. And, you know, we never got any compensation or anything for that.

So you went to the Jewish Gimnázium.

In '54.

And then times were moving towards the revolution. So, what can you remember about that period when obviously something very traumatic was going to happen in Hungarian history?

[00:46:03]

Yes. I don't think I was aware that it was going to be a revolution. I mean, we went to school. And then, you know, in mid – well, you see, after '53 there was all sort of a melting period but then the Communists still were in power and it wasn't as strongly controlled between '53 and '56 as it was from '51 to '53/4. We weren't aware that there was going to be a revolution. I mean, I remember on the day there was crowds and we noticed a lot of people but, you know, I had no idea there was going to be a revolution. And then the Russian army came in after October '56 and they were shooting on the streets.

That was Budapest.

Budapest, but as I say, we lived in Budakeszi which was sort of outside. We saw the army trucks because there was a big army, Russian army base not far from us and one morning broom, broom, broom, we heard the tanks going into Budapest. And in the centre there were shootings, but I wasn't there. And after a week or ten days we started going back to school and we saw [inaudible] mark on the walls. And, you know, marks of not a war but of a battle, and heard that people were arrested and imprisoned. But the control was there and a lot of – well, they lost control along the border. [00:48:04] So a lot of people walked, escaped, and we arranged with Marie also in December one day that we will go. And it was arranged, somebody told us that there was this man, sort of five kilometres from the border and we could go there and he'll show us the way.

So you decided to leave Hungary at that point.

And get out, but then when we went to say goodbye to my parents apparently my mum was in such a state that I was told by my father and by my uncle, 'You cannot go anywhere because, you know, your mum.' So, then we started passport application. We knew someone who had contacts and we put in a – not passport, immigration application, and I declared that I was, I don't know, disabled or something because, I mean, I was what, sixteen and army service. My parents were no problem. I mean, they were not in – they were only fifty but anyway –

Army service? Sorry to stop you. You said something about army service.

Well, I was sixteen and, you know, at eighteen they would have taken me in the army so I was potentially – but we put in this application and after three months in April I think we got – April '57 we got the permission to leave. Then we had to fill in various forms and then of course we had to find a place where to go. And as I said, Marie's sort of mum's cousin sent us an invitation and he guaranteed to look after us if we came here. [00:50:07] But then the procedure was interesting because to move into Austria we had to prove that we're going to go on to Germany, and Germany we had to prove we were going to go to Belgium. So, we

had to buy the ticket backwards so that every time we said, 'Yes, we're going in but we're going out.' So, in October – April – June, June '57 we eventually left Hungary and we had to be here by, I don't know, 19th of July, so we stayed for a month or so in Vienna and then on the 17th of July we got to Dover.

And that's your parents and Marie.

Well, Marie came with – her dad died in '54 so she came with her mum and youngest brother, they left the day before we did, and I came with my parents. And then we stayed in Vienna and then we moved over to London.

Could you speak English at that point?

Not a word. Not a word but, you know, you pick it up. I think first we stayed in the Jewish temporary shelter in Mansell Street near the City, and Blooms original restaurant in [inaudible] was there and after two days I was working in the kitchen there.

And you were seventeen by then.

Not yet. I was sixteen-and-a-half.

What were your first impressions of this country? It would have been very different from what you were used to. No Communism for a start. [00:52:05]

First impression. Well, it was difficult to get any impression because you couldn't communicate. I mean- in fact, to some extent we were surprised that by the time we left Budapest there was not much left. Okay, Budapest wasn't bombed but bridges were blown up and houses were damaged, but they made – tried to make quite sure that there was not much war damage by the time we left Budapest. Whereas here in '57 if you were on the upper deck on the bus a lot of places you could see the remnants of buildings on the road. Which we were surprised that there was still by '57 which was eight - twelve years after the end of the War and there still were quite a lot of noticeable war damage on buildings. Then I say on the

sides there were nice green things, but if you were on the top of the bus, you could see over and you could see the building [inaudible]. Which then took quite a while to clear eventually. I mean, obviously today you can't see it but I remember that was – why is it? And then, well, we were too busy trying to survive. I mean, I worked there and then after, I don't know, a couple of weeks we moved – the Jewish – it's not the AJR but some Jewish something got us an apartment in Dunsmure Road in Stamford Hill, 51 Dunsmure Road. [00:54:06] And my mother worked as a seamstress, my father worked in a soap factory as a labourer, and I was doing all sorts of jobs, working in a printer's shop until '58 when I started O Level at the City of Westminster College in Victoria Road. And when I started my English wasn't very good but, I mean, eventually you pick it up.

And after O Level, what did you do after that?

I stayed there, I did A Level, and then went to study chemical engineering at London University, Battersea College of Advanced Technology.

So by then you'd been in this country a few years.

Yes.

