

IMPORTANT

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AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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

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Interview No. RV249
NAME: Gabor Otvos
DATE: 12th December, 2019
LOCATION: London, UK
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

Today is the 12th of December 2019. We're conducting an interview with Mr. Gabor Otvos. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we are in Pinner. What is your name, please?

Gabor Otvos.

And where were you born?

Budapest.

When?

Hungary. 16th of September 1941.

Gabor, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for the Refugee Voices Archive. Can you tell us a little bit about your family background?

Well, it's a fairly humble background. My grandparents, on the father side, my grandfather was a shoemaker in Berettyóújfalu, Eastern Hungary and-

Can you spell that for us?

Spell it? B-E-R-E-T-T-Y-O-U-J-F-A-L-U.

Thank you.

Berettyóújfalu. It's very near the Romanian border. And my paternal grandmother comes from a family of innkeepers and ...transport people. It's a humble background and equally on my mother's side. My maternal grandfather was a butcher who came from Hohenau in Austria, because it was just one country in those days. And he came to Budapest at the end of the 19th century. That's really my parent- well, my mother was a bookkeeper and my father was a printer, [00:02:00] and my brother is a printer. That's really the family background.

How did your parents meet? Where did they meet?

Well, it's a very interesting story because my cousin, Ibbi, was born in Budapest in 1933. And this was my father's niece, this cousin. So, he kept going to the hospital to visit and my mother's sister, at the same time, had her daughter in this hospital, so my mother went to see her sister. And... they met in- on the ward. After meeting, my father kept going every day and his family was just amazed how good was he. [chuckles] But of course, you know, he wanted to continue the relationship with my mother and he succeeded. That's how they met and they married in 1935.

By that time, had they moved with their parents to Budapest, or the whole entire families or?

Well, no, my father's family stayed in Berettyóújfalu and my mother's family was in Budapest- from Budapest.

You said your father was a printer. How did he become to be a printer? How?

Well, he was apprenticed in Berettyóújfalu with another firm of printers. He had various adventures before becoming an apprentice, trying various trades. None of them suited him. [00:04:00] So eventually, he, he got his qualifications to be a fully, fully-fledged printer. It all originated in Berettyóújfalu where there were perhaps one or two printing businesses.

And did, when he came to Budapest, did he know anyone? Did he have family at all there?

Yes, he had a sister or perhaps even two. So gradually, the children- or some of the children, his siblings, moved to Budapest. And- he was the 13th child. My grandmother had 11 and then she produced twins, so my father had a twin sister. And... yes, I think my grandmother must've had a shock, but- yes, sorry.

Did you ever meet your grandparents?

My grandmother died in 1943. That was the only surviving grandparent. She held me but I don't remember it and I was-

She died-?

In '43.

Of natural causes?

Natural causes, yes. She was 83, I think. I have one or two photos, yes, but I don't remember.

And First World War, your father, was he-

Well, he was very young, of course. He was born in 1903. So... he didn't take part in the fighting, he wasn't called up.

And your parents, where did they settle after they got married?

I think for a while they lived with relatives and then they settled in Budapest. And then my father started his business in 1935. And- so they stayed in Budapest and they survived the war in Budapest.

Tell us, [00:06:00] what was the name of this business your father had?

Well...I think, it's, it's a... the, the name on the photograph simply says, "Book printing," and the names of the two partners, which was my father, Jozsef Öhlmacher, and his partner, Antal Weinberger. And that was on the, on the sign, but I don't think it had a particular name.

And what sort of books? What did they print? Do you know?

Well, I went there once or twice, perhaps even more and I saw leaflets and booklets, and lots of receipts and name cards, but I don't seem to- I don't think I've seen actual books properly bound. So...it was a small business, about six or seven employees. My father kept saying, "Well, this will all be yours when you grow up." Of course, it never materialised. The communists put an end to that.

What area of Budapest? Where was it?

That was in Dob utca, Dob Street, which is in the middle of Jewish district, very near Dohány Street Synagogue.

The area that you lived?

We lived nearer the Danube which was a more modern Jewish area. Of course, in Budapest, there were many Jewish areas, [chuckles] but this was a more middle-class Jewish area, if you like, where we ended up living. When the business was doing well, they could afford to move to this new area in Sziget Utca, Sziget Street.

You said your mother was a bookkeeper. Did she work with your father?

She worked with my father, on and off, but she [00:08:00] became a proper bookkeeper much later on, when she had to go out to work once my father lost his business. And that, you know, was when the communists took hold in 1949 and then he got a job and a few years later my mother went back to work, a couple of years later.

We're not quite there yet.

Right.

Coming back to the Budapest of the '30. Of course, this was before you were born. Anything else about your parents' life in that time? What sort of friends did they have?

I think it was centered on the family. I don't really know too much about it. I have a letter from my mother to my father when he was on the front, in Russia- in the Ukraine. But I...I don't think they had a particularly lively social life. They, they focused on the work and family.

And did they come from- I guess, how religious were their families?

My father's family was very religious. My father knew much but he, he didn't practice in Budapest. My mother's family was, again, sort of semi-assimilated. Not particularly religious.

What did they decide to do, what-

I had all the-

[coughs] Excuse me.

I was circumcised and - I, you know, I had my brit [00:10:00] and that was it. And, so but they didn't belong to a synagogue. And particularly my mother was quite ambivalent about religion after the war. I don't know if you want to hear about my first religious experience.

Go on.

Where she took me to a chapel to show me little Jesus because she was so mixed up and we lost so many people in the family and she just felt well, where was god? She still kept lighting candles occasionally after that and she, she moved in a Jewish environment. Her friends were Jewish, but basically, she was mixed up about it, unlike my father who, who wasn't and he ignored what happened and he got on with his life.

We'll come back to that. So, you were born in 1941. What are your first memories?

My first memory is when I was three and a half...and you know, it was a traumatic memory. The aeroplanes droning at night, coloured flares in the sky and my father holding me, wanting to go down to the cellar under our block of flats, my mother standing in the doorway

of our flat screaming, "I want to die." I remember that very clearly, and then my father dragged her down to the cellar. That's my first memory.

That's 1944.

1944. [00:12:00] I think probably January or maybe even at the end of 1943, siege of Budapest.

Tell us a little bit about, although you can't remember it, but you have some knowledge. What happened from '41 to '43 for your mother to be in that state?

Well... I mean he- she, she escaped deportation more than once. She was called down to join the other Jewish people in the street to be deported, so she stuffed some shirts in her, under her clothes, and she said she was pregnant and they let her, let her stay in the block. And I think she just became very depressed that without my father there, the war going on and all the Jewish persecution, the Jewish laws, because of numerus clausus [limited access to universities] she, she couldn't study interior design, which she wanted to do. And... I think, she- I'm fairly sure that she even tried to commit suicide during that period. And it really, that lasted till the liberation. And...

You said your father, what happened to your father?

My father was a bit on the Russian front in the Ukraine, helping the Hungarian Army as a forced labourer digging trenches and whatnot.

There were so many other Jewish men was taken as a forced labour in-

Jewish battalion in Berdychiv in the Ukraine.

In 1941? When was this?

Gabor: '42. '42. Despite all the Jewish laws, Jews felt relatively safe. [00:14:00] And...in fact, many Jewish people came to Hungary from other countries because they thought it was safer there. But then Hitler got fed up with the Hungarian lead, Horthy, and invaded on my

father's birthday, in March 1944 and deportation started straight away. And... you know, within four months, practically, the whole of the country's- the rural Jewish population was gone. Budapest was luckier, only half of the Jews were deported. The Nazis ran out of time.
Your father's family in- I can't pronounce the name.

Whoever was there, yes. Two of my uncles, two of my cousin's- children. The whole Jewish population of Berettyóújfalu was gone practically. The ones who had moved to Budapest, most of them were okay.

So, what happened? The printing business closed when your father went in '42 or did it continue?

It continued led by a faithful employee... and really until the siege of Budapest, or until the deportation started, it was okay, or even later perhaps.

You said you were taken care of by another member of the family.

Greta.

Greta. What was her name, please?

Manyi, M-A-N-Y-I, which is an abbreviation of Melvina. It's also very interesting because - you know- children in Hungary [00:16:00] call, use the formal address to adults, which is the equivalent of the French "vous", and that's what I did. But with her, Manyi and my, two of my parents, I used the informal address, which is the equivalent of "tu". That showed the closeness. I don't know how it started. But you know...

Did she live with you or-

She lived with two of her sisters near the Jewish district in Budapest.

But you lived with your mother after your father left for-

I lived with my mother. Which wasn't too far from her.

She was the person who raised-

She was the person who most of the time looked after me during the period that my father was at the front.

Do you think your mother's depression was caused by the whole situation?

