

IMPORTANT

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Surname:	Vrbova
Forename:	Gerta
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	28 November 1926
Interviewee POB:	Trnava, Czechoslovakia

Date of Interview:	17 April 2018
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Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
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REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV220
NAME: Gerta Vrbova
DATE: 17th April 2018
LOCATION: London, UK
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[Part One]

[0:00:00]

Today is the 17th of April 2018. We are conducting an interview with Professor Gerta Vrbova and we are in London.

Can you please tell me your name?

Gerta Vrbova.

And your maiden name?

Sidon.

And when were you born please?

When or where?

Both.

I was born in Trnava on the 28th November 1926.

Thank you. Thank you Gerta so much for agreeing to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices Project. Can you tell us a little bit about your family background?

Well, I come from a middle-class Jewish family where- they sort of- they were not very religious but we did have a kosher household. And my grandma was very keen that that should be kept. And my father- they had a kosher butcher shop, but that didn't do very well and so my mother had a special little workshop that made Venetian blinds. And she was the real entrep- entrepreneur in the family and she did very well. Unfortunately, she had to be away a lot because of her business, so I was brought up by my grandmother, really. She was looking after me and she spoiled me a lot.

What was her name?

Jeanette.

And surname?

Sidon.

Sidon. And tell us a little bit about her.

[0:02:00]

Well, she was widowed, because her husband died of a so-called 'successful' prostate operation. And she was about fifty when she was widowed. And she had seven children. My aunts and uncles. And she was a very literate person. She read a lot and she was reading- She- she- I spoke German to her because she came from Vienna and was speaking mainly German and she was a tremendous storyteller. So, she was telling me- translating sort of novels of Goethe and Schiller into my age-group. And I remember every afternoon she used to go to bed to have a nap and then in the middle of the story she fell asleep. [laughing] And that was a disaster. But she was a really very sort of educated lady who taught me a lot about German literature. And so- and she had a very good sense of humour. And she ran a

household that was sort of kosher. And- well- and she spoiled me no end. So, I have very fond memories of her.

[0:03:36]

And was she your father's mother, or-?

She was my father's mother. My mother's mother was completely different. That other grandmother was very strict. And I only got a cake when I was behaving well. Whereas my father's mother, she was making all sorts of food for me that I liked. So, they were very different people.

And you said she was born in Vienna?

She was born and she was educated in Vienna. And she married when she was seventeen. I think her first baby she had she was eighteen. So, she was quite young when she became widowed. But she was always dressing in a sort of black dress that made her look much older than she was. And it was so strange, because today, if you are about fifty you are not an old woman. But at that time, she- once her husband died, she was dressing like an old woman and- but she was- in spirit, she was very young.

And so when did she move to Trnava?

When she was eighteen. When she-

Oh, she moved to-

Yes.

To marry.

When she married my grandfather and I never knew my grandfather.

And what was his business?

[Sound break]

[0:05:03]

Yes, I was asking about your grandfather, what his business was.

What he did?

Yeah.

Well, he ran the butcher's shop.

Right.

But as I said, I never met him so I don't know much about him.

And your father took it on?

Well, there was that my uncle also was- the shop was called Daniel Sidon & Sons and so there were two owners. My father and my uncle, who was the brother of my grandfather. And they were running it.

And what...?

Not very successfully.

Aha. And what other family members lived in Trnava?

Well, my mother had two sisters that were married in Trnava. And they used to meet almost every week - every weekend. And the two sisters had children and they were my cousins, and so it was quite a big family. And very closely-knit.

And can you tell us how did your parents meet? How- where did they meet?

[0:06:24]

They met- my mother was visiting her sister, because my mother was the youngest child of a family where there were thirteen children. And her sister was the oldest one, so she more or less grew up in Trnava in her sister's house. And she used to go shopping and she met my father when she went shopping - in the shop. And they fell in love and they married.

And did you have any brothers and sisters or...?

I had one sister who was older and she died when I was two. She had a- she had pneumonia and at that time they couldn't treat it. So, she- she died. And so, because I was a younger child and I was sort of being spoiled by the whole family- because my mother couldn't have any more children because I was born by Caesarean and then- so I was an only child. Worse than an only child.

And what are your first memories of growing up in- in Trnava?

What were the first memories? Oh, I was very happy. I really thought I had a wonderful time and I had so many people looking after me. There was a big family and there was my grandmother in the house and there were my parents. And I was a very happy child.

And what about friends? What sort of friends did you have?

Well, I had a lot of friends. I had- but that was once I went to school. I had the daughter of the person that worked for my father, and she was a Slovak girl called Maruška. And she was my best friend. And we used to go cycling together. And we did a lot of different activities together and I was very attached to her. And then I had- I had very many friends and it was a very friendly environment. And there was no distinction whether they were Jewish or not Jewish. We all just had a great time. So, I had a very happy childhood. Until '39.

So, when did things change?

[0:09:01]

Well, when Slovakia became a fascist country in- after the Munich Agreement. And they had a fascist government. And that's when things changed, because that's when my friends didn't want to - my Slovak friends - didn't want to have anything to do with me and rejected all the things that were binding us together. They wouldn't really come to see me anymore and they didn't want to have anything to do with me. And then we were excluded from school, because Jewish children were not allowed to go to school. And we had to hand in all our possessions, all our sort of valuables to the government. And I remember I had a- a coat with fur trimming and I had to take this trimming off and I remember that was very painful. Was very bad for me, because I was very proud of that coat and it was really mutilated after that.

You had to put the fur in, not the coat? You could keep the coat?

I could keep the coat, but I had to take the trimmings off. And this is when I- it really became very difficult for us, because Jewish people could not practise any profession. And they were taken- and all their valuables were taken away. So, life became very difficult because they had no income. And, so really the Slovak government which was fascist government at that time didn't really know what to do with these people. And the solution, as you know probably, that they found was that they persuaded the Germans to take all the Jews away and they paid 500 DMarks for each Jew that has been taken away. But that was not till '42. So, between '39 and '42 they stripped the Jewish people of all their possessions, all their valuables and all their friends.

Yeah. Just before we talk about that time, you have a lovely story in your book about-

Maruška?

About Maruška but also about the poem you were chosen to do. I think it's-

Well, yes.

A poignant story.

Yes, well I was very enthusiastic about belonging to the Slovak- to be a Slovak. To be Czechoslovakian and to be a Slovak. And I was chosen- and I wrote a lot of poetry and I had a very good teacher in primary school - this was in primary school - who appreciated my literary efforts. And, every year at the end of the school year there was a sort of a poetry reading, where the people that sort of she thought understood poetry best, read a poem. And I was very proud that I was chosen to read a poem. And I chose quite nationalistic Slovak poems because I really felt I wanted to belong to and be a sort of Slovak person. So, I- I read some Slovak poems and was very pleased about it. And was- there were only two people in the class that were chosen to read the poems, and so- and-

[0:13:04]

And when was that Gerta?

That was in '38. Or '37 even, because it was before I went to secondary school.

Right.

It was in my last year of primary school- or sec- I don't remember exactly but I was about- about twelve or eleven.

Yeah. So, you finished your primary school?

I finished- actually, I went to a Jewish primary school. So, it must have been the secondary school that I read the poems in.

Aha.

Because of- primary school was Jewish. And then after that I went to a *Gymnasium* and I think this was the first year. So, it must have been in '38.

And that was the school you were then excluded from?

Yes. And then a year after that, we were thrown out.

Yes, so the second story was that story with Maruška.

[0:14:04]

Yes.

Which again, is-

Well, Maruška was my best friend. And we used to go cycling. I had an uncle who had a farm outside Trnava and we used to go visiting him. And one day we went cycling to my uncle and then we stopped. And then Maruška said to me that this is the last time she can see me because her father told her that if she's going to be friends with a Jewish girl, he will not benefit at all from being in the fascist Hlinka Guard and he will not get any - perks from being- being sort of fascist. And that she is not allowed to see me. And that was terribly painful for me, because I thought that she was a real, true friend and that she will stand up to that and continue to be my friend. But she- I never saw her after that. And she just didn't want to have anything to do with me. And I don't even know to this day what happened to her.

How did it make you feel as a, I mean- at that time you were twelve, thirteen?

Well, I felt very hurt. I was very upset and- and I was very upset that she didn't stand up to the pressure of her family. I thought that, that was really bad. And so, it sort of- this fascist ideology and the perks that they got from taking away the Jewish property and- and appropriating it, really destroyed the fabric of society. And this was just one example, how- the neighbourly relationships were being eroded and destroyed. And it actually was just as bad for the Slovaks that were concerned as it was for the Jews.

And how did your parents and your grandmother- how did they react to this situation?

[0:16:29]

My father had a lot of friends that stood by him. And so, I remember that what they did was they tried to... take all the valuables and ask the friends to keep them for them, so they wouldn't be taken away. And so, a lot of the valuables that we had my father take- has taken to his friends for safekeeping. And my father had a lot of very- very nice friends that stood by him. My mother didn't, because she didn't- she was mainly friendly with her family, with her sisters and- but my father had a very good relationship with a lot of friends that stood by him.

And they kept the things?

And they kept the things. And they gave it back to me, after the war. They were quite- there were about two or three friends that were- that were quite devoted to my father.

And did they think at the time it would pass, or what- what should be done?

Well, everybody, particularly my father, was very optimistic. He thought well, this is only going to last a little while and then it will all pass and then we will come back and it will be ok. And my mother never believed that. And my mother wanted to leave. My mother wanted to emigrate. But my father didn't, because he felt very integrated in that society and he felt- well, it was a very old family, the Sidons in Trnava. And he felt that he belonged there.

In a way he had a shop so he was in the sort of centre of life in that sense.

Yes – yes.

He was-

And one of our ancestors was a very famous rabbi, who was also very enlightened, because he was the first person who introduced education for all children of all faiths until the age of ten. And so, the family felt very- my father's family felt very integrated. But not my mother's family. So, there was a big difference between that.

And they were also in Trnava your mother's family?

[0:19:10]

No, my mother's family came from a small village - near the Hungarian border. And it was a- they had a village shop. And they were much less sort of, integrated in the local culture. They were real sort of proper village Jews. And that was quite different. Well, there were thirteen children as I said that they had, which was- and my mother's oldest brother was a very skilful businessman. And he went to Budapest and established quite a big factory there, so he- they were very successful business people, my mother's family.

So, that's quite important for your story, that-

That's important, because- and the connections with Hungary.

Yes, so they went to Hungary.

Yes.

And something we didn't ask- I haven't discussed, is the languages you spoke. What languages?

Well, with my grandmother I spoke German. And I didn't want to speak Hungarian because I felt that Hungarian was really- that the Hungarians oppressed the Slovaks. So, I spoke Slovak with my parents. And- but I did listen to Hungarian so I heard the language, because in that part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, people spoke three languages. German, Hungarian and Slovak. And my grandma spoke German. My parents spoke Hungarian. I spoke Slovak. That was the sort of trilingual...

Yeah.

... habit. Which your mother probably told you about.

Yeah- yeah. And I guess the Hungarian more with the grandparents.

The Hungarians were my parents.

Your parents?

Yes. But I didn't want to speak it, because I was feeling that the Hungarians were oppressing the Slovaks. And in my phase of Slovak patriotism...

Yeah.

I felt I would rather speak Slovak. And it's interesting because Slovak was quite a new language. Because it wasn't a written language until the twentieth century. It was just a spoken language.

OK, so back to you and the change of school. So, you had to leave your Gymnasium. And where did you have to go? Where did you go from there?

[0:21:55]

Well, there was no arrangement made. And so, we were sort of left there trying to- to be educated. There was a very strong drive among the young people that they really felt deprived. That was a real deprivation, that we weren't allowed to go to school. And so, my mother was trying to teach me things that- to get me- to get me to learn things that would help me to- to earn a living wherever I was. So, I remember that I was sent somewhere where they made artificial flowers, sort of workshop, but I was very bad at all these skills. So, then the young people between the age of eighteen and twelve decided that they will try and educate themselves. And so, we formed- we sort of established evening classes in a- at a voluntary basis, where we were trying to learn things. And that's where I met Rudi. And sort of there were about ten of us who got together and had- read books, and tried to learn maths and tried to learn chemistry. And had sort of formal lessons, where one of us always sort of tried to educate the others. And that was- that was what we did for education, because there was no other way of... occupying ourselves.

There was no Jewish school?

No, there was no Jewish school. And there was a secretarial college that my mother sent me to. But I wasn't very interested in that. But I learnt shorthand - and typing.

And so how many Jews were in Trnava at that time? I don't know if you know.

I don't know.

No. But roughly, how big was the community?

Well, I would have thought there were about 5,000. Quite big.