What were your impressions after a little time here of this country, and the way you were related to as a refugee?

I don't know. I never – you know, clearly, I didn't speak English and it really only hit me in '64 or whenever I got British nationality, and I said, 'Wow,' you know, 'I am...' and of course I opened my mouth and people would say, 'Oh, your English is very good. Where you are from?' And then gradually I accepted – because initially I said, all right, I will become part of this country, and then I had to accept that I will never be English. I mean, I live here, nobody hurts me but, you know, I'm not English, I'm an immigrant.

You still feel that now? [00:56:01]

Well, I mean, I am a Jew. No one could ever question or ever wanted to question that I'm a Jew. I was born in Hungary. I lived here most of my life and, you know – I remember in the old days in the cinemas they finished the programme with the National Anthem, and at that point you had to stand up and it was a short version. And I noticed that some people got up half a minute before and started walking out. And I said, 'Why are they doing that?' [Laughs] So what I did on several occasion is stand up and stand on the passage on the way out so that they had to sort of forcibly pass me and in those days, people were reasonably polite so they stood and waited 'til the Anthem and then go out. They didn't sort of tell me, 'Move away,' or anything like that. But I'm sure they were annoyed, but I said, you know, 'You live in England, the Queen is the Queen so- you sat there for two-and-a-half hours watching all the films and everything so can't you wait and stand to pay respect or acknowledge that?' So I used to do that, but it didn't make me an Englishman [laughs].

So how would you describe your identity now?

As I say, a Jew who lives in England but born in Hungary and lives in England. And I feel totally – you know, I mean, the Queen, we went to celebrate the Jubilee and I really am not looking forward to the time when they change the thing because all my time it's Queen Elizabeth, so I want to stay with Queen Elizabeth [laughs] as long as it goes. [00:58:04] And well, my children, grandchildren, they all live in this country and we are British if there is such a thing.

So you came here, you got married to Marie.

We got married, yeah.

Some children, how many children do you have?

We have two children and six grandchildren. Our son was born in Israel because we happened to live in Israel for a couple of years.

So have you talked to your children or grandchildren about some of your experiences as a child in Hungary?

On and off. I never sort of gave them too long lectures, but they must have heard it in conversations but I never gave them a long talk. As I said, I used to give talks specifically to children in the synagogue but I was asked to talk about my experience during the Shoah but to – I mean, my children know all about this from conversations, and originally my parents lived in this house so my parents and our children, so six of us lived in this house and, I mean, from the conversation the children picked up the thing. But yeah, I mean –

Have you been back to Hungary?

We on several occasions visited because I still – I had aunties there so I visited them. I had my grandmother still alive, we visited her on one occasion, and by now I only have two cousins and we haven't been – what, in '97 I think was the last time. [01:00:01] We've been there three or four times. On one occasion, I think the first time, I went by car and I said to [inaudible], I said, 'Let's go up to Aszaló, have a look.' And she said, 'We can only go to Aszaló if you don't talk to anyone.' So, we drove through, 'But you mustn't get out and...' – 'Why?' 'Because then they would say, 'Ah, you see, the Jew, here he is with the car.''' Because in '67 or whenever we went there Hungary was still not – there were not too many cars and, in the village probably nobody had a car. So I went, I said, 'This is where we lived, and this is where Kati lived, and this is where the gypsy lived,' but I weren't allowed to stop or talk to anyone.

Are you aware of relatives, Hungarian relatives, who were not as lucky as you were? You seem to have had a string of miracles really to survive. Your parents, your wife. What about some of your other relatives?

Yes. I'll show you photographs. My mum had seven brothers and sisters. One brother went to Egypt in the thirties and ended up in Australia after '48. One uncle was deported and died. And two sisters, as I mentioned earlier, were taken and- but returned. One of my cousins, a young girl, was picked up in – again October/November, were taken down to the Danube and

shot there by Hungarians. So, another cousin was deported but survived and came back.

[01:02:04] All the relatives and in those day- I mean my father had loads of relatives in the country, they were all liquidated, and I tried to build up a family tree and mark with a [magenta? inaud] with the ones who died, and there were an awful lot of [magenta? inaud] so a lot of branches of the family were liquidated. But people I know, as I say it was an uncle who I hardly remember because after all I was only as we said four years old at the end of the War, but I remember Uncle Béla. He didn't come back. Ibolya, I remember well because she used to come and loved me and played with my little fingers.

Was that a cousin or –?

Cousin, cousin, cousin, but she was eighteen/nineteen and we thought she's all right, and maybe didn't look Jewish. Anyway, they got hold of her in late '44 and shot her into the Danube.

And that was Hungarians.

Yes, yes, yes.

How do you feel about Hungarians now?