Yes, yes. I think she had a tendency to, you know, be fairly - I don't know the word - melancholy. When her mother died, she - you know- was, went to pieces in 1930. So, I think that there was - a certain predisposition.

She couldn't cope with these [crosstalk]

That's right, that's right, that's right and then later on, even in this country, although she was happy here, she was depressed after she was 80. So...

That's something she had to deal with, but there's still your great- aunt was there.

I stayed there and I have very good memories, and I have some objects from her flat [00:18:00] which I-

This is also post-war or pre-war?

This was between '42 and '44 and post-war, yes. Until I was a teenager, practically, I stayed there, yes. I slept between the two great -aunts. It was a large double bed.

Your father managed to come back to Budapest. Tell us a little bit about this please.

Yes, he was on a train back to Budapest because he got a pass from, from his commander. He could go come back for a few days, but he was already aware that deportations had started. So- it wasn't a cattle wagon, he was travelling in an ordinary train, but with armed guards and in a bend when the train slowed down, he jumped off, and bribed a peasant with a gold pen, who took him to a village, and from that village, he slowly made his way back to Budapest, and then went into hiding with my mother and me.

Did he know about the difficulties your mother faced? I think was that do you think the motivation?

I don't know how much he knew because I think my mother sort of, tried to cheer him up whilst he was on the front. I don't know, I think he knew. I think he must have known. But my mother was able to send food parcels. As I say, that letter, which I've only found because I was looking for it, just before the interview, and it's fascinating. In 1943 it was written, and that's a letter from my mother to my father on the front. [00:20:00]

What did she say in it?

She sent a photo of me and how nice I looked and asked my father what he was- whether he had enough to eat and whether he could- she could send him warm socks, that sort of thing, and that the business was carrying on and he shouldn't worry about it.

But before your father came back, you had to move house. You couldn't stay where you were.

No.

Tell us, please.

From Potmanica street we had to move to a Yellow Star House in this new district, new Jewish district in Budapest because I think the Nazis wanted to concentrate the Jewish population in certain areas and yes, we had to wear the Yellow Star and we were in crammed accommodation, not that I remember it.

No, but you know.

I know about it.

Your mother, yourself and who else was there?

That's it.

I mean in this Yellow Star house.

I don't know who else.

So, when your father came back, he found you there.

Yes.

He managed to trace you, I guess.

I think so. I think relatives knew. Yes, yes. Again, I'm not sure how-

Did he talk about it later with you about that time?

To go to where?

Did he talk about this with you?

Very little.

Do you have knowledge?

Very little and, you know, why I didn't ask more questions I still don't know. I just didn't and I wished I had... but I knew the basics.

I wonder whether did he know he wanted to take you away [00:22:00] and go into hiding, you know?

He must have planned it. He grew a moustache, changed his name to- from, from Öhlmacher to Erdei which is a Hungarian name, and he said that he was a refugee from Transylvania coming back to Hungary because of the Russian advance. And... from Transylvania in Romania and he, he took a job as a deputy housekeeper in a block of flats. Again, in another

part of Budapest, Baross Street. And we were in a basement flat- with other people and again, I'm told I wasn't allowed to cry because everybody complained there. I don't remember it.

But...so you don't know whether by the time he arrived to get you he had the false papers. I mean, it involves some organisation to -get it.

Yes, I don't know. I don't know.

He managed to get some papers?

I think my mother may have started the process, may have. I don't know. I don't. A member of the family, his family, had a contact in a ministry and I'm told that she managed to get the false papers for us and I learned the name Erdei age two and a half and I'm told we were once in a restaurant and a Hungarian Nazi came in to check the papers and he asked me what my name was. I started saying the old name, Öhlmacher, which is Jewish [00:24:00] sounding and my father pinched my bottom and then I said Erdei and the Nazi let us off. It was a close escape. It could have been worse but that's the sort of atmosphere we lived under.

But you don't remember the fear? I mean- that...

I remember. I have the feeling of the fear. I remember as I was growing up, just the mention of war made me anxious and fearful. And yes...I think in a way it's still with me.

In which way?

I think, I think, wars are absurd, and in this day and age it's- it shouldn't be, but of course, I think perhaps it will always be because human nature is what it is and wherever you look now there is conflict. So, but it's... I had nightmares about the fear. You know, I had fantasies of having a group of wild animals protecting me and that's a nightmares-

When?

When I was eight, nine, headaches and I think the war was a defining factor in what- what I became.

When you were that age almost too young to understand and too old not to have any memories of the- I mean, that age it is- [00:26:00]

Yes, and strangely enough, I, it's only a few years ago that I started thinking of myself as a Holocaust survivor. I knew my parents were but I don't know why?

[coughs] Excuse me. You were saying you did not see yourself as a Holocaust survivor.

No, no. So, in a way I'm both a first generation and a second generation. I always saw my parents as the survivors, but I now realise I'm very much a survivor.

We'll come back to that as well at the end. So just to go back now to the time. Your father, how did he manage with the food situation, and I know in Budapest it was difficult? The Siege of Budapest.

Hungary is, is a country where there is a lot of food. It's- all the land is arable and even- it was possible to get food, not necessarily good food and certainly after the war things were rationed. But I don't think people had to starve. There was a black market but after the war, there was rationing and a year later, 1946, we had a very interesting experience. My mother entered- by then she was much better quite clearly, and she entered a competition... of, in a newspaper. [00:28:00] She had to provide a funny caption to a cartoon and she won the competition and the prize was a goose in 1946. We were still eating dried peas and egg powder and very little real food at that time, and I still remember her cooking that goose. And... that's a vivid picture, 1946. I was, you know, coming up to five and she, she fried the liver and she...she did the fat and poured it in a jar, and I can see that and smell it even now. So that, that was great but after that we went back to reality.

[coughs] Sorry.

Just after the war there was some American aid coming to Budapest, food aid, and my parents received small tins with a baby's face on it and none of us spoke English and it was held in our larder for about four or five years I think, and we all thought it was, you know, something very special. Finally, we opened one and it was some horrible baby food. So that's...

What happened to the other relatives in the time when you moved?

The...my father's siblings in Budapest survived. Went into hiding in the same way and they survived, except the husband of my [00:30:00] father's twin sister who died in a bombing raid. Well, the rest of the family in rural Hungary, many of them perished

And your great- aunt?

They, they survived, I'm not sure how. I think it was just luck. I think they stayed in the flat where they lived. They had some good neighbours who didn't give them away and they survived.

So, what are your- so you have that memory in the war, and then what are your memories, first memories of growing up in post-war Budapest?

Well, as I said, I still remember the sound of the sirens. And... I still shudder when I see an armed policeman or when I hear an ambulance. And you know, that, that, I find that disturbing. But after that, I went to a Jewish school around the corner and that was very nice. We sort of settled into domestic life. The business was still going. And... you know, I had some music lessons. I wasn't a particularly good pupil. In fact, I wasn't a good pupil at all. And so that lasted for a couple of years trying to master the violin in the- from the old flat in Potmanica? Street during this period. Because the business was going well. In 1947, we moved to Sziget Utca, [00:32:00] and to a nice flat. The previous owners emigrated to the Americas. And we had two large rooms and the bathroom and a balcony. And it was wonderful really because in the old flat there was only one room, no bathroom just the kitchen. And this was a big change. My mother put all her heart and soul into making this flat beautiful. And when I was taken there, so I was five and a half, I was very excited. We were reasonably happy there - although my father lost his business, it was nationalised. The printers were the first to be nationalised. He got a job- he was given a job, I think.

As?

As a printer. And- I mean he was very adaptable and didn't complain and just got on with it. And we managed to get a holiday on Lake Balaton, our only holiday after the war. We didn't have another one after that. And then the business was nationalised. The, the Jewish school was shut down because communism didn't really accept religious practice, although they were reasonably tolerant, not like Russia. And the communism in Hungary was better than in any other satellite countries. It wasn't a big thrill, but if you keep- if you watched what you were [00:34:00] saying, you were okay, okay. I mean there was a [inaudible] - a trial and he was executed, we knew about that. The mother of her little friend, her school friend wrote to her brother in Vienna, so she spent two or three years in prison. You had to watch what you were doing, but if you did, life was bearable. And... when I was about 10, everybody had to become a pioneer. So, you know, I got my pioneer uniform, little red tie, blue shirts, a leather belt with a buckle, on the buckle there was the word 'forward'. And... because, you know, I was good at reciting poems at school, I was drafted and to entertain the workers with another boy from our class who played the accordion. We went to factories and I recited suitable poems to urge them to work better. And... well, life was okay.

Your brother was born?

My brother was born in '49. That's right. Well, that was, that was not a good year really, because that's when the business was nationalised or shut down. And... I became, I think, fairly disturbed. I always remember that I was a [00:36:00] difficult child, but- you know, I think the war had some bearing on that. My parents just decided that I ought to be in a boarding school, not at home. My mother found it difficult to cope with me and my baby brother, so they sent me off to a private school in the hills in Budapest on the Buda side. I was very unhappy there, the education was very poor.