[0:24:22]

So, hence there were quite a few young people.

And there were- there were two groups, because there was an Orthodox and a Neolog synagogue. And they were- initially, they were quite divided. But later on, they all hung-hung out together. We all hung out together.

And which synagogue did your family go to?

My mother was Orthodox and my father was Neolog so... I went to both.

And the Neolog was a Ref- a more Reform or what?

Yes, that was sort of much more enlightened and they didn't have to have kosher household. But we did have. And, the Orthodox, my mum's, but my mother wasn't very orthodox. We weren't very religious in the family. But we did keep all the festivals and all the... gatherings and- and that was very nice, because when for example at Passover, we always, the whole family got together and we celebrated that. And I remember that I was the youngest so I always had to say *Ma Nishtanah*. But- but it was- well, there was a Jewish atmosphere in the family in spite of the fact that they weren't very religious.

Yeah. And did family come there from Hungary? Did they come and visit?

Yes, they all- the whole family got together each- each Passover. [phone rings]

[sound break]

[0:26:08]

We were speaking about family gatherings and you said that-

Well, we always gathered at festivals. At Rosh Hashana. But the Passover was the real sort of- everybody came. And there were about twenty people there, because all my family from Hungary came and- I had- I had three aunts in Hungary. And they came with their husbands, and they- so that was very important contact, because it saved our lives.

And when was this? Was it discussed in the family at those occasions what the future- what should be done or what-?

Well, for example, my mother's sister had four daughters and three of them emigrated to France and Britain and Australia. So, there was- it was discussed whether we should leave or not. And I remember we had this big map on the table and there was nowhere to go, really. Nowhere that we would have been accepted. And unless you were very rich, you wouldn't- you couldn't get out.

No. There was the financial question as well.

It was a financial question. And my mother's sister whose daughters left, she was very rich. So they could pay all these things to go to the States- they went to Australia and to England.

When did they leave? When?

In '38, '37. And the- the young people that went they were in their twenties.

Yeah.

But it was- but my father didn't want to go anyway, because he felt that- that it's impossible that he would be betrayed by the people in Slovakia. He felt that he has to be- that he will-

that they will not betray him. That they will protect their friends and neighbours and everything. He was a very naive and optimistic person.

[0:28:38]

And what happened to his shop?

Oh, the shop was- the kosher shop was closed. But we also had a non-kosher butcher shop and that was taken over by the assistant of my father, who was the father of Maruška. And he's taken over the shop - completely thrown my father out. And he ran the shop.

When- when, Gerta?

In '39.

So, right from the beginning.

Right from the beginning. And he didn't help my father at all, or the rest of the family.

And for how long had he worked there?

Oh, he- ever since I remember which is about twelve years I remember. I don't know what was before then, but he worked there for a long time. And he was a very active member of Hlinka Guard that was a fascist organisation. That was sort of equivalent of the Nazis organisations in Germany.

So, your father, did he do something else or did he...?

He kicked my father out.

And after that, did your father stay at home or what did he do? In those three...?

Well, my father was never very keen to be in the shop. Cause he didn't like the butcher shop. I remember that he once went to the slaughterhouse and they brought him back on a stretcher.

He was really a very unsuitable person. He liked playing the piano and singing and he liked music. And he- that's what he was doing. He liked talking to his friends in the coffee bar. And- but none of this brought any money in, so we were very poor at that stage.

[0:30:30]

And how did you manage?

Well, my mother did.

Even in those years, '39?

She- well, she managed to keep that company of Venetian blinds going with some friends and her brother. And so that was working and that- she kept the family. My mother was a very enlightened lady.

And for you, that was also quite a long time just to not go to school and to just go to evening classes.

Yes.

How else did you keep yourself busy?

Well, I think we did read an awful lot. And we did actually work very hard at our education. So, we were- we were quite busy with, you know. Because my mother was trying to get me involved in activities that I wasn't very interested in like secretarial college and making flowers and things like that. And that didn't- didn't appeal to me very much. But the courses that we did, we were very busy. And I think that Rudi was teaching us math and chemistry. And-

Was he a bit older? He was older?

[0:31:55]

He was two years older, yes. And he was very- very well educated in maths and chemistry. He had a sort of chemistry workshop at home that once blew up. And- and he taught us all chemistry. And then there was some other people that were teaching us literature. And then there was a very good library. We spent a lot of time in the library and we were- we were quite busy.

So that was the local library?

There was a local library-

So, you were allowed to go to the library?

That we were allowed to take books out. Not to go to- it wasn't a library where you could sit. But you could take books out. And also, there were lots of people, Jewish people, that had a lot of books that were quite pleased to lend us books and also talk to us about them. So, we were- we were reading a lot of contemporary literature, which was very good.

Self-organised, so to speak. So, self-organised?

Self-organised. We did- we didn't have anybody to organise it. We did- I think the oldest person was eighteen in our group, or nineteen. Something like that. And they were the ones that- the oldest person was the son of a teacher at- that was a teacher at the Jewish school.

Right.

And he was a very good teacher, the son of this man.

So, the age was important, because then once the deportations started, that was important.

Well, it was important that we had people of all ages in that group who could teach the younger people.

Yes, but I meant once- when was the deportations orders then, in 1942?

[0:33:55]

In 1942, all the people between sixteen and twenty-five were deported. And that's- but then that was in April- that was in April. And then my parents and I left about two weeks later. So that was the end of our education.

Yeah. And how old were you? Were you under sixteen?

I was fifteen. I was just under the- because sixteen years old were deported. And I had two cousins. One was sixteen and one was eighteen. They were children of my mother's sister in Trnava. And those two were sent to Hungary on their own to my uncle, before the deportation. So when the- they were supposed to be deported, they were sent to Hungary. Because at that time in Hungary deportations hadn't started. So, they- those two young girls of the age of sixteen and eighteen, were sent on their own to Hungary. And we stayed home for another two or three weeks and then we went to Hungary. But what I want to say is that a very important factor in our survival, was the fact that my father's sister was married to a German. And he was a very decent person. An Aryan German, not a Jew. And he helped us a lot to cross the border and to arrange for us to be hidden - before we left.

So, did you know anything of these- the first deportation? Did- did anyone know about it, that that was coming?

Well- yes, because my father had very good friends. And they told him that they are preparing these deportations and he should disappear. And also, my uncle, this Aryan, he knew about it. So- but it was my father's friends that helped us a lot.

And your- that German was in Trnava as well? Or where was he?

[0:36:26]

Well, my uncle was living in Bratislava at that time with his- with my father's sister that he was married to. But he came to Trnava to help us. And he hired a taxi that would take us to the border and he made all the arrangements for us to get to Hungary. And then in Hungary,

he- when we were in Hungary he used to come and look after us. And he was- he was very decent.

What was his name?

Hans.

Hans?

Rank. Hans Rank. And he was from Sudeten Germany. And he was a very decent person.

Was he ever awarded any post-war- did he?

No.

No.

No, we should have done that actually, but we didn't - because he died. He died quite soon after he has helped us. He had a heart attack and he was about forty when he died. So- and his wife was then taken to Auschwitz. But she returned.

But do it- you can still do it, you know, posthumously.

Pardon?

You can still do it.

I should perhaps do it, yes.

You can- it's no- it's not limited to...

[0:37:57]

Well, I don't know, because we were trying to- well, I'll tell you some other-

Anyway. That's another story.

Anyway.

Why do you think- I mean it's interesting that all the young people were taken. Was it first the young- the women and then the boys or how- the deportation orders?

No, it was... girls and boys. And the reason why they were taken, was that Germans said they needed a workforce. So they couldn't take families, because that would not be an effective workforce. And because they- the Slovaks were paying for these people to be taken away, the Germans were buying them as workers. So that's why it was the young people first that were able to work. And then they could- they could pretend that that's what they were doing. That they were taking them for work. And that's why they were taking people that were at the age where they were able to do physical work.

It's such an interesting thing, because I think most other deportations were not by- like that.

No, Slovakia was a very special case.

Let's say, in Salonika the year later, everyone- you know, the families were deported together. I think in Poland also mostly-

Yes, and the thing is that there was no ghetto in Slovakia. The people were taken... and they went with- they got a- pieces of paper that they should report somewhere and they went!

Yeah.

Which is really quite extraordinary. I can't understand that.

So, most people who you knew, that then were teaching there, they- they went?

[0:40:00]

They went, yes. And because they were taking workers, they thought they are just going to work somewhere. So, it was a deception as well, the fact - the age thing. And then the families were taken, because the President of Slovakia was a- a priest and he thought that according to Christian rules, families should be- should stay together. So, the second wave were- the families were taken. Because the Slovaks believed they shouldn't be taken apart, the families. So, then they were all taken to Auschwitz. Killed together.

Yeah.

But Slovakia was the only country where the deportations started with taking young people.

Yeah- yeah.

And it was part of- it was part of the deception.

Yeah. But in your family- those two girls were sent to Hungary. So, they-

My- my?

In your family you said your two cousins were sent to Hungary.

Yes, they were sent to Hungary because we had very close family there.

You could do it.

And it was- I don't think people realised that money played a very important role. Because if you had money in a- or somebody with money in Hungary, you could go there. But if they wouldn't have had anybody with money, they- they couldn't have lived there. So, the fact that my uncle was rich, was very important.

[0:41:41]

So, tell us about those first deportations. Did you- where were you and what did you see?

When...?

When you were still in Trnava and the first deportations of the young people?

Well, I didn't see anything actually, because I was at home and then when my cousins went to Hungary, I just didn't see them. And then my uncle came and my uncle took us to a hiding place because he knew that the next wave of deportation's coming. So, I was in this hiding place which is- I had a piano teacher, and she was taking care of me and my mother. And my father was with another friend. So, we didn't see anything. We- we just were waiting to be sent to Hungary.

And how long did you stay there, in those hiding places?

Three days, or four days - very short time.

And you said that the German uncle – he came?

My German uncle came and he arranged it all.

So, you left the house- the flat or the house-?

We said goodbye to grandma, because grandma didn't want to go. Because she said she'd look after the house, which she did! And so, she stayed in the house and we went to these different hiding places. And then my mother and I went to Hungary separately from my father, because my father thought it's easier to- for two women to cross the border. So, he came later. But it was all arranged by Uncle Hans.

[0:43:38]

And your grandmother stayed?

My grandmother stayed and she was sending us sort of - things. Some of our clothes and things, with Hans. He came to Hungary and brought us things that-

Because he could freely move?

Yes, he- he was a German.

Yeah - yeah. And what was the address? Do you remember the address of that house, actually I didn't ask you? Your house in Trnava?

In Trnava? Yes, it was Dolnopotocná 2, and it was on the main square where the market was. And the market was always very interesting and nice to watch.

So, it was in the centre?

It was in the centre.

What was it a house or...?

A house was quite a sort of big house and it was in the centre.

But you left, you left?

We left the house and everything.

And what could you take? What did you take on your-?

Well, when we crossed the border, nothing! I wanted to take my skates [laughing] 'cause I loved skating. But I wasn't allowed to. But my uncle got them for me.

[0:44:50]

He went- he-he got the ice skates?

He took them with him.

And at that time, I mean you were fully aware what was happening?

Well, we weren't. We didn't know anything what was happening. We just knew that they were taking people away somewhere which wasn't very pleasant.

Yes, but I mean you knew now you had- you were escaping to Hungary?

Yes, but we didn't know that- we thought we were just escaping some sort of unpleasant work camp where we would have to work and not have a very good time. But we did- had no idea about what was really happening. And nobody had.

No – no. And how then, once you were at the hiding place, how did you then cross the border?

Well, we went to- this was again arranged by my uncle. We went to a village that was close to the border. And we had a guide... that took us in the evening when it got dark. And it was April so there were very short nights. And he took us when it got dark, and we walked across the border. He was showing us what to do. And he- we had to- while we were in the Slovak part of the- of the side of the border, we had to wait for the guards to pass. And then there was a time interval bet- between the guards changing that he knew about. And he took us across at that interval. And then we came to the Hungarian part. And there, we waited till it bec- became light. And I remember mother and I we went to a church. And then we took a- a train or something. And I had an aunt that lived in a village or in a small town near the border so we went to this aunt's house. And then we had a rest. And then we took a train to Budapest.

And in Budapest?

[0:47:23]

And in Budapest my uncle had a big American car that picked us up from the railway station and then we were treated very well. And then we- my uncle rented a flat for us. And that's where we then stayed.

And did you take on other identities, or- how?

We had to have forged papers and they could be bought by- for money, by people. And so, yes, I had to become somebody else and learn very well what I was. And who I was.

What was- and what was your name?

Takacs, Eva.

And but now you had to speak some Hungarian?

Pardon?

You had to speak Hungarian now?