I don't hate them. I don't hate them, and the current government – I still have as I say one ex-classmate from the Jewish *Gimnázium* who I talk to two or three times a year, and a cousin, ninety-two, and another one, seventy-five. She was seventy-five a couple of days ago. And I always tell them, 'So how is it with Jews?' and they say, 'It's not too bad.' And in fact, the State, the government, helps the Jewish community so these people have daily help coming to them and if they have any needs they look after them. [01:04:12] So they don't complain about antisemitism today in Hungary. I'm sure there are antisemites, I mean, it's in their blood. And that priest who stood there probably there are many of them but, you know, you look around the world unfortunately and antisemitism is all over the place, so...

You mentioned that –

And, you see, the other thing is, I mean, we have some friends here who wouldn't go to Germany. And I keep telling them, you know, 'The Germans you see today, are they responsible for their parents and grandparents what they did?' And I've met Germans who were descendants and were very – felt guilty about it. I'm sure there is antisemitism in Germany, but just as I can't hate a thirty, forty, fifty-year-old Hungarian today because of what her relations did eighty years ago. Yeah, so if I go there, I mean, I go there. There was a period of time I remember from business in the sixties. I had to travel to Germany and there I used to look at people and say, 'Ah, he's old enough, he could have been.' By now, nobody who is alive could have done anything wrong because, you know, he's dead.

Do you feel – you mentioned that you don't feel English but you live here so you're British. Do you still in any way still feel a refugee? [01:06:10]

No. I don't know what a refugee should feel like. No. You know, I lived here long enough, I paid my taxes, I worked. My children are here, my grandchildren. So, no, I don't feel a refugee.

Thank you so much for sharing all this with Laszlo. I just wondered whether there's anything that you would like to add that we just haven't touched on that should be in here as part of your story?

I can't think of anything else. I think I sort of covered – no doubt tomorrow I will think, ah, I should have mentioned this or that. But yeah, I mean, we lived – as I said, we lived in Israel [laughs], and there before I applied for jobs and I applied to the military, and I went through an interview and he started asking questions, and I said, 'Come on my dear, don't ask me about my Jewishness, not here.' But still he had to say. I said, 'Yes, I can name Jewish friends from Hungary and Jewish friends from England,' but I told him, I said, 'You know, in Hungary they can ask me about whether I'm Hungarian, in England they can ask me whether I'm English, but here you cannot ask me that I'm a Jew,' [laughs]. I am a Jew. And my children, I mean, you know, I keep *Pesach* but – and we are not religious and we've never been terribly religious, and my children are reasonably religious. And once I asked my son, 'I

never sort of lectured you about Jewishness or the *Torah* or anything,’ and he said, ‘No *Abba*,’ – because they call me *Abba* – he said, ‘No *Apa*, it was in the air. We just breathed it in the air, our Jewishness,’ which probably is true. [01:08:14]

Do you have a message for anyone who will watch this recording in the future?

Well, as I think we said at the beginning that it was terrible times and they meant what they said, that they want to murder every Jew. And in my experience most – almost all Jews, certainly in Hungary who survived for some sort of miracle or at least good luck. Why they weren’t picked up, they overslept, I mean, crazy things. Because those who weren’t were liquidated. I mean, they took them by the thousands, by the hundreds of thousands. And I think the same applied right across Europe. Italy was slightly different because Mussolini was not antisemitic until he was helped by Hitler and then, well, he followed through. Albania, Bulgaria is interesting and I remember once flying from Tel Aviv to Budapest – anyway, there was a Bulgarian next to me and he said, ‘We’re coming from Israel. You’re Jewish, yes?’ And he said that the Bulgarians were partners with Germany, with the Germans in the War and Bulgaria gained northern Greece, Thessalonica and that area, and the Jews from there were transported through Bulgaria to the camps. [01:10:01] However, when they finished that and the Germans said to the Bulgarians, ‘Now, let’s have the Bulgarian Jews,’ the King and – not the Archbishop but the whatever they had of the Greek church, they said, ‘No, no, they are Bulgarians. They may be Jews but they...’ – and they did not send Bulgarian Jews to the camps. And this guy was very proudly telling me in the flight that, ‘You realise that Bulgaria did not give their Jews to the Germans.’ And the other thing is Albania which is the only country which had more Jews after the War than before the War. And I only learned it obviously afterwards that when people went to the British, American, French, Italian, embassies for protection they all said, ‘No, no, no.’ Then somebody said – and suddenly they said, ‘Why don’t you go to the Albanian embassy?’ They said, ‘What embassy?’ Because Albania took in Jews right through the War. You know, so a lot of Jews, Hungarian Jews and presumably other Jews survived because they managed to get to Albania. So, what do I tell people? Well, to Jews, to say be proud to be Jewish and never deny it because during the Shoah and I’m sure [inaudible] it would happen again, they will find you. And they said, ‘Yes, you might be called Smith, but you started off as Schwarz and

your grandfather... so, you're a bloody Jew.' So always be proud to be Jewish. Behave yourself. Make sure you give credit to the Jewishness, but never deny it because, you know, that's something to be proud of. Because after all, we are two-and-a-half thousand years and we're still going so make sure you do that and be proud. [01:12:02] Religious, well, all right if you want to be religious be religious.