To live there?

To live there, I was boarded there.

How old were you?

Eight. Well, not even- '47- '49, sorry eight. I was eight, yes. That boarding school, fortunately, was shut down in 1950 in March, so then I went back to my old school, but that

was a- real blow to me. I think it changed me, being sent away. And I decided to be a good child and prayed every night to be a good pupil, and I became a good pupil. And it's only much- even when I was in my 20s, I still believed that it was the praying that did the trick. And there you are, yes, I think that was really the first impact of both the war and being sent away.

You stayed for three years in that school- in the boarding school?

No, it's more like [00:38:00] I went there in perhaps in October, in October '49 and came out in six months, only six months.

What? Still a long time for an eight-year-old.

Yes, yes. I mean, I did some silly things like, you know, going under the chair of an uncle when he came to see us, he was a big man. And I tried to- I went under the chair and tried to lift him. And coming home from school, I fell on the horse. I slipped and the horse stepped over me. My mother got- got this out of me very quickly. Apparently, I was told that was the final straw, why they had to send me away for my own good, as I was told.

After the six month you could-

I came back.

-and you stayed?

And then I stayed with them, yes. I played tennis, I had a little sledge, so I went up to the hills in the winter. By the time I was ten- because I was a good pupil, I had more confidence, I had some friends, that's when I renewed this friendship with Adam who eventually left with me in 1956. He was the other boy who left with me at the time.

In that time, in the late '40s, early '50s, was there awareness of- you know- the war? Did people talk about it or was it- you were all the children of a similar background, [00:40:00] you know, the Jewish children I would assume, but was it something talked about or was it-

Not much.

No.

And yet there were so many children who lost a parent, whose father wasn't there. But- you know, as children, it was just one of those things.

So, were you one of the few families who had the father actually among your friends?

Among Jewish children, I think probably half had lost their father. After I left, well- perhaps it's too early to say this, but I didn't see them for 50 years. I left in '56, we had a class reunion 49 years later in '55, and then three years ago I saw them again. So I kept in touch with those children all my life.

From the-

-from the sector- primary school in Sziget Street, the strong attachment really.

And they went- people probably went all over the world?

All over the world.

This is the Jewish school or that's the state school?

No! Mind you quite a few pup- children from the Jewish school went to the secondary school when, when the Jewish school was shut down- no, primary school, when the primary school was shut down, the Jewish primary school was shut down.

So when, then in the '50s, so it was actually okay, life for you, you managed?

Yes, yes, yes, [00:42:00] particularly after '53, the atmosphere changed after Stalin died. And well, I remember- you know, it's one of those memories that most people have when somebody like Stalin died. I was on a balcony with Adam, March 1953, so we were 11. And- radio announced funeral music, Stalin died, and we just couldn't believe it because- you

know- gods don't die, it's a- yes, and then the political situation was a little bit easier after that.

And your father in this time he-

Still worked, same place and was reasonably happy. He, he was a survivor, all his life despite having a private business, he was a trade union person. So, he kept that membership even though trade unions had no power. He joined the Communist Party. And... he was, you know, just got on with life. And, and a friend of my mother had a little orchard in the Buda Hills. So, every Sunday morning in the summer, we went up there. And my brother and I explored around there and we gorged ourselves on fruit. And my father played cards with another couple, my mother was doing her mending, and, yes, life was okay.

Do you find that your brother's experience is very different, [00:44:00] being born after the war, to your own?

No, no...no, he was okay. Yes, I think, his personality is, is probably more like my father's and he's not so much affected by, by what was around him. And... yes, he was fine until I left, but, but then - you know- he, he was distraught. I'm told he cried a lot when I left. Again, my mother had a serious depression after I left.

So, tell us about this decision, first of all, to leave. How did this happen?

Adam's family was upper-middle class, you know, doctors and whatnot. They thought he should go because anti-Semitism was beginning to show itself in Hungary. The communists kept a lid on that in Hungary, and they just didn't know what was going to happen. So- Adam asked me if I wanted to go with him. I liked the idea, you know, I always wanted to see other countries because I couldn't under communism. And... I said, "Yes." My father thought, "Yes, it's a good idea." My mother was neutral. And... when I left, the morning I left, we kissed each other, she was still in bed, and then she turned towards the wall. And, I think she was quite numb, and then it hit her later on.

How old [00:46:00] were you?

Just 15, 15 and 3 months. And then we had a very hard journey across the border. I walked for miles. Adams's mother arranged for a guide who eventually abandoned us, and we travelled in mining wagons. Adam and I carried an old lady at some point across the fields, and then guide eventually abandoned us about three o'clock in the morning. He said, "Go that way." So, we did and then we got lost. We saw three lights and we had to decide which way to go. We went one way, as we got nearer, I noticed the chain-link fence was a different design from what I knew in Hungary. It was a good sign and we entered the village and it was an Austrian village, and- people were very friendly.

Because you didn't know where you were?

We didn't know.

When you left had some of your friends already left or other people had left already?

Yes, yes, we left fairly late because-

When did people start leaving?

Well, during the uprising, the iron curtain was lifted, so the chain-link fences and the watchtowers were taken down.

Tell us about the uprising a bit. What was-

Well- October the 23rd there was a peaceful demonstration in Budapest. Thousands of people who wanted more freedom...foreign troops, i.e. Russian troops to leave the country, and the more democratic form of socialism. And the Hungarian [00:48:00] Army supported them and the government fell, the communist government and the Russians withdrew. That's October 23rd. On November the 4th, the Russians came back. And I watched the tanks from our balcony, long line of tanks, and of course within days, the country reverted back to communism. And that's when start- that's when people started leaving in earnest, in, on early November, November the 4th. And we left a month later, it was quite late, which is why it was more dangerous. The Russians along the border had instructions to shoot, but I, I remember that I had no fear. I just didn't experience any fear.

And when you left was there- did your parent think they would also go, or what was the thinking? Was it-

There was no thinking, they didn't know, and then gradually they thought, "Well, life without me was not really on," and they, they were making plans to come out, but my mother was in two minds. She was- wondered whether I should go back with all the consequences, of course, you know, of problems because I had been a dissident. But still, she thought, "Well, that was still a possibility." And this, this- she was torn between these two things [00:50:00] and I think that was partly why I shared- this serious depression. She had electric shock treatment. And I knew about this in Paris when I was there and -you know- even when I was in this youth hostel- and I didn't know if I would ever see them again. And I remember one day, I couldn't quite remember the colour of my mother's eyes, and I panicked. That was a very difficult period. I was learning French.

We hadn't got there yet. You just told us about the village. You were taken with your friend, Adam.

Adam.

What was his surname?

Biro. Like "biro" [English pronunciation].

So, the two of you with other people or was it- [crosstalk]

There were about eight other people in our group. And some younger, some older. There was an old lady who we carried like that, you know.

By truck or?

By truck. We had horse-drawn wagons to, to take us nearer the border. We travelled by train from Budapest to a little town near the border, and then the guy led us towards the border, walking during the night, walking and horse-drawn wagons and then again, walking. And...it

was a marshy area near a lake in Austria which was also across- came across the border. So, we occasionally had to step over little brooks and, yes.

Then you saw the light.

We saw the light and we were let to a reception centre. [00:52:00] We stayed there the night.

They were prepared for refugees?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Because the refugees had been coming for the past month.

What happened once you arrived there?

I think we had some food and we- we had a rest. I don't remember exactly what happened. I only remember they were very friendly and then- then we were put on a train to Vienna. Adam's aunt lived in Switzerland. So, she came over to Vienna to greet us. She had a hotel room, twin beds. Adam and I slept in one head to toe. She slept in the other bed and I had my first orange. It's quite an experience. And we were blown by the lights of Vienna, the cars. You know.

It was different from Budapest.

Very different. Yes, yes. We went to Schönbrunn, you know. But, it's, yes, there were moments of sadness as well. And I think we stayed in that hotel room, Hotel Austria off the Fleischmarkt in Vienna. We stayed there for about 10 days, two weeks.

And did you have contact with any agencies? Did you have to register as refugees?