Yes, but I couldn't speak Hungarian, so my mother was teaching me. And she was very, very good. And she used to send me out to buy things. Well, it was very embarrassing because I had to read it. But I learnt quite quickly, because I was used to hearing the language so it wasn't entirely alien. And I think after about six weeks I could pass- I could pass for a Hungarian.

And how quickly did your father join you then, once you-?

Oh, within a couple of days. He did the- he had the same guide and he went the same way and came in a couple of days.

And while you were then in Hungary, that- the first time, how- was your uncle supporting you, or how did...?

[0:49:10]

My uncle was supporting us entirely, because you couldn't get a job because you would- you didn't have the right papers. So again, money was very important because without that, you were stuck. And I was terribly upset and my father was very upset that- that he, sort of, let us down and my uncle had to support us. So-

And you could still communicate with your- with your grandmother in Slovakia?

Yes, through Hans, until Hans died, which was in 1941. He came regularly and- and then he moved my grandmother to his place in Bratislava.

So, in which year did you move- to Hungary?

Oh, sorry, '42. And in- my uncle died in '43.

Right.

And so, until '43 he kept coming. And then- then we lost contact.

So, she in fact moved to Bratislava?

She moved to Bratislava to his house and my aunt's house. And there she was till- till the- till '44, till they took her to Auschwitz.

So, until then she was not- she wasn't deported. She stayed?

She stayed till '44, yes, in Slovakia with my aunt and uncle.

So, did they have papers that excluded them from deportations?

They excluded her because she was the mother of... this mixed marriage.

So he could have, if he'd lived, he could have saved them or-?

Probably not because by that time they took anybody.

But it saved them-

But it saved them-

From the first deportations?

It saved them from the first- saved them till the uprising.

[0:51:26]

So, you had those- how- how long did you have in your- on your first stay in Hungary?

How long was I in Hungary? Well, somebody denounced us then in Hungary and we were taken to a sort of Hungarian camp - in eastern Hungary. North-eastern Hungary.

And when was that?

That was in '43. And we were there for about- with my mother. My mother and I. Because my father- oh, and my father, too. There we all- the whole family was taken to this camp. And then my uncle, he was very skilful. He bribed somebody and we were released. And then we were- we came back to Budapest and my- we had then our own papers. But my father had to report - every month - to the police. And that was between '43 and '44. That's about eight or nine months.

So, it means you had your own names?

We- we could have our own names then. But we couldn't get a job. It wasn't possible. But my uncle was very, very clever and very good at organising our lives. So, we stayed there in Hungary. And- until '44. April. And in April, March and April, that's when Eichmann came to Hungary and started to round up the Jews. And my father was- because he was such a law-abiding citizen he went to report, and then never came back. He went to work camp. They kept him there. And my mother and I decided that it wasn't safe to stay in Hungary, so we went back to Bratislava in April '44.

Just before we come to that, so who- did you find out who denounced you?

[0:54:00]

No. Well, but we thought- we didn't find out for certain, but we thought so. Because my- I had an uncle in Slovakia. And he had a daughter and she was married to somebody. She was not quite right in her head but she was alright. She was just very stupid. And he married her off to somebody called Fiala. And we then found out that he was in- in Hungary. That he was a sort of person that denounced people. But we weren't sure about that. But we- we thought that he denounced us.

But in fact, your uncle managed to-

My uncle was very- yes, to bribe us out. With a lot of money.

But again, you thought then it was safer to be back in Slovakia?

And then things in Hungary became very, very difficult. So, we thought it will be safer to be back in Bratislava. And we went back to Bratislava with my mum and got different forged papers there. Was a different name.

So, what was that name?

Jurkovic- Jurkovicova, Eva. And so, we got these papers and we rented a room. And I got a job as a secretary in Bratislava. And I don't remember what company it was. It had a very nice- very nice boss. He was a very nice person and he really liked me a lot. And so, I was quite well paid. So, we could live on what I earned. And that's when I met Rudi, when I was in Bratislava. And the way I met him was that- there was somebody from Trnava there, who got us the papers. The forged papers. And one day I met him. He was called Josef Weiss and I met him and he said, "There's somebody I think you would like to meet." And I said, "Well, who is that?" And then he said to me that it is Walter Rosenberg, which was Rudi's name before the war. So, then he put us together and we met and that's when I met Rudi after his escape. And then- it was a very important meeting for me. And then we met regularly and we sort of tried to go out together, but it was very- very difficult.

What was he like, to compare? I mean you saw him two years before. Basically...

[0:57:16]

Yes, well it was- he was unrecognisable because he was a sort of very attractive young boy. Trusting and with a wonderful sense of humour before. And very sort of... engaging person. And then when I saw him again, there was tremendous change. He looked quite different. And not only because he was two years older and strong and muscular, but it was in his eyes that was sort of quite different. And then I remember that I went- we went swimming to the Danube and we sort of went to the Danube and- taken off our clothes to put the swimming trunks on. And then I saw that he had this sort of number on his forearm and I thought this is very odd. So, I said to him, "What have you been- why did you tattoo yourself?" And he said, "Where do you think I was? In a sanatorium?" And then he was so cynical about this question I asked. And that's when he told me about Auschwitz and where he was and what was happening there. And about his escape. But I remember that- the first shock I had was when he had this number.

And could you believe what he was telling, from-?

Oh, yes. I believed him.

You could.

Yes. Because he was so changed. He was so cynical about everything. He was a different person. It was... It was terrible.

And at that point had they written the report already or were they in the process of writing it?

[0:59:19]

No, no. They finished the report.

They'd finished it.

Because they were- after they finished the report in Zilina, where your mother was feeding them, after they finished this report, they were given forged papers. And they were sent off to different places. And Rudi went to Bratislava. And Freddy also went to Bratislava but to a

different flat. And so, they were living there with these forged papers. And- and Weiss was looking after them. Josef was looking after them.

So, they had written- so they just- because this is important. So, in terms of dates, they escaped in-

In April '44.

Yeah.

And then they wrote the report until the end of May they were- they were in Zilina. And then after the end of May they came to Bratislava. And then they went to see this Papal Nuntius and tried to tell him what was happening there. And that was all while they were hiding in Bratislava. And that's when- when they were there. So, they were in Bratislava since sort of June till September.

And so, when you met him, what was the mood in terms of did they think- I mean, were they- it was all about the Hungarian Jews, or was it...?

[1:01:00]

Well, they were hoping that the Hungarian Jews will be- that some of them will be rescued. That they'll escape. And they were terribly upset when they discovered that the Hungarian Jews never got the gist of the report, that they haven't been told anything. And I think it was a terrible thing that they haven't been told anything. Because the geopolitical situation in the summer of '44 was quite unique. Because the Russians were twenty kilometres from Budapest. The Romanians changed allegiance.

Yeah.

And joined the Allies. So, if people had known, they could have escaped. There were lots of options. They could have- have escaped through Slovakia to Russia because the Russians were at the Dukla Pass. And there were lots of options they had. But they believed that they are going Kecskemét which is a sort of joke, because it's [inaudible]- it's some place called

[inaudible]- something where they would have, had a lot of food to eat. And they were told that's where they are going. And then they went with great innocence into these trains and came...the sort of- got taken part in the most savage killing that Auschwitz has experienced. And within three months they killed half a million.

Yeah.

[1:02:59]

And I remember Rudi was absolutely- and Freddy- they were devastated about the fact that their report was sitting in somebody's drawer and people didn't believe where they were being taken. I think it's a very sort of shameful story of the Holocaust.

I mean some people think that it did save people, because eventually the deportations from Hungary stopped.

Yes, it did save- the report saved about 200,000 Jews in the ghetto. And I think that that was due in part to the report that then leaked out. But- but half a million were killed!

Yeah...yeah.

They saved about 200,000. But- but they could never quite reconcile themselves to the fact that- how many more- you see even if just ten percent would have escaped would have been 50,000 people.

Well, it's an interesting story of what happened to that report and whether the Hungarian Jewish leadership knew about it or not knew about it. It's quite a-

Well, no, they knew about it. And there's quite a lot of evidence that they suppressed it because of the negotiations that Kastner [original name Rezső Kasztner] had with Eichmann.

This is the Kastner Affair...

This is Kastner Affair, yes, the Kastner story.

Yeah- which is-

And you know that this year in the Knesset they lit a candle- candle for Kastner in his honour, his family, and in recognition that he saved 1,600 Jews which is really terrible.

For the train- that's the story-

Yes, for the train that he arranged for his friends and for the people that had a lot of money.

Yeah...yeah. But if you could tell us a little bit how, for people who don't know about it, what Rudi told you, how they managed to-

Escape?

...escape Auschwitz, because that's quite something.

[1:05:30]

Yes, well Rudi told me that they realised that they were building new accommodation and new facilities for the arrival of a large number of Jews. And Rudi and Freddy thought that they were Hungarian Jews. And Auschwitz security was built so that they had an electrified fence. And then beyond the fence, there was a large territory where there were huts and facilities for prisoners to be taken to Birkenau. And then there were watchtowers. Another lot of watchtowers between the fence and the facilities where they were building these things. And every day, people from the camp were counted and went to build these facilities for the incoming victims. And there were sort of wooden huts and wooden places for them. And there were- and somebody before Rudi built a sort of hiding place in that area, so that people could hide there for a day or two. And these people then didn't use this hiding place, and told Rudi and Freddy about it. Where it is, and what it is and- and how they could use it. And Rudi and Freddy had a Russian friend who told them that the best way to avoid being discovered by dogs, is to put tobacco soaked in petrol around the place where they were hiding, because dogs wouldn't discover them. So, then Rudi and Freddy were putting things into this place. They were going out every day to work there, and came back and put in

different sort of clothes - civilian clothes – there, and all sorts of things that they might need into this hiding place. And then one day they didn't return and they were- they stayed in this hiding place. They put tobacco with petrol soaked- soaked in petrol around it and they went into this hiding place. And then when they weren't counted when they came back, there was an alarm. And the towers were manned. And so, there was a big sort of thing that two prisoners escaped. And they were- and then for three days the Gestapo was looking for them with dogs and with all sorts of... things. And the dogs didn't discover them; the tobacco worked. And so, after three days they couldn't find them, the Gestapo couldn't find them. And then they withdrew the manned towers after three days because they thought that it was impossible for anybody to stay there.

[1:09:06]

And they- when they heard that the alarm was off, then Rudi and Freddy went out of this hiding place. And that was very diff- difficult, because they weren't sure whether they'll be able to open it again. But they managed. They managed to displace the thing that covered them. And they got out. And they- they walked out and then they walked from Auschwitz to Zilina. And they walked mainly at night, because the Germans had taken the Polish population around Auschwitz away, and populated it with Nazi Germans. And they couldn't walk during the day there. And that walk was tremendously strenuous. It was 134 kilometres. And they managed to remember some... geography that helped them to get there. And they got to a- a Polish village at the border. And a Polish- Polish partisan helped them to get across the border. And then, the other side of the border in Slovakia, near a village called Skalité, they were discovered by a Slovak peasant called [inaudible]- Andrej. And he took them in at a great risk to himself and kept them. Fed them up a bit because they were terribly weak; they were completely exhausted. And then he got- put them in touch with the Jewish community in Slovakia. And they took them to Zilina. And that's where they wrote the report.

I mean it must have been difficult even just to walk in- in that distance, for them.

Well, terrible, I mean, they had- I think Freddy wasn't so weak but apparently Rudi, his shoes went all bad and-

And they must have had help. I mean somebody must have covered it once they were inside.

Well, that's sort of- I think so, but I'm not sure about that. I think somebody covered them but that's why they didn't know whether they will be able to uncover it.

[1:11:54]

Yeah. And the people- because then a few other people escaped a bit later.

Yes. Mordowicz and Rosin. Yes.

Did they use the same-?

They used the same system.

In the same spot?

Yes.

So, the spot-

And also, tobacco.

So, the spot wasn't discovered, actually.

The spot wasn't discovered.

That's also extraordinary.

Well, it is extraordinary but I think it is because the dogs didn't manage that.

And do you know how- how Fredo and Rudi, how they were put together? Why was it the two of them and not-?

Well, they were friends.

Yeah.

And they knew each other from Trnava. Because Freddy was in Trnava and Rudi was in Trnava. And they were both registrars and so they had- they were- they were friends. And I don't know how they decided to do this adventure together but I think it is they liked each other. And they thought they will get on.

[1:13:03]

So, my question is you know, whether it was a sort of personal decision or whether there was some... organisation involved?