Laszlo, thank you so much for this really fascinating interview and for your time. We will now film any documents and photos that you would like to show us.

So how do we play that? All right, here is –

Sorry. And just look at Claire [pause]. Yes please.

This is a photograph of my grandparents and my mother and her seven siblings. So, it would have been taken, I don't know exactly, but around 1930- I guess or in the late twenties. It shows my grandparents. My grandmother who passed away in 1941, my grandfather who survived and died in 1954, and then one of his eldest son on the left, second on the left, was deported and died. And the one on the left which is the second son emigrated to Egypt in the thirties and ended up in Australia. And out of the girls, two of them survived in Budapest during the War, one died in the thirties of lung problem, and the one on the right, two of them were deported but came back. [01:14:08] And the furthest on the right is my mother.

This photo would have been taken in the summer of 1941. On the left I am in the arms of my mother, and behind us you could see my father's head, and the going to the right is my grandfather, and seated is my great-grandfather, and next it's my grandmother, and my auntie. I don't remember my great-grandfather because he died in '41 or '42. I just about remember my grandfather who died – he was lucky, he died three days before the Germans came into Hungary in March 1944.

What was your great-grandfather's name? Do you know?

My great-grandfather was Rosenbaum Shamuel. My grandfather was obviously – no, I think he was born Roman – no, Rosenbaum because my father was born Rosenbaum Miklós, but when he was quite young, six or seven years old in 1912 or thirteen, my grandfather changed the name to Roman from Rosenbaum. But I was born as Roman.

This is a photograph of my grandfather with me in our apartment in [inaudible] utca in Budapest. It would have been taken about '45, yeah, just after the War. Ready? **[01:16:01]**

This is a photograph which would have been taken in 1945 or maybe 1946 in our apartment in [inaudible] utca in Budapest showing my mum, my dad, and myself.

This is a photograph of my mother who was a trained seamstress working on the sewing machine. I suppose in the mid/early forties – fifties.

This is taken at our wedding in 1963, 31st of March 1963, showing Marie and me.

This is a photo of our wedding where behind Marie are my parents, my mum and dad, and the rest are Marie's London-based cousins and second cousins. Her mum from Israel couldn't attend. And the wedding was taken in the shtiebel, 69 Lower Cheap Road under Rabbi Baumgarten but that shtiebel didn't have a marriage licence so officially the marriage took place in the Adath Shul in Queen Elizabeth Walk, and the two were connected through a courtyard.

This picture, it was taken in the mid-sixties, '67/'68, at our house in 44 Clifton Road. My parents and Marie and me.

This photograph shows my mum and my daughter Thalia riding the bicycle in our garden in the mid-eighties. **[01:18:04]**

These photos show our two children graduating from Cambridge. Dani on the left, graduating in law in 1993 or '94, I don't remember offhand, and Thalia graduating in medicine on the right in '98 I suppose.

Laszlo, thank you so much for sharing your story and your photographs today. Thank you very much again.

This is the so-called immigration passport from Hungary issued early 1957. And of course, it's not a book, it's just a sheet of paper on to which we had to get all the visas and transit permissions allowing us to move from Hungary, through Austria, German, Belgium, to England which we arrived in July 1957. [Pause]

This is the reverse side of the so-called travel document which shows the torturous history of obtaining it. Because before one applied for this permission to leave the country, one had to have written permission that England would let us in, or rather that the guarantor is prepared to guarantee us. Then eventually we managed to obtain the document by which time our original guarantor was two-minded and didn't sign the next piece of document. **[01:20:05]** So we had to find a religious Jew in Stamford Hill who, unknown to us or we are unknown to them, nevertheless was prepared to guarantee us so we could get permission to enter England. Then we had to get transit permissions from each – because we came by train, we had to get transit permission from each country but backwards because the Belgians would only give us transmit permission if we were sure to be able to get to England. The Germans, likewise, and the Austrians. So we couldn't get an Austrian permission to transit until we had the German one and the Belgian one. But eventually we had it all and this shows the various stamps on this old piece of paper.

Thank you very much Laszlo.

Yeah. [Pause] This is the yellow star which I had to wear between April/May 1944 until January 1945. **[01:22:07]** And this is the one which I took off when we were going from one Jewish house to the other which I referred to in my descriptions. Then thereby we avoided being shot in the Danube. Now I keep it in my *Pesach Haggadah [book]* and I make reference to it every *Seder* so the children and the grandchildren know it and its story.

[01:22:47]

[End of transcript]