Oh, yes, yes. We had to, I think, we had to go to the police station and Adam's aunt took us and I had my "*Ungarische Flüchtling* certificate, Hungarian refugee which entitled me to free travel on [00:54:00] the trams. And... yes. I've come across other people, you know, who were queuing up at the Joint office. Frank Jordan, one of my friends from the school, our neighbours from Budapest who were there, and yes. And of course, our plan in Budapest was that I go to Belgium where I had a cousin in Brussels who were quite comfortable. They had

no children, she and her husband. But they didn't want the responsibility of a child. They sent money to Vienna so that Adam's aunt had some of her expenses covered, but they didn't want to know any more than that. But my parents had managed to- I think I had it already- contact in Paris, a distant cousin of my father, Gregor Öhlmacher. I still have his business card. He was a poor tailor. He lived in a poor district of Paris, who actually came to the train when we arrived in, in Paris with Adam. Because we were, you know, we travelled from Vienna to Paris by train. Adam's relatives were at the station and he was at the station. And I stayed with him for about two or three days, perhaps four days. No bathroom, the toilet was on the landing, one room, but - you know- it was somewhere to stay. [00:56:00] And... would you like me to carry on with it?

Yes, please. How long after? How long did you stay in Vienna before coming to-

About two weeks., you know. And towards the end of that two weeks in the same hotel, there were two American ladies who didn't have any children. They offered to adopt Adam and myself, and said we would have a wonderful life in America. Well, we certainly didn't want to know, but, you know, it's interesting how and uprising like that. They came to Vienna to look for a child.

And you didn't, you weren't interested.

No, we didn't want to know.

But I wonder, because you were still under 16, you were sort of unaccompanied children.

Children, that's right.

But they let you travel to Paris and they-

Well, yes, yes. We were on- we were put on a train, a night train to Paris, yes, and we arrived in- went through Melk and Ulm and then Colmar and then Paris.

And there met by this tailor.

By this tailor.

What was his name?

Gregoire Öhlmacher. Gregory. Yes. And, and he was a bachelor. Very nice man.

But he couldn't take you in.

I mean, there was no question of me staying with him. You know.

They found a-

Well, then I contacted a neighbour of my- the daughter of a neighbour of hers, Mr. Cohen, who lived in Paris- with, with her family. And... I stayed with her for a few days, [00:58:00] perhaps a week or so. Then she found this Jewish youth hostel in Neully. A nice leafy suburb of Paris and the hostel was prepared to take me and Adam, who was also unhappy with his rich relatives. And we, we seized up on this and we both ended up in this hostel. And there were about 25, 30 young people aged 15 to 25. And we had our first experience of Jewish life with Friday night services. And we were dragged out of bed occasionally on a Saturday morning if they needed somebody for the Minyan, but it was interesting because in Hungary, neither of us experienced this, this kind of Jewish life. Not only that, the *directrice*, the woman in charge of this hostel, was Hungarian. Came from Brasov, now in, in Romania. She spoke Hungarian, Bözsi, and only about six months ago, I googled her and she did amazing things during the war. She was working in Lyon and helped people across the border to Spain.

Bözsi, who?

Bözsi Hirsch.

Hirsch.

And she ended up being in charge of this hostel and it, it was very good, very good, but I missed my parents terribly.

Were you in contact with them somehow?

Yes. There was postal service that, that was resumed and I have some postcards and letters.

That was the time your mother got these...treatments?

Yes. [01:00:00]

That was at the time they thought that 's how you deal with depression, the electric shock.

That's right, that's right.

Was she in a psychiatry, was she at- [crosstalk]

Yes. She was in a psychiatric unit in a hospital. While she was there, my father had sold all the furniture. So, burned his bridges and when she came out, they really had to move forward and my father managed to get papers. The flat was nice, in a nice area, so that went to a communist official and that, you know, helped for them to get a visa and passports and so on.

Did they emigrate officially?

They emigrated officially. I have the document. Yes. And they came in January '58.

To?

To Paris. Yes. And we had a very emotional- re- what's the word?

Reunion.

Reunion. Thank you. Gare de l'Est in Paris.

What happened? You picked them up?

I went to meet them and I saw the three figures, you know, coming off the platform. My parents in black coats, my brother in a- who was nine, in a grey coat with a little hat covering his ears. And then, you know, we just held each other. Yes.

Because in terms of time, it wasn't that long. How long was it between you left- and?

Well, December '56, January '58. 14 months.

It was more the insecurity in between that you didn't know- what was going to happen?

That's right. [01:02:00] Exactly, exactly. And, you know, I sort of tried to encourage them and told them to be strong. I think that was the time when really my childhood ended.

Once you left?

Yes, yes and once I was on my own. Instead of my parents taking care of me, I took care of them. Yes. Emotionally, if you like.

Also, we didn't discuss the language. How did you manage with French?

I didn't. I had one year of French at school. I remember writing to them after a month that I can now speak French. But- I went to the Alliance Francaise in Paris and, and learned. You learn fairly quickly when you're at that age and I think it took me about eight- six, eight months to be quite fluent. I was able to go to school in September '57. So that was, yes, eight months after I arrived.

And your parents then, where did they have to go, once they- you couldn't put them up. I mean, you were in the hostel.

Well, it's a- you do ask the right questions I must say because, I made a very good friend in the lycée and his parents moved out of their flat so that my parents could stay there. And they stayed there for three days before they actually left for London and of course, when I applied to go to the lycée, [01:04:00] Bözsi took me there and they tested me for French history, French literature, French language and they said, "Right. Well, we'll put you in a class with

11-year-olds." And I was mortified and I said, "No, no." I just felt I could never catch up and they called down the teacher in charge of 15-year-olds, Monsieur van Tigem [inaudible] ... And he talked to me and he said, "Well, I- my parents were refugees from Holland. I know what you are going through and I think with hard work, you can succeed. And I'll take you in my class." In class, he asked which pupils would be able to help me, three hands went up. One of them was Gérard, Gérard Vacas unintelligible, and he became a very close friend, and he came last year to my younger son's wedding and- a lifelong friend. His parents had moved out so that my parents could stay there.

What did he speak? Which language- French, you spoke to him or?

To Gérard?

Yes.

Oh, yes. Well, by that time when I- September '57, I could, yes, I could speak French. Not wonderfully, but gradually, I learned it to and...and then of course, yes, another change coming to England.

So why did your parents want to come to England?

Because they couldn't find anyone to give them a warranty in France. Whereas they had a- I had a cousin in Leigh-on-sea, [01:06:00] near Southend. The sister of the one in Brussels who then gave them a guarantee that they would never be at the charge of the British government. And that allowed them to come to Britain.

They were the guarantors.

Guarantors and my parents went to live with this cousin of mine, my mother's niece. For about six weeks they were there and then they rented a flat. My father found a job. My mother found a cleaning job and their life had taken off in this country. I joined them in June. Once I finished the lycée, I joined them here. And I had a lot of help, you know. There was the Jewish refugee agency, there, there, there was the British Council and I managed to get

the scholarship from Southend Council provided my baccalaureate results were good enough and they were because I got this place at Manchester University.

You went to the lycée here in London?

Yes, yes. And whilst I was there, I was learning English, but the lycée was French, the education was French.

So, you finished your French education in London.

That's right, that's right.

But at the same time learning English because- did you have any English when you came?

I had no English whatsoever. None whatsoever.

So, in the short time span, you changed twice?

Yes, yes, yes.

Did you speak some German at all?

A little. School German. Yes. Those were- I learned it at school and had a few words in Russian because, we had to learn Russian in Hungary, but-

Would your parents [01:08:00] have gone to Germany? Because I know quite a few Hungarians did go.

I don't think they ever considered it. They didn't have any relatives in Germany. Yes. I think they would have stayed in France if somebody had given them a warranty or guarantee.

Because you were already there.

I was already there and again, there was the decision, should I stay in France and continue my education or should I join them. And I, I wanted to join them. Many people told me, "Stay here, you know, you speak French." But- I, I really, I needed the family.

How did your mother then manage with this change?

Surprisingly well. You know she- well, the, the burden of anti-Semitism [01:08:50] in this country was gone. And she was a good linguist, learned English fairly quickly, unlike my father, and her niece was there and- Gradually, you know, they build their lives, they managed to get the mortgage from Southend council. When my father was 57, she was 55. They bought a little house with a little garden. And yes, it worked out well.

Were there any other- apart from their niece, were there any Hungarian refugees?

In Southend, there were, there were. Yes. There was a printer and who- actually, no, he lived in London but there was a Hungarian farm labourer, Mr. Simon, who had they- my parents wanted some Hungarians.

Yes, that's why I've asked you because-

They saw him until one day he said, "Well, my daughter is getting married in Hungary and I hope [01:10:00] her- her fiancé is not Jewish." [laughs] That was the end of that friendship and there was also a musician, Mr. Horvath, very nice man, so they were in touch with him. And their social life in England was far better than the social life in Budapest. There were Hungarians, there were non- Hungarians. You know.

So, they built up a community for them?

Yes, yes and they joined the synagogue.

Which synagogue was this?

It was Westcliff. It was, well, it's the Westcliff congregation at Finchley Road in Westcliff. And they were very good, you know. They, they didn't have to pay and they occasionally

went, not very often but they occasionally did. And the synagogue kept two places for them in the cemetery so they would be together. And it was, it worked out very well.