I don't- I don't think there was any organisation, because- there are a lot of people that think it was an organised thing, but I don't think so, because of what Rudi told me. And also, there was never time to have an organisation in Auschwitz. That would be- because they were killed at such a- the turnover was such, that it was impossible to have an- an organised resistance. They were all- there was just not- not enough time for people. The only time when they could have had an organised resistance was this family camp from Terezin in Auschwitz. Because they were there for three months and they had an organised sort of resistance group. But the ordinary prisoners couldn't have it, because there were too few of them and the turnover, the rate- the rate at which they were killed, was just too fast - to establish an organisation.

And you said they were registrars. What do you mean by that?

Well, the Germans had in each hut, they had people that registered who came in and which camp and where from. And they just write down- wrote down the numbers. So, they knew that on- in March there were French people and how many in a transport, and- this is why they finally believed them, because they had this information that they brought out. And they wrote it all down, Freddy and- and then they lost it on the way. And then they just remembered the numbers.

They lost the- the manuscript, or-?

They lost- yes, they did. They had it in a tube and they dropped it somewhere. I think that's what Freddy says in his book.

Yeah- yeah. But it's amazing what detail this report actually contains.

Yes, because they remembered. And Rudi had a sort of- I don't know about Freddy, but Rudi had a sort of photographic memory. And he remembered sort of all these things very carefully. Even when- when I lived with him, he remembered too much. But I think that this was how they escaped - and made it. And now they have this march that your mum went to welcome.

To the end, in Zilina. Yes.

Yes.

So, they march now every year.

[1:16:04]

Yes. And now they have two marches, because there were too many people. One in July and one in August. But the one in July is not very- not so popular because it's not school holidays.

Yeah, so, two groups. And it started a few years ago, or, you said-?

Yes, well my daughter tried to initiate that, because she felt that these two guys weren't recognised enough as heroes. And-

No, because they put their lives completely... at risk-

Well, I think that they took tremendous risk. And they really tried to- well they tried to- they did it for the Hungarian Jews. And to tell the world what's going on there.

Yeah.

And I think it was a tremendously cleverly de- designed way of doing it and... must have been terrible, that walk that they had.

Yeah- Yeah... OK, so let's come back to you. So, you then met Rudi and spent that time in Bratislava. You were working.

[1:17:26]

Yes. Well, and then somebody denounced my mother and me. Oh, and then there was- the Germans occupied Bratislava after the uprising. There was a Slovak uprising and that's- the Germans occupied Bratislava. And that's when they were rounding up the rest of the Jews in Slovakia. And that's when my mother and I were taken to the Gestapo and kept there for a week because they weren't sure that we were Jews. Because we had very good papers. And they couldn't check them, because that village where our papers were from was already Russian. It was from part of Slovakia that- that was already occupied by Russia. So, they didn't know whether we were Jewish or not. And then- then we were- interrogating us and beating us. But I didn't- we didn't tell them until they brought my grandmother in from hospital. My grandmother was in hospital, because she had a broken hip. And all the people from- Jewish people from hospital were rounded up and brought to the Gestapo to be deported. And when my grandmother came, my mother wanted to stay with her. And so, she said, "Yes, we are Jewish. This is my [grand]mother." And that's when I thought that I've got to escape because of what Rudi told me. And my mother wouldn't come with me because first of all she didn't want to leave my grandmother. And second, she doesn't want to live in a world where things like this are happening. So, my mother didn't come with me.

So, did they - the Gestapo - know that you were related, or you just met your grandmother-? Did- they couldn't put you together?

They couldn't put us together, but my mother couldn't deny it.

She saw her- yes. She saw her, basically?

She saw her and she- she was lying there, helpless, and my mother couldn't leave her. But then she couldn't go with her either, because my mother was taken to Ravensbrück and my grandmother to Auschwitz, so she- so it didn't help.

So again, the time thing was, there was a Slovak uprising in the summer- or was it the fall?

It was in September and this was in November. This was sort of beginning of November.

So, in the uprising did you do any- I mean, was there a feeling that that was a positive thing - at the time?

[1:20:29]

At the time we felt it was a positive thing, yes.

But it didn't last very long.

Well, no, but it did, because that's when the partisan movement started. So, there were groups of partisans all over the place and that was something.

So, did you join the partisans, or...?

No, I didn't, because I- I didn't know how to actually. Rudi-

And you were in a city?

I was in a city. And Rudi went. Rudi joined. He had some contact but he wouldn't tell me. I remember I had a long discussion with him before he went and he said that this- don't- I wouldn't be a great contribution there.

And where did he go?

[1:21:19]

Oh, it was on the Moravian border, somewhere between Moravia and Slovakia in the hills somewhere. I don't know where he found out.

And what happened to Freddy at that time? I actually don't know. What...?

I don't know what happened to Freddy because they lost contact. And also Rosin and – the other guy, they lost contact. And I think that that was deliberate because it's much more difficult to round them up then.

Yeah. Yeah. So, you were- so the Germans came and you were denounced or how did you end up-[inaudible]?

Somebody must have recognised us and denounced us, yes. And then the Gestapo came to- in the middle of the night, I remember. It was terrible.

What happened?

Well, they just knocked at the door and- and there was a car waiting for us. They pushed us in and taken us to Edlová 6 which was where the Gestapo was. So-

So, until your grandmother arrived, you stuck to the story?

Yes, it was a week. And so, we knew the sort of – surroundings. And also, because we were there so long, they used us as cleaners. So, we were cleaning their offices. And that's how I could escape because offices were on a floor below us. So, it wasn't so high to jump out of the window.

So, did you try to convince your mother to escape with you, or...?

[1:23:17]

Well, she was in the same room. And I kept telling her, "You have to come with me." And she said she's not going because she doesn't want to live in a world that- where this is

happening. She was very sad because she had- I remember she had a diamond ring and she wanted to give it to me. But it was somewhere else and she asked me to wait for it and I said, "I can't wait."

And you left.

But it was terrible to leave her there actually. That was a terrible decision. And I did- I was sort of doubting whether it's the right thing. But then I remember, I went to the window to shake out the dust- dust or something. And there was outside there, and there was life there. I couldn't resist it. So, I jumped out of that window.

And went?

And went, yes.

Disappeared?

Well, I went- well, I went round the corner, so they couldn't see me because there were guards outside the door. And the window was next to it so I had to go around the corner. And then I found a phone box and phoned my- because I only had a blouse and a skirt and it was pouring with rain. I remember it was very cold. So, I rang up my- the boss that I was working with and asked him to meet me. And so, he came and met me in a place I told him to come. And then I told him that I was a Jewish girl, and that I was on forged papers, and that he employed the wrong person and would he be able to help me? And he did. He took me to his house, and I was staying in his house until I got a different lot of forged papers and money. Because I needed money. And I wrote to the guy that had our jewellery in Trnava, whether he could give me some money to help me. And he came to Bratislava and he did give me some money. And then I got these other forged papers. And I went back to Budapest, because I thought I will find my father there. And so, I crossed the border again. By that time, I was a real expert at crossing [laughing] borders illegally here, and there and everywhere. So, I crossed again to Hungary and I had... good forged papers. And I had- money. And that was quite important.

You had Slovak forged papers, or?

[1:26:25]

I had Slovak forged papers, but I also had Hungarian forged papers. I had... all sorts of forged papers.

But again, you met people who were willing to take risks for you, so-

Yes.

...like your boss?

Yes, I mean, that guy that employed me took a great risk, because after all-?

Yes. What was his name?

Martin something. But I don't- I've forgotten the name. And his wife was very nice, because I remember when I came there, I was soaking wet because I had this one blouse. And she gave me her clothes and a coat and everything.

And the phone box, you didn't need money? You could just make the phone call, or-?

I could reverse the charges.

You reversed the charges...

Yes, I reversed the charges. I had no money. I had nothing. I remember- I remember the blouse I had - what it was like. But I mean I couldn't go out cleaning in a coat!

No, so were you in your own clothes? Was it your own-?

I had my own clothes, but when I was at the Gestapo, I had a very fancy leather coat. But I couldn't take that cleaning.

No- and in the Gestapo did your mother- did you know what had happened to your father, at that point?

No- and we thought that our father was at work camp. And we had some news of him, because he visited my aunt in Budapest. And so, we thought he was still alive. And in fact, when I came to Budapest and contacted my aunt, she said her- the- my father was there a week ago. So, I missed him by a week. And then he was at a work camp, but he got very sick. He died of kidney failure.

[1:28:23]

So, when you came back to Budapest, at that point, there was still family? There was...?

There was family but they couldn't help me because they were rounding up the Jews into a ghetto. So, I had to find my own-

So, were there any Jewish houses and that sort of thing in Budapest?

There were these protected houses, where my aunt was.

What was she in?

But they- they were not respecting them very much, the, the Germans. They were- they marched her to the Austrian border. From that house they rounded up- it was a protected house, but they rounded them up and marched them to the Hungarian border. And then it was Wallenberg who came to rescue them and took them back to Budapest. But I couldn't- actually couldn't get her help, because she was- the whole family was in hiding. So, I had to get my own help. And I- it was quite interesting because I had a French teacher in Budapest when I was there first time. And I went to see this French teacher when I came back. And asked her whether she could hide me. And she said, no, because she's got a lot of French prisoners of war in her house and they all- she's hiding those. But she will send me to her brother who is a civil servant in the Horthy fascist government, and he will- he will help me. So, she packed a suitcase for me and sent me to his- to her brother as a cousin that is fleeing

the Russians from the east because they were fascists. So, I came to this very elegant house of her brother's, and her brother was very nice to me. He put me up, I remember, he-

[1:30:30]

Where was that? In Budapest?

In Budapest. In a very posh area. And he got the maid to look after me and to get me breakfast in bed and everything, because I was a poor refugee from the east, from-

He didn't know you were Jewish?

Oh, he did, but the maid didn't. No. So he was hiding me for a day. And then he was telling me that the best- that he can't keep me there, that it's too dangerous for him. I've got to find another solution. And he said that there is an office- and I wish I knew what this office is in Budapest that looks after refugees from the east that had a fascist past and are scared to stay at home. And that I should go to this office and get a flat and papers...and pretend that I come from this village. And he found a person's name and he found credentials and everything. So, I went to this office in the centre of Budapest and pretended to be a fascist refugee that's fleeing the Russians. And they gave me a huge, big flat. And a lot of money. I got money from them every week. And I wish- because I was helped as a fascist. And I wish I knew what that office was, but I forgot.

So, this was now then the set-up for people who were fascist and were fleeing the Allied forces?

Yes, that were fleeing the Allied forces and went to South America somewhere- and so I-

Help- self-help group, so to speak.

[1:32:22]

So, I was pretending to be one of those. And that was very useful, because I then had a big flat where I could hide a lot of people that needed accommodation.

And did you?

Yes.

So, who stayed with you - then?

Oh, all sorts of people that- I don't remember anymore. But I had always somebody that needed to stay overnight or something. And there was an organisation, a Zionist organisation that was forging papers and taking them to the ghetto. So, they employed me as somebody who could take these papers to the ghetto because I was pretending to be the daughter of a person that was collecting things from the ghetto because they displaced him. Because they'd taken people out of the ghetto. And they needed some people to collect their things. So, I was going with these forged papers with these cases of forged papers. But nobody seemed to take any notice of me.

Because you were not staying in the ghetto, a Jewish person-?

I wasn't, no I was- I had forged papers- well, not forged. I had these fascist papers.

Extraordinary.

[01:33:55]

So, I- well, I was very fortunate to get these people that advised me. So that's how I survived then in Budapest. And-

But what happened? You have a very- again, another poignant story in the book, to one of your friends who came very late at night to your house.

Which one?

There was a woman who came-

Oh, that-my friends were shot in the Danube and she managed to escape. Yes, well there were people that were staying in that house. My friends. And they went out and there were two men, two boys and the girl. And they were caught by the Gestapo- by the- the Hungarian fascists and shot into the Danube. And she managed to escape and the two boys never came back.

And those were friends of yours who stayed?

They were my friends that stayed in the house! And they went out and they were identified as Jews and- a lot of people shot in the Danube.

And how did she manage to escape that?

She jumped before they shot her. And then she came out. And she was frozen. ...That was terrible. Because they were with me quite a long time in that flat. Those three.

So they were close to you the two people who, who you know, whom you knew?

[01:35:43]

So, I knew- oh, they were quite close! It was a terrible time. You know that the siege of Budapest is the longest siege of any European city during the war?

Yeah. It took a long time for the Russians to come in.

Yes- yes. For the Russians to liberate it!

Yeah, because it was street by street.

Yes.

Yeah. And so, where were you during the siege then? Where?

I was there! Well, that was during the siege. And I was in Buda-

Yeah?

But the organisation that was a sort of Zionist organisation that was helping people was in Pest. And then I moved- I realised that Pest will be- that the other side of the river, that it will be liberated before Buda. So, I decided I will go to Pest. And I went there one day before all the bridges were blown up. Cause then you couldn't go, after that, from one place to another.

You knew the Russians were on the other side?

[01:37:05]

I knew the Russians are nearer to Budapest on the other side. So, I was hoping to be liberated earlier. Because the whole of Budapest wasn't liberated till February. And I remember that I was liberated on the 15th of January.

When did you cross to the other side?

Oh, the bridge? The 14th or, just the day before the bridges were blown ... So, I was very lucky. Because the ghetto was on the- the other side- in Pest, where I was.

And were you with the- your friend? That friend together, did you cross? With that friend who survived the shooting?

Yes, she came with me. But I- I don't know what happened with her because then she went somewhere else. I don't know. And then we- we joined- there were some other friends that I had. And we decided that we are going to go away from Budapest because it was still under siege. So, we walked from Budapest to Szeged, that's a- about 200 kilometres from Budapest and it was one of the most horrible winters that they had. It- it was terrible. I remember I had such frostbites and I- but I was- I just wanted to get away from the front. From besieged Budapest.

And did you have food? Because I know food was a big problem in the siege, and-

[01:38:47]

Yes, the food was a problem. But I didn't have a problem while I was in that flat, because that was very well supplied by food.

But then, on, when-?

But on the way, it was a problem. And it was terribly cold. I- when I- when I'm sometimes cold in this flat, I always think of that. I think, "Well it's not as cold as that." [laughs]

And you managed to walk those 200 kilometres?

Well, it was sort of partly walk and partly we got lifts from the Russian people that were- that were having some cars there. Lorries. They were having lorries and they sometimes gave us a lift. There were five of us that decided to go. And the Russians weren't very nice to- to- it was quite dangerous.

Yeah. But you were of a dangerous age, you were young.

Well, I was eighteen. And the- and there was another girl who was with us who was fifteen and she was always, they were always trying to rape her. So, it was terrible.

But you managed to-

[01:40:07]

Well, you, you could talk yourself out of it, because you- if you could- I could speak Russian quite well, and I could tell them that I'm on their side, and that my boyfriend is a partisan and is fighting. You could always- you could talk yourself out of it. But it was- you had to be able to chat them up. It wasn't always easy.

No. And why did you want to go to Szeged?

I wanted to go to Szeged, because that was a long way away from the front.

Right.

So, I thought the German would be unlikely to come there. So, I got to Szeged. And there, I joined a sort of group of people that were Zionists and providing forged- providing papers for people that wanted to go to Palestine. And they needed employees, so I got a sort of employment there.

With Zionists-?

And at that time, I was quite- thinking about going to Palestine. But then I decided that I'm going to try and find my father. And I'll- I'll wait until- whether my parents will come. So, I didn't go. And I went back.

And were you liberated there in Szeged? When...?

Pardon?

Where were- you were liberated already, so this was all under the Russians already?

This was under the Russians, yes.

So, you were liberated in Budapest.

[01:41:50]

Yes. I was in Szeged then working for this Zionist organisation. And then I enrolled at university for- and they accepted me. I even had all these, sort of, papers that- and, and I'm registered there as somebody who attended university. But I had no qualifications to go to university. But I did go to- I- I remember I did an essay or some- some piece on Goethe. And I was doing a German class.

In Szeged?

In Szeged, yes.

And any of your relatives or anyone that was- at that point?

At that point I didn't have anybody. I was there on my own. And then I went back to Budapest and my relatives survived. My aunt survived and my uncle. And his wife. And there I had quite a lot of relatives. And... they wanted me to stay in Budapest but I didn't want to stay there.

Why not?

I didn't like Hungary. I didn't like Budapest. I didn't- I think it's a very strange place.

So, you went back to Szeged?

So, I went back to Bratislava and then-

When? When was that?

[01:43:26]

In May. After- sort of middle of May. Because war finished on the 8th of May. And I went back pretty soon afterwards because I was hoping that somebody will come and return. And so, I went to our house and this guy that took over all our property looked at me and said, "You are still alive?" He was quite shocked when he saw me. And he wouldn't let me in the house. And so, then I didn't know what to do, because I wanted to stay there to see whether my parents will come back. So, I went- at that time Trnava was under Russian administration. So, I went to the administrative Russian officer that was looking after civil rights of people. And then he came with me to this house and he chucked the guy out! And put me in there. So, he was very good.

So, you went-

So, I went to our house.

By yourself?

By myself. I was there by myself. And- and then I was looking for- for news about my family. And I stayed there... till June or July. And then I heard that there is a course in Bratislava that we could attend and get the sort of matric- the A-levels we needed for university. So, then I thought I'd better go to enrol for that course. And then I wanted to get rid of the house, because I knew my- I heard that my mum died in Ravensbrück and that my father died in Hungary.

How did you- how did you hear that the Ravensbrück? How...?

[01:45:30]

I'd heard about that through the Red Cross, somehow.

So, you got a notification?

Well, no, they were sort of- well, there was an office that you could go and they told you who was- it was a Red Cross office that told me about my mum. And my father, I heard from my aunt. She found out in Budapest that my father died of kidney infection in a work camp. So, when I knew they are not coming back, then I decided I've got to do something with my life! So, I went to Bratislava to enrol for this course. And I sold the house because I didn't want this guy to come back. So, I sold it to my neighbours. And I remember I sold it for a Leica camera, for a watch and a typewriter. I was so pleased to get rid of it.

You wanted to go out?

Well, I didn't want the guy to come back.

Yeah- yeah. And at that point, what- it must have been- I mean, after all you've been through and all these identities and all this going back from Hungary- to find out that your parents had not survived. How- how did you manage that?

Well, it was terrible. Was really awful, because I mean... I was hoping we'll have a family. And that's why I went back to the house. And sort of retrieved it. And then when I heard they are not coming I didn't want the house. Didn't want to stay there. I just wanted to get away from it. And then in Bratislava I met Rudi again. And his mother. And his mother looked after me. She was very nice to me.

Gerta, I think she should take a break because this is another-

It's another...story.

It gets into another chapter, and I think you've done amazingly.

[sound break]

[01:47:40]

OK, Gerta so we got to what- to the end of the war, when just...

Yes, we got to- being when I sold the house.

When you sold the house. But I wanted to ask you, did you meet any of the people you knew before, apart from that family who took over your house?

Yes. I met my friend Inge, because she survived the war. She was a hidden child. Her mother found somebody who was hiding them, so she was in Trnava when I came. And it was with Inge that I went then to Bratislava from Trnava. And- and she became a very good friend of mine throughout my life.

Where is she now?

She died about five years ago. She but she lived in Prague. She was a chemist. And she lived in Prague all her- the rest of her life. Because afterwards- after the war we finished this course that gave us qualifications to go to university. And then I went with Rudi to Prague.

The two of us went to Prague. And Inge also came to Prague. And another person that was on the course came with us. So, there were three girls and Rudi. We all went to Prague.

[01:49:24]

Together?

Together. And then I studied medicine, and Rudi and Inge studied chemistry. And Eva studied- Eva was the other person that came with us. And she studied medicine. And that was a very exciting time, actually, the first- first few years in Prague.

But just before that- so, in Bratislava you were doing this- the course, just to catch up?

Well, the course to catch up with the six years we missed. So, we had-

You missed six years of schooling?

I missed six years of schooling and Rudi missed four. And so, we had to catch up with this. I with six and Rudi with four.

And where did you stay in Bratislava?

Well, we rented a room with Inge. And we stayed in- in a room. And I remember that there was a- the beds didn't have a mattress. They were just sort of springs. But we rented a room in Inge and that's where we stayed. And Rudi stayed with his mother, because his mother came back from Terezin. And she had a flat and she stayed there.

In Bratislava?

In Bratislava yes.

And you said it was important for you, because you didn't have your family?

[01:51:00]

Well, she was very nice to me. She sort of took me on and she- she looked after me. And Inge's mother also was very nice to me. But mainly Rudi's mother. She sort of really tried to be very helpful. And she was one of these people who could arrange everything. Everything there was to arrange. She was incredibly successful lady.

And had she known your parents? Did you know her before the war?

She knew my father, yes.

So, at that point, you were together with Rudi?

Well, we were sort of an item if you want to call it that, yes. And she was very keen that we should stay together, because she liked me. She was very much supporting this relationship.

Yes. Yes. And how did she survive? She was in Terezin.

She was in Terezin. And she was in- she was always very efficient. When she was- before the war she was a commercial traveller, and she was selling ladies' underwear and corsets and things in Slovak villages. She was sort of travelling around and selling all these things. And when she came to Terezin, she said that she wants to set up a workshop to- to make ladies underwear for the German wives. So, she set up a workshop. And she employed a lot of very successful, very clever people that could make- because she couldn't make it but she claimed that she can make ladies underwear. So, she had this workshop in Terezin which was a great success, because she managed to find some very skilful seamstresses. And so, she survived the war there. Because they were- she was needed by these wives of these Nazi people there.

[01:53:26]

And her husband?

She- I never knew her husband. I don't know what- this was a second husband or third husband. She had many but I didn't know any of them. Cause Rudi's father died when he was very small.

So, she had remarried?

Well, she- and then she remarried and with this new husband she came to Trnava. But I never met him.

And why did you decide you wanted to go to Prague, you and Rudi?

Well, we didn't want to stay in Slovakia. And we didn't want to emigrate, because Rudi's mother was there. So, we didn't want to leave Czechoslovakia. So, the option was- it wasn't- And we wanted to go to Prague, because it was a place where there wasn't so much- there weren't any fascists there because they were- they weren't occupied. They weren't sort of fascist country. And the Czechs seemed very- it was very easy to communicate in Czech because it was very similar to Slovak so we didn't have to learn another language. And it was a very exciting times, because the Czech universities reopened after having- they were closed during Nazi occupation. And now they reopened. And there was- so it was a very mixed group of young people that attended the university, because they arranged from twenty-six to nineteen.

Yeah.

Six years. And so, it seemed to us that it will be an interesting place to be.

[01:55:27]

And what...?

And it was.

What? Why? What stood out, or what?

Well, it was all new! There was sort of- universities- very open. The lecturers were all sort of... interesting people because they were young and they were- and in some ways we also-

again, we organised our own education. There were hardly any books and we had to... print them ourselves. And it- it was just a very exciting time there.

And what made you want to study medicine? Was that...?

Well, I didn't- initially I wanted to become a film director and then some members of my surviving families told me that it's too risky, and that I should- I should do something where I can earn my living. And medicine seemed something that was- that was very- it was a profession where you can always get a job. And also, it's something where you can help people. And it- there are many options, if that- you don't have to do medicine. You can do other things with that degree. So that's why I did it. And I was very pleased because actually doing a medical course is very nice things- thing to do 'cause you learn many ways of learning. You learn from books. You learn from apprenticeship. And you learn to deal with people. It's a very good course.

You enjoyed it?

Yes, very much. So that's why I went to do medicine.

[01:57:27]

So how many years did you study for your medical...?

Five years. And sort of halfway through I decided I was interested in research. So, I- I read a book that made me very interested in the nervous system. It was called "*How Signals are Transmitted Within the Nervous System*". And I read this book and I thought well this is interesting stuff. And I went to- there was an institute of brain research in Prague. So, I went to that institute. And I met a guy that was working on the nervous system there, called Ernest Gutmann [1910-1977]. And he was a very nice person. And he was very nice to me. So, he took me on. And he was quite a very- quite an established person in research. And so, he took me on as a volunteer. So, I volunteered with him. And then I stayed in his department until I left Prague.

Yes, Ernest Gutmann. So, did he become your- was he your supervisor or...?

He became my supervisor and my mentor and my very good friend. And he- he was a wonderful person.

So, from that time you knew you- you didn't want to be a doctor in the sense of treating patients?

Well, no, I did qualify. And then I went to do neurology. And I did about two years of neurology and I was very disappointed because it was- all- the- the whole profession was such that you were taught how to make a diagnosis. And you could do that quite easily and that was quite exciting. But once you made a diagnosis, you couldn't do anything for the patient. And so I got very upset about that and I went into full-time research. Because it- it was very disappointing to be a doctor and not being able to help anybody.

[02:00:00]

So, you think you have a longer- a bigger impact?

Well, I thought that yes, that it will be more useful to find out what one can do, rather than not being able to do anything. But it was very useful experience to do clinical- a- two years of clinical work.

Yeah. And in that time, so you were there late 40s-

Yes.

Fifties. That was the beginning of the Slansky affair, anti-Semitism...

Yes, that was-

It came up again, so how-?