They didn't want to come to London?

No, no, my mother had a cousin in London and there was contact and there was contact with a lot of Hungarians in London. Because Southend, it's only an hour on the train and they came in. People came down to Southend to the seaside, they knew Peter Frankl, I think you interviewed him.

Yes, I did.

Because he was a neighbour.

In Budapest?

In Budapest, lived a street or two away with- because he didn't have a father, with mother and the Pauk family came down- because people came to the seaside.

To the seaside.

That's right.

For Refugee Voices we interviewed for refugee was Otto Deutsch, does that name ring a bell? [01:12:00]

Absolutely and I always remember that Mr. Deutsch who had a Jewish boarding house in Southend. Now, it may have been another Mr. Deutsch but it was near-

I don't think that was-

A small Jewish boarding- it probably wasn't the same but it was a Deutsch. I went there when I stayed with my parents and I don't think it - because Mr. Otto Deutsch was a- also a refugee, wasn't he?

Yes.

From '56.

No, no he was not Hungarian, this one-

He wasn't Hungarian?

No.

This one was.

So, it's a different one.

It's a different one.

He came on the Kindertransport.

All right, no I don't it was him. Well, I don't know. This man was definitely Hungarian.

Did you yourself live in Southend?

Only during school holidays.

And in London, where did you live?

Well, I was in digs- in various digs, to start with. I was with Mrs. Allan in Clapham North, a Jewish lady, the Jewish Refugee Agency found her. She- I was there with a year- for a year and she told me how wonderfully her husband spoke English. Well, I believed her but later on, when my English was better, I realised, it wasn't wonderful at all, [laughs] it was pure Cockney. And she did some funny things, my mother wrote to me on postcards, so she took the postcards to a Hungarian translator to know what, to know what my mother had written. But, but, you know, it was a home and she was, she was a good cook [01:14:00] and I had my own room.

Did you receive help for example, from the AJR, from other bodies?

Not AJR, AJR, didn't- well, it existed but I wasn't in touch with the. No, but it was a Jewish refugee agency in Tottenham Court Road, I don't think it's there anymore.

They gave you some stipend or?

Yes, very small amount, £10 per month or something like that but I had no financial worries and I didn't have to ask for money from my parents. So yes, there was also the British Council which was very helpful and they gave me a small amount of mon- £100, which was a lot of money, so that I could try and get into Cambridge, do the entrance exams, which I failed, so it didn't work out but-

You got to Manchester.

I got to Manchester.

How different was it to be a refugee Hungarian, Jewish refugee in England to France, you know- how at the time, do you see what I mean?

Well, in France, I was very much a Jewish refugee but not here. You know, it, it somehow it- I didn't advertise my Jewishness, I didn't go to shul. So, yes...in France, I mean, I lived a Jewish life in that hostel but not here.

Not here, it wasn't necessary.

No, no, and in fact, I left Mrs. Allan after a while because [01:16:00] I think I just got fed up with her nosiness despite everything. I ended up in a hostel Belsize Park, Belsize Square, not a Jewish hostel, it was just a hostel.

What number or where was it?

Oh...it was just on the other side of the synagogue... and there was another Hungarian boy, again from my class who, who was there.

Run by who?

Run by, I don't know.

Was it a private hostel like-

Oh, yes, yes.

Like a person would take a flat or two flats or a house and run?

A room, a room, it was for young people, so there were a number of rooms. A couple of non-Jewish Hungarians, there was this Jewish-Hungarian boy, Gabor Herman- ended up in New York. And... I shared a room with a Hungarian boy from the country, then with ...an Indian young man and it was fine.

But not owned by the Jewish Refugee Agency?

No not run by them.

Anyone could join.

Anyone, anyone.

Because I wonder whether in that area there were so many hostels for the refugees in the wartime, you know, but then later in the '50s-

I don't know the history of it but the man in charge of that was a certain Mr. George who was from Yugoslavia. One day, one evening I was very hungry, so I went down to the kitchen, I was friendly, you know, with the staff and they gave me a piece of bread. And Mr. George saw me when I left the kitchen and told me to leave. I remember his words, "This is not like the Rákosi regime." Rákosi was the communist leader of Hungary. So, I left. [01:18:00]

Everybody thought it was pretty harsh but perhaps, he had a thing about Hungarians, I don't know. But it was a blessing in disguise because the social worker who helped me to come from France to England, it was called the International Voluntary Service, a certain Margaret Herman. She said, "Come and live with me and my husband in Lewisham." And that was superb. I mean, they were just so nice, really nice and I'd pay this minimum amount for my upkeep. And the husband was a polymath, a doctor, a cultured man and he became, you know, my role model, really.

What were they called?

Herman.

Herman?

Fritz Herman and Margaret Herman. So, I stayed in touch with them until he died.

Was he a refugee from [crosstalk]?

Refugee from Vienna.

Vienna?

Yes, also came through France and he didn't look Jewish, so it took me, I think, three or four months before he told me and I was surprised.

And she was a social worker, you said?

She was a social worker who was in touch with the youth hostel in Paris who organised the documentation.

For- who did she work for?

International Voluntary Agency.

Interesting.

Then she worked in Greenwich Council as a social worker.

How long did you stay with them?

Let's just see, I was still in the lycée, a whole year.

Until you finished?

Until I finished the lycée and I went up to university, yes. [01:20:00] Perhaps it was two years? I lose track, but it was a very good experience and- sorry. Yes.

What other children were there, or did you meet at the lycée?

Well, you see- it's another good question because I wasn't too proud of being Jewish at that time and I didn't tell anybody, even though there were two or three Jewish children in the lycée, but they were all very nice. And, no problems and I was invited to their home, whatever. But they didn't know I was Jewish and then, I stayed at Hillel House after-- I was already at the University in Manchester, went down to London to stay in Hillel House. One of the boys from my class in the lycée was there. He said, "I didn't know you were Jewish."

Why do you think that is? Did you feel you had to blend in or is it?

I grew up with descendants, "do they know that we are Jewish?" And, you know...

Is the mixture, the survivor and communist, they're together?

That's right.

They mix it?

That's right, that's right.

Problematic being Jewish as this went on. Very private.

Private and it's-

Or dangerous even.

Yes, and the fact that my parents were not that religious although, you know, they, they, they'd lip service the things, you know, I had matzo at Pesach in my hot coffee. That sort of thing but- and I never denied that I was Jewish when, when I was asked. But I didn't advertise it. [01:22:00] So, I lost touch with the- children in the lycée, but I still keep in touch with Gérard from the Lycée Pasteur and of course, a few of the boys from Hungary, from Budapest.

And in the meantime, your brother went to school in Southend or-

In Southend.

-what happened to him?

Well, he was nine. Immediately, he was sent to the local school where one of the teacher's- one of the teacher's daughter eventually married my brother. Yes, just around the corner, he went to the school, he learned English and gradually, he fitted in and he's much more English than I am. And he's much more at home here. And we're keeping close contact, no children there.

Where does he live?

Westcliff.

So, he stayed in the area of let's say, Southend?

Yes, yes. And my cousin who gave us the warranty, she's still alive. She's 95 and she lives in the same house in Leigh-on-Sea.

When did she get there?

She went there after the war. She met her husband in Brussels who was a Hun- a British officer and they came to England. And she has an amazing story.

I'm saying, if she's interested, we're happy to go to Westcliff.

I mentioned it to her and she didn't want it. I think I even mentioned it twice, but I didn't want to push it anymore.

No. Only if somebody wants to.

That's right. Yes. [01:24:00]

So, in the holidays, you would go back to your- [crosstalk]

Yes. Very nice. I took my books, I went there, you know, for comfort and home really.

And you said you wanted to go to Cambridge. You didn't manage.

Yes. I had unrealistic expectations of myself. Yes.

So, what did you want to do with after school? Do you remember?

I always wanted to do architecture, but not because it was a considered decision. From the age of six, I heard my father saying, "Oh, architecture is a wonderful profession." And... I was just- I grew up with this notion and that was a good all-rounder which I think what you need for an architect, and I applied to Manchester. Not- I applied to various universities, but not all of them accepted me and Manchester did. And I went for an interview and I, I, I was accepted. Again, I think my Jewish life took off in a way because, there was a Jewish society which I joined and then there were Jewish girls I've come across and that's where I meant Beryl in my second year at university.

What was she studying?

She was studying social administration and a year younger than me, but because I lost two years, you know, I think I already met her in her last year...and- or second year. Yes. We met and she came to a party in our flat and... yes, I mean, her family was much more Jewish than mine. We married in a synagogue [01:26:00] and yes, I have a photo there. That's 54 years ago. My doctor just recently asked me about, "How long have you been married?" So, I said, "54 years or something." She must be mid-30s. She said, "Well, what's the secret?" Without hesitating I said, "Give and take."