Yes, that was very, very disappointing, very terrible. Particularly because initially, all the young people, most of the young people that survived the war and the Nazi regime joined the

[Communist] Party. Because that was a sort of alternative that we will be able to change the world and make a more- create a more just society. And- be really sort of instrumental in doing something ex- new and exciting. So, most of us joined the Communist Party. And Ernest Gutmann was also a communist. So, all my friends were communists and then, then it was terribly disappointing in the 50s when- when these communists were using the same instruments as the Nazis. And it became very difficult.

Did you join the Party?

Oh, yes, I was- very enthusiastically in '46 or '47 before it became communist country. But it was something that we really wanted to do. And this is why I call my second book "*Betrayed: A Generation*". Because we were really betrayed by the ideals that didn't fulfil our expectations.

[02:02:16]

And what consequences did it have on your lives at the time? Was there...?

At the time- well... it- the consequences were mainly the inefficiency of the regime. I mean it was a terrible system, really. And so we couldn't- it was impossible to get a flat, to get an accommodation, because they were not able to pull, to- to- to provide enough accommodation for the people that needed it. There wasn't a- there were terrible shortages. There wasn't food. Had to queue for potatoes. For everything. But then there were some advantages too. It was not completely negative. For example, the health service was very good. And I had my two babies - they were born in Prague. And they were- they were- I mean the care, health care, was excellent. And then... also the childcare was much better than in this country. It was really- you got very good childcare. And you got a long maternity leave at a time when in England they didn't even hear of maternity leave. So, there were- it wasn't entirely negative.

Yes.

The other thing that was quite good in communist countries was culture. You could go to the theatre very cheaply. Each- I mean, our institute had- you could get theatre- they got theatre tickets for you. And they arranged- the office arranged for anybody wanted to go to any

cultural event to get cheap tickets. Everybody had holidays. You could- there were sort of houses, holiday places for every person that- that got- and everybody had a holiday.

Yeah.

[02:04:50]

And when I- I remember when I came to England, I was very surprised that there were working class people in England that had never been on holidays. And the disadvantage was of course that you couldn't travel anywhere else. You couldn't mix with westerners. And there were lots of disadvantages. But for ordinary people, I think life was easier than it was here.

Yeah. And when did you get married to Rudi? In which year?

Oh, we got married in '47 or something. We got married in Prague. And Rudi got a flat because he was a Partisan, so we had a flat. And then we had two children. And then we decided that it was- that we couldn't live together. That it was too difficult, too stressful. And that really, we did- that we weren't suited for each other. So, we decided to divorce. And then I met my second husband at a meeting- a scientific meeting. And then we wanted to get married with my second husband. And that was very difficult. So I had to use my experience in illegal crossing borders. [laughs] But I had two small children.

To come out - because your husband was English? Your future husband?

Because he was English. And so, we met across in the Tatra Mountains and in Poland where we couldn't- we couldn't get married. And I was allowed to actually go and visit him as a scientist for a study visit.

Right.

[02:06:53]

So that was possible. But I couldn't get permission to leave and take the children with me. And then what happened was...that- well, Rudi wouldn't move out of the flat and that was terribly awkward because we were divorced and we were in this flat. And it was very difficult to get him out of there. So, my- I- I mean we were- we were very- I mean the friendsh- the very strong friendship ties among the people that I worked with. And there was a rule in Communist Czechoslovakia where you can get a flat somewhere else if you worked a certain number of hours a year on a building site. But you had to work- I don't know, I mean I could have never got that. So, the whole institute all my colleagues went to work and they gave me their hours. So, then I got a flat - separately. And I moved with the children and I left Rudi in our flat. But it was then he sort of- he was a very good dad and he really looked- was- had very strong ties to the children. So, they were going quite often to see him. And then one day he came back and he said he's going for a sabbatical to Russia. And... and he wants- he brought all their toys and he said he won't be seeing them for a year. So, I thought that was very odd. So, I checked it and he was not going to Russia. He was going to a meeting in Austria. So, I knew that I've got to get out or I'll never get out of that place if I don't go out now.

Because you think you would have been punished, so to speak?

[02:09:04]

Well, I would have been stuck or never been allowed to leave. So, I was invited to a meeting to Poland at the same time. And I had a passport that is a special passport that was given to people that were invited to scientific meetings. And it said that I can go to Poland through any country of Europe and back to Prague. So, I thought that was an interesting- interesting exit visa. So, I thought that I will go to Poland, and then ask my English husb- future husband to send me an air ticket, Warsaw-Copenhagen-Prague for myself and the children. But the children were not on my passport and they were in Prague and I was in Warsaw. So that's when I had to go back illegally to Prague, pick up my children and take them over mountain to Poland. And got an- get a Danish visa for twenty-four hours. Then I put their name into the passport with my own fair hand. [laughing] And- and then I went to the airport. I got a ticket from my husband and I went to the airport and I took a plane from Warsaw to Copenhagen. And I stayed in Copenhagen and I was there for a year. Because British wouldn't give me visa because at the time the rules for emigrants were that they- you stayed where you landed.

You couldn't go anywhere else. So, I was one year in Copenhagen. I got a very good job there - as a scientist. And for the children, the childcare was absolutely amazing. They were very advanced, the Danes. The children really enjoyed Denmark; they liked it.

So, you managed to cross from Poland to Czechoslovakia and back-

Yes.

... with the two small children? Did anyone help you?

[02:11:30]

Well, back, I came with the small children.

Yes.

There, I went alone. When I went to Prague, I picked up the children and then I took them. And it's interesting because I wrote this down in my book and I described how I left. And then the then Czech Ambassador was at my book launch. And he told me, "Well, you know the place where you left, was the place where the Polish and Czech Resistance always met." There was a hut there, and that was their meeting place. Because at- at the top of a mountain in the... mountain range that I crossed between Czechoslovakia and Poland, there was a hut. And it was a sort of outlook hut. And you could go into this hut either from Poland or from Czechoslovakia. And then you can go out the other side. And it wasn't- it was hardly watched at all, because it was a sort of outlook tower and people just used it for the view. And this is where the resistance people met and then I went on- that way I went to- from Czechoslovakia to Poland. But I had a Polish friend that was very nice to me and he helped me with the children because it was a six-hour hike and that was- they were four and six. And I wouldn't have managed that on my own. So, he- he was waiting for me in that hut.

[02:13:16]

But you managed on the Slovak side by yourself?

On the Czech side. Yes.

On the Czech side.

Yes. And- yeah, but on the Czech side there was a chair-lift.

Aha.

So that wasn't too bad.

So, the chair-lift got you up.

So- so the chair-lift got me to this hut and then in the hut I had my Polish friend.

And what's the place called?

Sněžka, which is "snow mountain". And it's in the *Riesengebirge* [Czech: Krkonoše], at the sort of German- Polish side of the- of Czechoslovakia- in north Czechoslovakia. And it's a very beautiful range of mountains. And then on the Polish side, I went with my- [I think you want your thing- is that all right?] Anyway, on the Polish side, my Polish friend looked after me. And took me to- because I had to stay somewhere, and to collect my visa and forge the passport. And this Polish friend took me. He had a sister-in-law who was a sculptress. And she had a sort of huge big atelier. And so, we stayed in that atelier of hers. And for- for a couple of days until I sorted out my papers. And then we went to the airport. And my Polish colleagues were- I must say- I was very impressed with them, because they were very helpful. They took me to the airport with flowers and toys and everything, and pretended that I'm sort of- I'm their guest of honour so there wasn't very much time for the people to check my passport. So, they sort of pushed me through the controls and then I- I went on the aeroplane.

And what about your Czech friends? Did anyone know of your plans, or...?

[02:15:28]

Only one friend knew of my plans. And I wouldn't have trusted the Czechs not to say anything. But the Poles- nobody gave me away. But the Czechs I wouldn't have been sure about. I had one friend. And Ernest- and I didn't tell anyone. I didn't even tell Ernest because I was worried that it will be more difficult for them, then they will be interrogated to say they didn't know anything. So, it was better if they didn't know anything. And I- I left a meeting and I had- while I was at the meeting, I hurt my leg. And so, I left the meeting saying that I'm going to hospital. So, nobody was reporting me because I was saying that I went to hospital to have my leg checked. But it was- but the Poles were fantastic. They really supported any dissidence.

And at the same time Rudi had left to Austria?

And it was the same day that Rudi left to Austria, I went to Poland.

But he didn't tell you that either?

He didn't know about it. But I knew that he was leaving because he said he's going to Russia and there was no indication anywhere that he was going to Russia.

What about his mother?

Well, she was in Bratislava. I didn't have any contact with her.

At that time...

But I don't think she knew, because he wouldn't have told her. Because it would- it was dangerous to know it.

Yeah – yeah.

So, then I spent a year in Denmark. And then... I had to get married to be able to get to England. And then I married.

In Denmark?

[02:17:31]

No, I went- I got permission to come to England, provided I'll get married within the first week of my arrival. And my mother-in-law, Sidney's mother, she was- I had very good mother-in-laws, both of them. She was very supportive and she'd arranged all this wedding. And I remember I had to borrow a dress from her because I didn't have one.

Yeah. And do you think in the breakdown of your marriage with Rudi that his experiences played a role in it? That...?

Oh, definitely, because he was very paranoid. He was convinced that everybody is trying to do something terrible to him. And it was impossible to live with that. For example, he would come back from the lab and he said he had a terrible day because somebody has hidden his scissors, and so he couldn't cut the filter paper and he couldn't do his experiment. And of course, I mean, who would take his scissors? And there was- every day there was some event that something terrible has happened. And he was also very suspicious of me. He thought that I'm having an affair with everybody that was on the scene, whether or not I even knew them. And it was impossible to- to cope with that.

[02:19:00]

So, he was very affected-

So, he was very affected. And then after the war, or rather very more- very recently, I was wondering whether he survived Auschwitz because he was so paranoid already, or whether he became so paranoid because he was in Auschwitz.

That's an interesting question.

Because it must have been a combination of the two. He must have been quite suspicious of everyone in Auschwitz already.

Yeah.

And then when- when he was there it got worse. And it- it was- and it probably was hard for him too, because it must be terrible to be suspicious of everybody.

Yeah. But you said he was close to your daughters?

He was a very good dad and he really adored my- our children. And when he left, he went to Israel first.

Yes.

And then when we moved to London he came to London because he wanted to be with the children.

So, he moved to London?

[02:20:22]

He moved, he came to London in the 60s because he wanted to be with the family. And they really- the children loved him, the both of them. Particularly the younger one, Zuza, she was terribly fond of him.

And then how long did he stay in London?

Well, again, the reason why he didn't stay was because of his paranoia. Because he worked in- he had a very good job. He worked on- in a place, in an institute for brain research. And then suddenly he got the idea that somebody- that his boss is stealing his ideas and publishing them. And he was employed by the Medical Research Council. So, he wrote to them a letter that his ideas are being appropriated by this guy and that they are cheating him. And of course, the letter went straight back to his boss. And so, he got the sack! And nobody in England would employ him, because he's a troublemaker. And how- he was very good- he was a very good biochemist, but being a troublemaker is unforgivable in this country. And so, he couldn't get a job here. So, then he had- he moved to Boston first and then got a job in Vancouver. But he had to move away again, because of his paranoia. And it

was a shame, because he really liked it in London. He had a very good job and he was close to his daughters. But by that time, his daughters were big enough to travel so, he- they- they met- they had a lot of holidays together and they- they met... And then he got married and his wife was very friendly with particularly the younger daughter. And they- that worked out well. But-

Yeah. So what happened to you then in England when you came?

Pardon?

What happened to you in England when you-?

When I came?

Mn-hnn. With the children.

Well, first of all, I was very surprised how bad the childcare was in this country. And I was also very surprised that there are many types of freedom. Cause the freedom for women - women - was much less than that in Czechoslovakia. So, it was a big shock, because-

[02:23:13]

In which way Gerta? In which way?

This was in '59.

But in which way?

In which way, that there was much more discrimination against women here than against women in Czechoslovakia.

But in the workplace or...?

Everywhere. In the workplace, everywhere. I remember I went for a job interview in- at University College in '59 or '60. Must have been '60. And I was pregnant with my first daughter. And this guy that interviewed me said that, "Well, you are very suitable for this job but I can't give it to you because it wouldn't be fair to your child." And, you know, it was this sort of thing that you would never have expected anywhere else. But I was very lucky because one of my colleagues, who was a very important person and was a Nobel Prize winner, he liked my work. And so, he got me a lot of help for getting a good job. And- and he was also prejudiced but he over- could overcome it. But there was a lot, for example, there's a Physiological Society in this country. And- and a Journal of Physiology. And if you are a man, you put your initials- your name, and your initials to a paper. If you are a woman, you have to put your name and your first name to a paper. And- and I remember I once gave a paper to the Society and I put 'G. Vrbova' or 'G. Hilton', I don't know, because Hilton was my husband's name. And so, they said I have to put my first name there. And I said, "I'm not putting it, because I don't like it. It's too German." So, there were sort of little things that were quite offensive to women.