That's good advice. And were there other Hungarian refugees in Manchester?

Yes, one or two. I came into contact with them but it didn't - sort of- develop. In my second- in my first year, I was in digs with a Jewish lady, Cheetham Hill and there - in my second year, I shared a flat with two other boys. And it, it was really a kind of social liberation, you know, being able to have people coming to our flat, have discussions- one or two parties. Beryl came to one of those parties. I have noticed her before from the University refectory. She was getting out of a car, a small car and- you know- and a week or so later, she came to our party invited by someone else. And that's how we met, yes. And...one of the boys I shared with was Peter Kuttner, who was adopted by a Czech emigre family. Yes. A family in Keighley, Yorkshire who adopted him and the other boy was, he was studying architecture. [01:28:00] And the other boy was- came from a mining family in Yorkshire. Northumberland, near Durham, and I'm still in touch with him. With the Jewish boy who lives in Australia, I practically have no contact with, but I know where he is.

You moved around a lot in terms of your own living just from France to England, and then different places.

Absolutely. I can't- this is probably why we stayed here for well over 40 years.

Did you enjoy the architecture, starting basically?

Yes. I mean, the first two years were much easier than my baccalaureate finals and then, I enjoyed it. Yes, it's a, a rewarding profession. The reward is only about 5% to 10% at the end, but, you know, it's worth having.

What did the families say about you as a son-in-law, as a refugee? Was it a problem?

Beryl's family?

Yes.

Well, just recently I asked Beryl, you know, but they thought, well, she was keen and they knew I was going to qualify. And, yes, they, they were quite happy apparently. Beryl's older sister married an Austrian-Jewish man whose, whose family came out of Vienna in 1939. And her younger sister married an Australian-Jewish.

Okay. Then what did you do after Manchester?

Beryl? [01:30:00]

Both of you, you or-

Well, I, we stayed there for three years.

Right.

I had a job after qualifying in an architect's office. Mario worked for the Manchester Social Services Department and then she worked for a diocesan social services unit ...and after three years, I wanted to be nearer my parents, nearer London, so we decided to move to London and I looked for a job, found a job, so we moved in 1970 when-

To?

Yes, to here, yes.

Pinner?

Pinner, to this house.

And why Pinner?

I got a job with Harrow Council.

All right.

And this is, this is part of the land of Borough of Harrow- and I wanted to work and live in the same borough. Yes, in a way, it's nice because it means- I'm more rooted or I was, but that's really why. Yes, I had one week to find a house, came down from Manchester, was in digs, just roamed and roamed and finally decided to go for this, which was far beyond our budget but we caught up, you know.

And what was your job to the- for Harrow council buildings?

Architect, yes, designing and-

Social-

-supervising. Oh, her job?

-no, your job.

My job-

Social housing or?

Social housing, schools particularly, I specialised in school but there was social housing. There were heritage buildings, a good spread. And in a private office, architects usually specialise in ironmongery [01:32:00] or drainage. They don't have a complete control of a

job, [crosstalk] designing it and carrying it through to completion. In local authority, you could do that and that's why it was a satisfying job.

Did you stay in this field-

Yes.

-throughout your career?

Yes, yes, I-

For Harrow or for-

Harrow. All my work- no, since we came to London I was with Harrow. It's got advantages, disadvantages but it was a 10-minute journey by car, I didn't have to commute. I made some good friends with whom I still keep in touch. One of my best friends is an Indian Architect who lives around the corner and we have a lot of contact. So ...

Is there any particular project which stands out for you in your career?

Well, there were a few new schools, Whitchurch School in Stanmore, Roxeth Primary School in South Harrow, what else? A couple of new schools, Newton Farm, Earlsmead and lots of other things, and the final job was a hostel or a day centre for people who have a disability, a mental disability. A mental health day centre-

Right.

-it was called. That's in Harrow Weald, Harrow Wealdstone. I used to go back to my babies, [chuckles] not so much these days, you know. It's because I retired fairly early. It was just after the Thatcher years, they wanted to privatise [01:34:00] Local Authority Architect Departments.

Right.

And there was a prospect of me not ending up with a pension, you know, just practically thrown out at the mercy of a private [unintelligible] firm. So I asked to be released. By releasing me and not having to pay my salary, the architects' section in Harrow got the contract.

Right.

Yes, I've been in retirement for a long time, but yes.

And did you see yourself- I mean, you started here as a British architect. Or do you see- do you- in your work, did you find you had some ...continental influences, or- do you see what I mean?

No, no. I saw myself as a British architect, yes, with the training, the environment. Not that I particularly felt British.

Oh, yes-

But the work was neutral if you like.

You raised your children here in Pinner?

Yes.

What sort of identity did you want to give to your children?

We wanted them to have the choice of remaining Jewish or anything else, so we joined the local Pinner synagogue and they were bar mitzvah. My older son is- he always had an incredibly strong Jewish identity. We had to light candles in a tent when we were camping in France and he was five years old, so he belongs to a synagogue in Finchley. My younger son- he feels Jewish but he didn't marry a Jewish girl, but [01:36:00] they, they had the choice.

And you, in terms of your identity, how would you describe yourself today?

I'm a hybrid. I'm a mixture really, and it can be good if you- if I see it in a positive light. You know, at other times it isn't [chuckles] because, I'm Hungarian, I've got a lot of French in me, English and Jewish. And I'm a bit of all those things. In terms of language, it's- I'm very attached to Hungarian. I read Hungarian poetry- I listen to Hungarian poetry. And... it's, it's a void in my life that I can't share it, share it with other people, I tried and not everybody is interested. And so, it's, it's something I take pleasure in. My brother speaks poor Hungarian.

All right.

And we communicate in English and I found a Hungarian Poetry Circle and I did realise that they meet in St. Stevens house in Ealing and there were some interior pictures of where they meet and there would be crosses on the wall and I just thought, "Well, I'm not going to be comfortable there." Because, even when I went to the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Coventry- in Covent Garden, I came across an older man, very pleasant. Then he told me he was a member of the Gendarmerie [01:38:00] during the war in Hungary and they had the worst reputation for cruelty and persecution. So, ... I'm aware of all this and, you know, and I keep Hungarian here.

It's difficult, but you said you have void, what do you mean by that? The void?

A lack, you know, a kind of a longing which, which is not satisfied.

Have you been back to Hungary?

Yes, yes. Now, 10 years ago but before, I went back every five or six years perhaps. First time, it was 1970 when there was already an amnesty and my dear great- aunt was advanced in age and I wanted to see her once again and-

Because she stayed in-

-she stayed in Budapest, yes and a year or two later she died. So, you know, to go back, we sold our first car and we went back.

What was it like for you?

To go back? Well, it's, it was quite a sad experience really because, shops were empty and people were fed up and we had a agent provocateur in the hotel who wanted to sell us dollars and we, you know, more or less knew that, and if we had agreed, there would have been consequences. So, it- but we saw family. And...it was good to go back to the block of flats where we lived [01:40:00] and see all the people I hadn't seen for 14 years. And ... Budapest is a beautiful city. Yes, it's, it's lovely too. It was good to see it again.

You said there's is a longing, what is it? What do you miss? Or?

Difficult to say because I don't think I could live in Hungary.

No.

It's difficult to say.

Do you follow the news about Hungary a bit?

It's on and off, yes, yes and again, these days it's depressing.

Do you think your life would have been very different if you, if you stayed in Hungary?

Yes, very different, narrower. So that's- there are gains and losses. And I have a feeling that the gains outnumber the losses but the losses I still feel.

And what- is it the loss of language?

Loss of language, loss of homeland, you know. It's - there's a very beautiful poem by Miklos Radnoti. I think you've heard of him.

Yes.

Which, which is, you know- describes what it means, what Hungary meant to him. He knows the names of flowers, he names the names of bushes. It's the soil which nou- nourished him, he hopes to be buried there. It's a beautiful poem. [01:42:00] I think Judi Dench recited it in English but I don't have the translation. And I read that quite a few times. And there's a Hungarian actor who recites it beautifully. Now, this Miklos Radnoti was murdered in 1944 at the age of 43 or 42. And the street, Sziget utca became Miklos Radnoti utca.

Radnoti.

Radnoti.

How do you spell it?

R-A-D-N-O-T-I, Radnoti. And his wife only died, I think two years ago.

The poem resonates.

Oh, absolutely, absolutely because it hints to the terrible conditions that, that prevailed. He wrote it, I think, just before he was deported or whilst he was already deported. And you know, it's, what the pilot sees from above, factories and railways, to bomb, but he sees the, the children at the station, the dog in the factory courtyard, that sort of thing, you know. He sees- the stone that he stepped on when he wanted to avoid going to school because he didn't know that particular lesson. And you know- that is the stone, but the pilot above who is bombing wouldn't see that, and the symbolism, the metaphors and... I went recently to North London, New Synagogue with Rabbi Wittenberg.