[02:25:29]

Yeah.

But what was good about this country was that if you really were a- a good scientist, that- that was really what mattered most. And you- for example, I was a foreigner, a woman, and I got a grant from the MRC [Medical Research Council] for my salary and for two Postdocs and that is- today that wouldn't happen. So, the actual somebody trusted you, and had confidence, then you could-

So where did you start to- to work?

Well, my first job was at the Royal Free. And that was a- she was a woman professor at the Royal Free and she gave me a job. And this Jenny that phoned me, was my first colleague in that Royal Free Hospital pharmacology department. And then I got an independent grant from the MRC to set up my group. And then I got space at King's College to set up a group to do research on what I wanted to do. And that's when I had my salary and two Postdocs that I could employ. So, then I went to King's College. And then my husband, Sidney, got a

job as Professor of Physiology in Birmingham. And then I had to move there and I was very upset because my two daughters just settled into schools here. And then I had to take them to Birmingham. And I had two children here in London that were born here and that were settling. And then we all had to move to Birmingham. And... well, I had very good facilities for work in Birmingham but- but I didn't want to move. I felt I'd moved enough. And then- but then we moved to Birmingham and I was there for twelve years.

[02:27:47]

So, a long time. So, you managed to do your work and you had four children.

Yes. Well, it was easier in a way in Birmingham, because we lived very near the university. So, I could come home for lunch and look after the children. And so that was easier but- but it, it- it was a big disadvantage to have to move again after three years in London. We moved again to Birmingham.

And did you work for the university as well?

Yes, I was teaching quite a bit of physiology. But- but then my second marriage collapsed and that was- you know, there were just too many tensions there because the children from my first marriage and the children from the second marriage. And- and then I think that my husband wasn't very suitable to be head of department. So, I think he got very frustrated and then... we divorced. And then I came to London again.

And how old were your children by then?

Well, one of them was at Edinburgh University. She was a medical student. And the other one was taking a year off between university and- and secondary education. She came- she came with me. And we went for a year to Australia before I went to England.

Aha?

And that's when three of my children came with me to Australia. My old- my second daughter and two younger ones. And we spent one year in Melbourne. It was very nice.

And did you think of emigrating to Australia or-?

[02:30:00]

Well, I think that the- my- the children didn't want to go to Australia first. When they came there, they wanted to stay there. But I didn't think of emigrating then. No, I, I somehow felt I belonged to Europe.

Yes.

But we had a wonderful year there. And it was very nice for the children. It's a very good country for- for young people.

And following that you came back to London?

I came back, well I came back to Birmingham for about a year, because I already had this job in London but I knew I'll have to move. That was in '76, I moved to University College. And that's where I was till the end.

That's where you stayed. In which department?

It was first anatomy and then it was developmental neuroscience. It was- changed names. But I was teaching anatomy for quite a bit.

And what was then your main research? Your focus of research?

My research was mainly on how nerves and muscles interact with each other, and what happens when this interaction breaks down. And it's related to sort of neuromuscular disorders of children, and to spinal cord injury and to any condition where people can't move properly when this interaction between nerves and muscles breaks down. And so that's- was my research. And I had a lot of female PhD students, because they all came to me because I was a sort of role-model. Because there weren't many, sort of, women scientists. So, I had- most of my PhD students were women. Not all, but a lot.

That's really interesting. Because on the Continent there were more women scientists probably.

[02:32:14]

Yes, yes. Well, I don't know, but they were more recognised. And also, it depended whether you could get money for your students or not. And I was quite lucky because I didn't have problems getting money for them.

So, you enjoyed your time at UCS?

Oh, I enjoyed my time, yes. And I enjoyed my time in Birmingham. I had some very interesting time in Birmingham. That's when we got the bungalow in Wales.

Aha – yes?

And I- but I don't think my children enjoyed Birmingham very much. I think that my oldest daughter went to a very fancy school - King Edwards High. And that was a very sort of traditional school. And the other schools in Birmingham they were- they were very bad really.

And what sort of identity did you want to give to your children? I mean, you had moved by now, many times. You'd lived in different countries. You spoke-

I wanted them to be able to adjust. Wherever they were, to do the thing that they enjoyed doing and to adjust. And... I guess that's what I did achieve. I didn't want them to be either very Czech, or very Jewish or very anything. But for example, my second daughter, Zuza, she wanted very much to be, to be Czech and Slovak. And she was very upset because she forgot it, the language. When we came here, she couldn't speak it. So, she was taking lessons to learn Slovak.

And did you join any synagogues or any other- I don't know, organisations or-?

[02:34:15]

No...no. I didn't. Well, my, my mother-in-law, Sidney's mother was- she was a very active Jewish person. She was in WIZO [Women's International Zionist Organisation] and synagogue and she, she took them all- she took the children to all sorts of Jewish holiday places. And I remember that, that once she fixed up a holiday at a Jewish holiday place somewhere in- round the coast, around London. And my son was about eight, and Caroline was ten and they both went to this holiday place. And Peter, that's my son, was- was washing his socks. And got very told off because it was Friday evening. [laughing] And he was so proud that he was washing his socks. But they all knew that they- they actually- all the children were very fond of Rudi. Even the second lot. And Peter was very devoted to him. And so, they knew about the Holocaust, and they knew about- that they were Jewish. And that there was something different about them.

And did you talk about your past a lot?

Oh, yes. We did talk about it. And- and I remember that Peter was fourteen when he read Rudi's book. And it made a terrible impression on him. Rudi didn't talk to his children about his experiences. Only after I told them about it. He didn't want them to know anything about it. And this was because when I asked him about it, he said that he thought it would be too painful for them to know what he went through. So, they heard about it - later on. And I think when we were in Birmingham he came and told them about it.

And do you think it affected them?

I think it affected Helena, the older one, yes. I think that she had a very strange relationship with him anyway.

[sound break]

Yes, you were saying it had a bigger effect you think on your oldest daughter?

It had a bigger effect on my oldest daughter because she was a- because Rudi was a bit of a sort of male chauvinist. And she was a very- when she was about sixteen, she became very

ardent- very enthusiastic feminist. And she didn't like his attitude to women. And then he had a girlfriend here who she got very fond of. And then this girlfriend got pregnant and he ditched her. And she got absolutely furious. They had terrible arguments about that. And I think that- well, I think because she had this very feminist attitude, she didn't get on with him. And Zuza was quite different, because - my second- his second daughter - because she didn't care. She just loved him as he was. And she- she was a different person.

Yeah. Yeah. And your other children? Do you think they are affected by your experiences or by...?

[02:38:30]

Yes, I think- Caroline keeps telling me that I was a very unusual mother. And that I never got over this trauma that I left my mother. And that that showed in my relationship. I don't know how, but you would have to ask her. But she feels I was a different person because of my experiences.

In which way? How does she see it?

She thinks that- she felt that I couldn't give them unconditional love. That there was always something that was holding me back. But I don't think it's true. I think that, that's how she feels. But she's the only one that feels that. The others never said anything. Peter said that, my son, said that I took too much time for my profession. He said that I was telephoning for hours discussing my work and he wanted to talk to me and I was on the phone. And that probably was true. But that's something else.

And how do you see it? How do you think your experience shaped your later life? How do you- how do you feel?

About my experience?

Yes, and how it affected you.

Well, I think that it- it did affect me in that... I was much more careful than I would have been, with human relationships. But not careful enough, I think. [laughs] But I don't know, it's because my early childhood was such a happy childhood. And I think- so that set me up and I was able to- to be positive even when things weren't very good. I- in fact I think that I probably was too trustful.

But you also wanted to be independent in a way, I mean, you were-

[02:41:04]

Well, I was very concerned that I should have my own- my own place. My own space. And this was one reason why it- it probably didn't work out with me, with my husbands. Because probably I wanted too much of my own space. ...And the other thing is, that I was for some reason in a way I was maybe too successful in my profession. And because we had a similar profession, it did affect my relationships with my partners, because they didn't like that.

So, you were all in the scientific field-?

Yes, yes. And because everything worked. For example, with my second husband I've learned an awful lot from him and everything worked fine for us, until suddenly I was invited to more meetings and I was getting more money for research. And I had a bigger group. And that's when things started to go - difficult.

How do you think your life, or- do you sometimes think how it would have been different if the Holocaust hadn't happened?

I probably would have been- I probably wouldn't have studied medicine. I probably would have become a film director or something. I would have gone another way, because I would have stayed at home and I would have had the background and more security. So, I would probably have done something different and I think my life would have been different in that sense. But I'm pleased I was- I did science, because that was very exciting.

Yes – yes. But you didn't have that security.

But if I would have had more security, I wouldn't have gone that way.

And-

Because after the war, I was very insecure. I had- I had no parents. I had no money. I had nothing.

Yeah.

I had some family but they were all trying- struggling to get- to get to terms what- with their lives, so- I was really left to myself.

Did you stay in touch with your Hungarian family? With the- the other sister?

[02:44:05]

Oh, yes. And one of my aunts, she was fantastic. And she was really a sort of surrogate mother to- grandmother to my children. And...for example, Caroline, that's my third daughter, she had- she always had difficulties. Emotional difficulties. And the only person that could cope with her was my Hungarian aunt. She learned English, and they corresponded and they were very, very close. And my aunt was a fantastic person. And also, I have a cousin who was my father's brother's son in- and he was- he was in Prague. And he was a part of that dissident circle in Prague. He was a writer. And he was sort of [Vaclav] Havel's mate and part of that dissident circle. He's called Karol Sidon. And he was very close to my aunt. And she converted him. He was Catholic, because my- my uncle married a Czech woman and that was their son. And so, he survived, because his father was taken to Terezin and killed there and Karol survived in Prague. And my aunt sort of took him on and converted him to Judaism [laughing] and – literally, sort of- and then he became Chief Rabbi of Prague. And he was Chief- he's still in Prague. He's-

Aha, who is that?

He's called Karol Sidon.

So, he's related? He's your...?

Well, he's my cousin.

Once removed or- something like that?

No. First cousin. Because- my father's brother's son.

Yes, first cousin.

[02:46:14]

So- yes. And he was also- without my aunt I don't think he would have converted to Judaism. Then he went to study all these rabbinical things in Heidelberg first. And then he went to Israel and then he became Chief Rabbi of Prague. Well, it was all my aunt!

Yes. Yes... And your doctor foll- your doctor- your daughter followed you into the medical field, so to speak?

My oldest daughter, yes.

Yes.

And she- she was very- she was a very amazing person, because she went to Papua New Guinea to do research in malaria and that's where she- she got killed and... Well, at least her work continues, because I established a foundation at the school of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in her name. And about two years ago I had a letter from them, that somebody who is anonymous - wants to stay anonymous - has put an awful lot of money into that foundation. And so now they are able to give grants to two people to do research in malaria. And they sort of- it's all in her name and she's recognised. Now I don't know what to do for my second daughter. It's- but-

Who- who also passed away?

Yes, she had cancer. And that was terrible because she so much wanted to live. And she was so vibrant and- I don't know what to do about- well, the march is hers.

Yes.

So- and- and her children. She has two children so that's- that's her. And this little one is very sweet.

And grandchildren?

Yes, that's her grandson.

So, you are a great-grandmother?

Great grandmother, yes. So, she has- her genes are being kept alive.

Yeah.

But it is terribly bad luck that I lost that family- the whole family!

Yeah. And another trauma. I mean it must- I mean, your first daughter died-

Yes. My-

...young.

[02:49:08]

...first two children. But you can't bring them back and they have contributed and done a lot in this world. That's all you can say.

Yeah. And in fact, did you all live together here in this house, in Muswell Hill?

Well, no, because- well we did live I this house but when we came here the two older girls already were at university.

Right.

So, they had their things here, but they were hardly ever here. And when they came, they wanted to go to Wales so they- they were mostly in- in Wales when they had holidays and when they were studying for exams, they all wanted to go to that place in Wales.

And Gerta, now where, where would you think is your home? Where do you feel like home?

Now, I feel at home here. Very much so. And I like this house. And I like being in London, in Muswell Hill. But I still- I go to Prague quite a lot, because I have my best friend who actually knew that I was leaving with my two children.

Yeah?

And who helped me quite a lot during the time- during those two days when I was collecting the money- getting ready to leave. She's called- she's called Hannah and my oldest granddaughter is called Hannah, after her. Well, she- she lives in Prague and so I go and visit her. And we manage to keep our friendship.

And to Slovakia? Do you go to Slovakia?

[02:51:11]

I go to Slovakia, to Zilina to this march.