New North London.

New North London, my son belongs there. And we went to his home [01:44:00] because he had an evening which, which was- the theme was Hungarian- the Jews of Hungary. And a man, another Hungarian, I sort of mentioned to him, you know, that I, I'd love to have more contact, more, more experience of Hungarian literature, poetry. Could we think of founding something, a Jewish-Hungarian literature circle and sort of showcase that a bit? I can't remember but I mentioned this poem to him and he didn't know it. And I thought, well,

there's no point. But the interesting thing at this Jewish- at the meeting, a lady joined us next to me, in her 60s perhaps and we started talking. She turned out to be the four-year-old daughter of a neighbour of ours in Sziget utca who lived on the floor above, Lanik Klari.

I tell, you, I think it's interesting for there might be- because we have interviewed now so many people, I think you could do something from the AJR to have a little Hungarian group. It might be interesting - not for the interview but something to [crosstalk].

Perhaps put in some- put in- right, right.

Think about it.

Yes, yes.

It occurred to me before- but yes. How do you think that your experiences affected your later life? This means both your war experiences and your refugee experiences.

Yes, well, I would call [01:46:00] them, you know, two traumas really and I think it, it affected my personality. I- I think I was more outgoing as a 15-year-old, more confident, and I think I became more reserved, more self-contained, and a few issues that I think come from that, you know. Difficulties at times of making new contacts, but yes, I'm sure that I would have been a different person had I stayed. Not necessarily better, but just different. And I think even the- if I had stayed, the war would have affected me or continued to affect me there.

And do you find the changes towards, I mean, at different stages like - you know- when you stopped working or one becomes older, do you find the past coming back more, or?

Yes, I think more about it. I do think more about it. And, you know, I think twice now. I, at times I felt I needed some therapy and I did get it and it was very useful.

Yes, because it is this age, it's interesting what you said before that one doesn't, you didn't consider yourself a survivor.

That's right. You know, I just wanted- I think you know, again, a [unintelligible] and I just realised that well, I don't really know what the war- what impact the war had on me, so I did contact her and [01:48:00] she was helpful.

I think you can, it's not individual. It's for I think, you know, I think it's not surprising that suddenly we have interviewed a lot of Hungarian child survivors because at this point, people do feel that the story is important but also, you know, that there are survivors.

Yes.

Maybe 20 years ago, you know, maybe you wouldn't have liked to be interviewed, or thought it was not important or, I don't know.

Yes, yes, probably both. Every story is important and I'm sure there are stories that are more traumatic than mine but you know, it's, it's still a survivor story. And not that many, well, it's a double survival, if you like, the war and the uprising.

Have you ever been asked to go into a school and do something educational?

I've never been asked, no.

No?

No, but then you see the important thing is the Holocaust when you go to schools, and I don't have that many direct experiences of the Holocaust.

And what about your parents towards the end of their lives. They lived quite for a long time in England.

My father died at 100, my mother was 87. And...

Did they adapt?

Yes.

They were happy to be in England?

Absolutely, absolutely. My mother always said she was happier here than in Eng- in Hungary. My father, because her- his English wasn't that marvellous at times I think he wasn't so happy, but his personality was such that he was really that he... [01:50:00] he- you know- he was happy with the family, and he made the best of, of whatever he was surrounded with. They were happy. And- I felt responsible rightly or wrongly. Probably wrongly, I felt responsible for them. And it was a great relief that they found their feet and were, were happy in England.

They had their circles?

That's right. That's right.

And managed?

Oh, yes. Oh yes. And you know, they managed to pay for the house I think after 25- my father was 82 when he finished paying for it.

What do you think for you is the most important part of your - let's say- Hungarian Jewish heritage backgrounds?

Well, it's, it's- when I'm in a positive mood, I think, "Well, that's good, and I've got all this." And - but at times as I said, I don't- I don't think I have enough of any of them.

Yes. Not rooted enough?

That's right.

Where do you think is your home? Where do you feel at home? Sorry.

Oh, 75 Central Avenue. No- I feel at home here. But- you see- as soon- when I meet British people on holiday, I'm not one of them. And, and they, you know, straight away, "Where do you come from?" So... that's okay, but this is my home. Pinner and, and England.

Yes. [01:52:00] I do love England. It's a beautiful country. Until recently it was a very good country to live in, just at the moment...

We have to say that we're doing this interview on election day, that you've already voted. I have voted, but well, not sure what we could look forward to, or not look forward to, but anyway. You're worried about Brexit?

Not that worried. I think we'll have a hard few years, a few hard three years. I think this country will, will, will do well eventually. There is a lot of enterprise here, and a lot of talent. If we have Brexit, I think eventually we'll be fine, but it will be hard to begin with, and I would have preferred to remain.

Aren't you worried about anti-Semitism today?

Yes. I hope Corbyn doesn't get in. And, yes, it's worrying. When times are harder, that sort of feeling emerges in people and they start looking around who to blame and... Yes, I never thought that I would feel like that in this country,

And based on your own experience, you were an unaccompanied refugee. What do you think England or other countries should do for child refugees or?

Well, I think we should have taken more child refugees, say from Syria. Yes, yes, I don't think we did enough. You see in other way people [01:54:00] sort of suffer, and I can empathise with them. Yes.

Based on your experience, do you think there is a lesson to be learned, as based on your own refugee experience?

Well... yes, yes. I think every country should pull its weight, not just the ones who are in the firing line. No reason why Canada couldn't have taken Syrian refugees. Or Russia. Even if those refugees didn't want to go there, that they could have gone there. And, and it's a repeat of the, you know, experience Jews had during the war. Nobody wanted to know. Well, they did, but in very limited numbers. I, I can't really predict how things will go. I'm less confident in human nature these days. But in everything's there for things to work better but,

you know, the international bodies and the structure, but difficult to know.

And another thing I wanted to ask you, did you talk about your past at all with your children, or grandchildren?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. My granddaughter wanted chapter and verse. My sons, as I say, asked me repeatedly to put things on paper.

Like you have.

I have. Yes.

And what was it like for you to collate your memories and photos? [01:56:00]

It was good because I'd, I'd realised how much I did remember not during, not from the war, but after. The little things you know. There are so many little things, and they're all really valuable. I just felt that unless I put it down, it will be lost really forever. I think they'll appreciate this as they got older, perhaps more than they appreciate it now. I had a health issue when, when I started. I thought, "Well, I don't know how this is going to work out. I better get on with it." Yes, I'm glad I did it.

Since you put it, you found the photos?

Yes, and Beryl helped me on the computer with scanning, and so on. And my Indian friend encourage me to do something more glossy than I intended. He is an architect, and I ended up with something a bit more glossy than I wanted, but it's all right.

Now we've done the interviews. Hopefully that will also be there in the archive, and for your children to see as well.

Right, right. I wanted to- sorry.

Is there anything else we haven't discussed, which you think should be mentioned here? I have to ask you. Any person you want to talk about any other topics?

I think - [01:58:00] I talked about practically everything. Yes, perhaps one or two things I didn't think I would talk about. But, you know, but...

I mean, one of the things we haven't discussed is this whole issue, because you were so little. I didn't ask you about Hungarian Jewish leadership, and you know, whether what they knew, and not know, and then there's this whole issue, but I don't think...

Well, I've read the books and I don't know what happened. I think if, if all of that is true, it's, it's catastrophic, you know. I don't think it was done deliberately. I don't think that was madness or nastiness, just- enormous error of judgment. Because many Hungarian Jews could have left at the time when it was still possible to leave - Palestine, or whatever. But...yes, it's a sad story.

Yes, it is a sad story because it was also done in such a quick way. It's done in a short time span.

Yes. Which is perhaps another reason they didn't act more quickly. They didn't think it would happen so quickly. But so many people in our family, you know, it's... My cousins, a cousin lost his wife and his only child., you know, that sort of... My father's sister, brother.

Where?

In, in, in the rural [02:00:00] areas near Berettyoujfalu.

In the camp or "be killed."

Killed, deported from, from a local camp and because there were some eyewitnesses, you know, my aunt apparently went mad in the wagon- in the cattle wagon. And people who came back, you know, sort of... very soon though nobody talked about it, very little.

What about people being shot into the Danube was that something you ever [crosstalk]?

Well, my Adam's uncle was shot into the Danube and his father- the uncle's father, yes.

Was that- was- did you know that when you grew up that that was--?

I did, I did because it, it, it was a terrible tragedy and I met the mother, Adam's grandmother, who just completely went to pieces and you know, and again the loss is- they went out to get some bread just before the liberation and Hungarian Nazis got hold of them and shot them in the Danube. I mean that's the ambivalence about Hungary, you know, that Hungarian Nazis were sometimes worse than the Germans.

What happened to Adam, to your friend?

Well, he left the B'nai after about five months. His father, a well-known doctor, had connections in Switzerland. And he had Freemason connections so he was, he went to Geneva, studied there, married a German Protestant girl, [02:02:00] who is a lovely woman and he became an editor of art books, quite well known and he is now retired and we, we see each other from time to time and he has two, two children, two daughters and two grandchildren.

What was his surname again, you said?

Biro, if you think of biro.

Biro, Adam Biro.

Adam Biro, yes and his uncle was an art historian and a painter and lost - murdered at the age of 38. I mean-

What was his name, the uncle?

Jozef Biro and he's got one of his paintings, Adam donated to the Hungarian National Gallery on condition that it's displayed. So, I think it's still there.

Is there anything else? I think we have discussed many topics, anything else?

Well, I mean, just one small footnote about Adam's family, it had a great impression on me, you know. The culture, the books- they, they had a telephone and that sort of thing. And...and also, they- what we inherited in terms of furniture when, in- when we bought the flat in Sziget utca. There was a big bookcase from the previous owner full of books- poetry, history and again, you know. That, that made me sort of if you like ambitious in terms of studies and - [02:04:00] just opened my mind to so many things. No, I think, you know, I think one could go on with details but I think I told you most things.

I think if you want to, we could ask you to read this poem in Hungarian, would you like to?

Yes.

Okay, let's--

Now?

It's just one last message then we can have a little break and then let's do it. My last question to you is whether you have a message for anyone who might watch this interview in the future?

I think I always feel that respecting other people is, is the most important thing whoever they are. Just respect them, respect what they say before you judge them and if you judge them. And... well, if people could work for two things that I feel strongly about, wars and climate change at the moment, if they could bear that in mind.

Gabor, thank you very much for this interview and for sharing your history with us.

It's a pleasure.

That is...Tell us who this is, please.

It's okay have you found it? I hope it's filming, I'll tell you in one second.

[02:06:00] If you read it in Hungarian first and then tell us what maybe each, I don't know however you want it to do.

Well, I'll read it first and then I'll translate it line by line.

Okay.

Gabor: The title is Nem Tudhatom which is, I couldn't know. Nem tudhatom, hogy másnak e tájék mit jelent, nekem szülőhazám itt e lángoktól ölelt kis ország, messzeringó gyerekkorom világa. Belőle nőttem én, mint fatörzsből gyöngye ága s remélem, testem is majd e földbe süpped el. Itthon vagyok. S ha néha lábamhoz térdepel egy-egy bokor, nevét is, virágát is tudom, tudom, hogy merre mennek, kik mennek az uton, s tudom, hogy mit jelenthet egy nyári alkonyon a házfalokról csorgó, vöröslő fájdalom. Ki gépen száll fölébe, annak térkép e táj, s nem tudja, hol lakott itt Vörösmarty Mihály, annak mit rejt e térkép? gyárat s vad laktanyát, de nekem szöcskét, ökröt, tornyot, szelíd tanyát, az gyárat lát a látcsőn és szántóföldeket, míg én a dolgozót is, ki dolgaért remeg, erdőt, fütyös gyümölcsöst, szállót és sírokat, a sírok közt anyókát, ki halkán sírogat, s mi fönről pusztítandó vasút, vagy gyárüzem, az bakterház s a bakter előtte áll s üzen, **[02:08:00]** piros zászló kezében, körötte sok gyerek, s a gyárak udvarában komondor hempereg; és ott a park, a régi szerelmek lábnyoma, a csókok íze számban hol méz, hol áfonya, s az iskolába menvén, a járda peremén, hogy ne feleljek aznap, egy köre léptem én, ím itt e kő, de fönről e kő se látható, nincs műszer, mellyel mindez jól megmutatható. Hisz bűnösök vagyunk mi, akár a többi nép, s tudjuk miben vétkeztünk, mikor, hol és mikép, de élnek dolgozók itt, költők is büntelen, és csecsszopók, akikben megnő az értelem, világít bennük, őrzik, sötét pincékbe bújva, míg jelt nem ír hazánkra újból a béke ujja, s fojtott szavunkra majdan friss szóval ők felelnek. Nagy szárnyadat borítsd ránk virrasztó éji felleg. 1944 January 17th. It's a little long.

It's lovely, you don't have to tell us line by line just tell us a little bit what it says.

Yes, I wouldn't know what this landscape means to others. This is my homeland, this little country surrounded by flames. My distant childhood, the world of my distant childhood. I grew out of here like **[02:10:00]** the, the small branch from a, from a tree, and hope that eventually, my body will sink into it. I'm here, I'm home. I know the words for this flower, or that bush. I also know what it can mean when I see a summer evening, the red, the red colour

of pain. If you are in an aeroplane high above, and you don't see the details there. It's, it's just a map for the pilot. The factories, railways, that, that can be bombed, and he doesn't see the people, the children, the dogs, et cetera, et cetera. And... that is the park, place of lost loves, or old loves. It is the stone on which I stepped in order not to be called up at school. After all, we are guilty just like the other people. And we know how we... where we failed, why we were guilty, what we did, when and how. But there are workers here, [02:12:00] poets who have no guilt, and babies who will grow up, and, and...and whose mind will grow, and babies, yes, and that, that their mind will, will have light. And they, they guard this in, in, in cellars at the moment. But then when the peace, the, the... finger of peace will, will give a sign to our country, they will respond with fresh birds, and they and so on. Yes. And the last line, very difficult to translate. Nagy szárnyadat borítsd ránk. Cover us with your large wing, watchful night cloud. There's a hope, hope that things are bad now, but, yes.

Written in 1940.

1944.

'44?

Yes. I think he died in June 1944.

This is before the deportation?

Yes. Just before. Yes. He might have known because he was, he was in forced labour, [02:14:00] may have been in a forced labour camp.

Okay. I should do some research. Thank you very, very much for sharing this with us. And thank you again for the interview.

Not at all. Thank you. [silence]

Right. This is the Berettyoujfalu volunteer fire brigade. In the middle row, first left, is my grandfather.

When was it taken? Approximately?

At the beginning of the 20th century. This is the Öhlmacher family in 1911. Middle row, second and third from left, are my paternal grandparents. Sitting in front, my father and his twin sister aged eight. **[pause 02:16:00]**

This is the Berger family in about 1909. In the middle, my maternal grandfather, and next to him on the left is my great -grandfather, and to his right, my mother aged about eight. Right. This is my maternal grandparents, Berger grandparents, towards the end of the 19th century.

Where?

I think it was Budapest. My parents, Jozsef Öhlmacher, and my mother, Irene Öhlmacher, née Berger in Budapest around 1933. My mother and me in Budapest, 1942. It's me, age two, in Budapest. And it's the photo my mother sent to my father on the Russian front, where was doing forced labour. On the reverse of the photograph, my mother writes, "To my dear father, with much love from his two-year-old little son, Gabi- Gabika, Budapest **[02:18:00]** 1943, September the 7th." My father's printing business in Budapest, around 1939. And he's in the white coat. My father in the forced labour uniform, on the Russian front in Ukraine, around 1942. A school photo for my parents in 1948. On the balcony of our flat, in Sziget street, number 25, in 1949.

Who is in the picture?

It's me aged eight. My father's family, my parents, and myself in the Szechenyi baths, in Budapest, in about 1947. I'm next to my mother on the right. End of school photo, in the Sziget Street primary school, 1948. I'm in the... row below the top row, second from the right.

This, please.

My maternal great -aunt and my beloved Manyi on the left, around 1950.

This, please.

Me and my brother, Bandi, in our flat in Budapest, in 1951. End of school photo in the Sziget Street Primary School, my last year there, in 1955, Budapest. I'm second from the right, in the middle row. December 1956, Adam and me, days after arriving in Paris. Spring 1957, Adam and me in the Jewish hostel, in Neuilly, Paris. June 1965, our wedding, front row from left, Beryl's father, my mother and me, Beryl, Beryl's mother, Beryl's sister, Rose and then my father. July 1997, Martin and Sara's wedding. From left, Beryl [02:22:00], me, Sara, Martin, my father, Phil, and Bandi. My temporary residence permit in Paris, February 1957.

Temporary residence permit for me, issued in Vienna, December 1956. My refugee certificate in Paris, issued in February 1957. Brochure of the Jewish youth hostel in Neuilly, Paris, given to me by the directrice of the hostel, for Rosh Hashanah, in 1957. Business card of my father's distant cousin, who met me at the railway station when I arrived from Vienna, December 1956. One of the many postcards I sent from Paris to my parents. This one is dated December 1957.

Thank you very much.

Thank you. [02:24:00]