To march.

But I don't have a- I don't have anybody in Slovakia that- because in Prague I have got this Hanka and then my cousin Karol.

Right.

He's in Prague, so he's family. And I don't have any family in Slovakia. They all moved to Vienna. I have some- my mother's two nieces, they lived in Bratislava, but they don't live there anymore. They went to Vienna. So, I sometimes go to Bratislava just to meet up with them, but very seldom. And do you know Fedor Gál?

Yes.

Well, Fedor got a big prize! A special prize from President, for being- promoting civil rights and democracy in- in Slovakia. And a very prestigious prize he got - last year. So, he's very pleased about that.

And he's the organiser of this march?

Well, he started to- he helped me to get it going. I couldn't have got it going without him because he's a very politically very important person. And he- now he got his prize and he had his seventy-third birthday.

So, this is the commemorative march.

Yes, the commemorative march. And he- well, he's a political sort of personality.

So, and you've also written two books about your own experiences.

I've written two books.

And when- when did you write them?

Well, the first one I wrote when I retired. Because I wrote other books before that. I- I have about three other books that have nothing to do with-

Aha, not autobiographies? Yes?

No- they're professional. The first one I wrote when I retired, which was in the 80s. And it came out- well by the time I'd written it I think it was 2000 or something. And the second one I wrote quite shortly afterwards. And when I wrote it, I thought well, it's a bit boring. Nothing happening there. But now it's interesting because quite a lot of people like the second one more than the first one. Because it's more related to their- lives. It's the sort of things that were happening there. And the history of eastern European development after the war.

[02:54:14]

Yeah. Because what I'd like to know is whether, you know, in terms of your own, what you were talking about first, whether you were talking first about I guess, Rudi, and his experiences, you are a witness so to speak, or about your own experiences. You know, whether- how that worked together.

Well, I don't know because I used to talk mainly about Rudi when I did talks. I was talking about his escape. And now, people are asking me to talk about my own experiences. And I found that- find that much more difficult, actually. I've- I've been invited to go to Oxford to talk about my first book. Oxford has some Hungarian Society and they invited me to talk about that. So, I've got to really think how to put it, because... I much prefer to talk about other people's experiences. It's difficult to talk about yourself.

Yes. It's-

But you see, in the second book, I could now talk much more about the people that I've been with. Because they were all interesting people.

Well, I thought you were very open in your descriptions. I mean-

[02:55:44]

Yeah, well. Well, for example I'm very proud that over this period when people couldn't go abroad from Czechoslovakia, that I managed to keep my friendship with my friends in- in Czechoslovakia. And for example, with my friend Hanka I met in Budapest, over the years

we always managed to meet in Budapest. And- and we smuggled a computer to Czechoslovakia through Budapest. She had a son and she- he was very keen on computers when he was a- a young boy. And you couldn't get them at- couldn't get any computers in Czechoslovakia at that time. So, she asked me whether I could get her a computer. And so we got a- I don't really know these- these boxes. The Sinclair, that [Sir Alan] Sugar...

Yes.

... discovered. And they- they were quite small boxes, so I got this Sinclair and went to Budapest with my daughter Caroline. And Hanka came from Prague. And she then smuggled this computer back to Czechoslovakia, pretending she was pregnant. [laughing] She put it over... But we sort of managed to do things together even when we were separated.

And Gerta what do you think for you is the most important part of your Slovak Jewish heritage, or, of your Czech Slovak background?

[02:57:40]

I think it's memories of my family. Because they set me up. Memories of my grandmother and my parents and my early beginning. And I think also they made me feel enthusiastic about things.

So, you're grateful to them?

Yes. I'm very grateful to them. But... I am also very concerned that some of the work I did should have lasting- should last. That it shouldn't disappear.

Your scientific work?

Yes. That's been very important for me.

And what is your proudest- what do you feel proudest about? Or is there anything in particular?

Well, I think that what we discovered is that you can- you can change muscles by making them doing different things. And that that can help people that are paralysed. And that you can, during development, have a period where you can influence the development of nerves and muscles and that can help a lot of children with neuro-muscular disorders. And that's now becoming very important.

It's sort of stimulating...

[02:59:26]

Yes, we can stimulate muscles. But we can also do some particular way of exercises and- and you can also stimulate pathways in the spinal cord that can make people walk again for spinal cord injury. And that it's all based on the basic research that we did. And that whatever is going to happen, can develop further and help more people. For example, now they discovered that you can genetically manipulate- sort of improve a disease by putting in some particular substances into the spinal cord of sick children. But you can only do it at a particular stage of development. If you do it later, it doesn't work. And I think we defined quite well this stage of development, when they can do it. And that should be very useful. Because you can then help these children to become healthy if you give them that gene at that stage. So it is- there are some things that actually are helpful.

What I also wanted to ask you- whether post war, Rudi and Freddy met again?

Rudi and who?

Freddy.

Oh, yes. Freddy was at my wedding!

Aha. In Prague?

No, we were married in Bratislava.

In Bratislava, ok.

And Freddy was at my wedding. And Rosin and Mordowicz, they were all in my- at my wedding. And they were terribly drunk.

Aha.

I haven't got good memories of that wedding, because they were terribly drunk and they were just singing rude songs.

[03:01:44]

That's interesting, because he was also present at my mum's wedding. Freddo.

Pardon?

Freddy was also at my mother's wedding.

Yes?

I have a picture

Really?

Later- it was 1964.

Well, I had a lot of pictures and then it turned out that I put the film in the wrong way around and I didn't have a single picture left.

So, when did they then become estranged? Or I mean, obviously, Freddy stayed in Bratislava and Rudi went to Canada...

Well, I think that Rudi didn't like Freddy's wife. He had very big objections to her.

Right.

He said that she- she was not behaving well in Auschwitz. And I think it's for this reason that Rudi never wanted to marry anybody who was in a concentration camp. Because he said he would never be sure. And it probably- he probably wasn't sure of himself either. Who knows?

So, you- that was the-

But I think that was when Freddy married, Rudi didn't want to have much to do with him. And I don't know whether it's true or not. ...I've never found out.

No, that's something to look at actually. Interesting.

But that's when they got- when- when Rudi told me that he's not really very keen to be in contact with the family.

[03:03:28]

And then he wrote his book. When did they each publish their books? So...?

Well, Rudi published his in the 60s-

Right.

After the Eichmann trial. And Freddy published it about five years later.

Right. But as a novel and all this- a bit different?

No, it was just sort of a biography. Well, Freddy's was more stylized.

Yes, that's what I mean. Freddy's not Rudi's. Freddy wrote it in the third person.

It was more stylized. Yes.

But they never appeared together anywhere talking about their experiences?

No. Well, they did at the wedding, so obviously they.

Yes, but I mean not...

Not, not- not together.

Because it seems there's more interest today, than you know- I mean- it seems the interest is increasing.

Well, I think that also- I mean they must have felt that being together and talking about it was bringing back memories they didn't want to relive. And whether they both had also done some things that they didn't want to remember, is difficult to know!

Yeah – yeah.

And they must have done, because you can't go through it, totally innocent. You know, even if they just remembered taking a piece of bread off somebody. ...So how can you cope with these?

[03:05:08]

Yeah. But are you surprised that for example the marches, that so many people are going on it? I mean I have to say you know, when I went to Zilina, I was amazed that so many people, young, old, yet, who are going, who are interested in-

Well, no, I- I think it is a very educational thing. And I do believe that doing physical activity in the same way as they did, brings something out that's different from just watching. Cause if you go to Auschwitz, you are a passive onlooker. And this way it's a little bit more active.

I mean I actually just recently thought it is surprising that there is no memorial in Auschwitz. I mean-

That what?

Why is there no space in Auschwitz which shows... You know, you can probably locate the place where this hiding place was.

Yes.

Why is it-you know, that's something to- that occurred to me the other day.

Why is it in Auschwitz?

No, in Auschwitz itself...

Yes.

...there should be a- at the place.

Well, this is what now, you know, my son, Peter, he got very involved in this whole thing and he is on the committee of this... foundation that's now organising the march. And he now wants to have in Auschwitz a- a sort of place where they would commemorate this-

Okay. So...

...Your idea.

Okay. His idea.

And he's proposed to this, to Mojmir- but Mojmir's not very active so I think Peter's going to Zilina again. And- with Robin. You know Robin is Rudi's second wife. They want to sort of set up a special museum. But you know I was in Yad Vashem last- last year - the first time. Have you been there?

Yeah.

And they have their sort of place of- where they show that there was some resistance. And they have Kreisky there talking - oh - an hour and a half. And they have ten minutes of Rudi. And nobody- Freddy isn't there at all. And ten minutes of Rudi and half an hour of Kreisky or an hour, who didn't actually manage to do anything. And there are other people that did resistance that they should have there.

[03:08:00]

Yeah.

So that section of the Yad Vashem is very badly presented.

So, their voices you feel should be heard stronger?

Pardon?

Their voices should be stronger?

Well, I think there should be more about the fact that it was possible to- to do something.

Yeah.

That it wasn't entirely impossible.

I mean I wonder whether there is any interview of, you know- I know there are interviews with Rudi, because he was also in the Shoah film,

Yes.

you know. But [inaudible]

Yes, it- that- and also the Spielberg has a lot of Rudi's interviews.

Yes – yes.

But do they have any [of] Freddy's?

I doubt it. I doubt it. I wonder whether there's any recording. I mean, that's- that's an interesting thing to find out. I mean... I, I was in Bratislava, you know, when I was sixteen or seventeen and I stayed with them for about a week. But of course, I didn't have a recorder. I didn't have any equipment. And it would have been good now if I had something in my hand.

Yes, if you would have had something. Yes.

But I didn't do it. I didn't do it. So- anyway. Gerta is there anything else we haven't discussed which you would like to add?

[03:09:24]

Well, only that... I think that we should not forget that- that this happened. And that one should fight against any backwardness and terrible things that are happening today. I mean, if you think about it, that- that there is a war in Syria for seven years. And people can't sort out their differences other than killing each other, is something after this Holocaust experience- we haven't learned anything! And I think that this is the message I'd like to send that one should learn that you don't achieve anything by killing people. And the Holocaust was a sort of most unique thing that ever happened, actually. This technological, planned murder of a group of people.

Yeah.

And that inclusion is a terribly important thing.

In general?

Yes!

Of...

Of different groups. And if you are a citizen, you should have a right as a citizen. I mean the fact that the Jews were citizens of these countries that killed them - they killed their own citizens - is unbelievable.

Yeah. And as you said with the Slovak Jews that they- the Slovaks, they paid.

Well, they paid to have them killed. That was unique, actually.

That was unique. So, what do you feel about Slovakia today? What- what do you feel?

I have very ambiguous feelings. And it depends who you speak to - I think. I don't know. I- I think- I wouldn't like to live there. And I mean, Fedor moved away and a lot of people moved- liberal people sort of moved to Prague, a lot of them. I don't think that- well, I think that I met some people in Zilina, Slovaks, that are trying to come to terms. But this is the general problem of eastern Europe, that they haven't come to grips with their guilt. The Hungarians also. They haven't come, you know, they haven't coped. Because in Germany they have actually been very good about trying to understand what happened. But in- in Poland, anywhere, they- they didn't come to grips.

[03:012:48]

And how- my second question is, how do you feel about Germany? I mean, did you ever- did you have problems going to Germany – post war?

No.

No.

No, I didn't have problems going to Germany. And I have a lot of German friends that- that are very decent people. And I've got a German lodger here Nicki. And she was very sweet because she came two years ago. Because I'm renting- I've got a sort of flat upstairs that's quite independent. And I'm renting that, because I don't want to be here alone. So, she came to look at this. And she liked it very much and she said she would like to stay here. And then she- I told her I've got to talk to some other people that also came. And then she came next

day and then she said to me, “I don’t think you’ll have me.” And I said, “Why?” She said, “I read your book and I’m German.” But you know, I mean, isn’t it terrible that people should still feel this? She’s about thirty. She’s- you know, third generation. And she’s a very nice person. I’m really glad she’s here. She went- she went on a march. You may have met her there.

Maybe. But you also said your grandchildren are also very interested in your- in your story.

Yes, they are. Particularly the- particularly – well, all of them - but particularly Peter’s children. They are now nineteen and twenty-one. And they- particularly the nineteen-year-old. He- he’s sending me different articles. He sent me an article by Kershaw the other day. Why was 20th century Europe so violent? Why was there so much violence? And they’re interesting articles because he does history and politics. And so, when he finds something interesting, he sends it to me.

[03:15:05]

And they want you to write another book?

Well, he wants me to. He says he’s- he rang me yesterday and then he said he’s coming back in June and that’s when we have to start writing. [laughing]

And what would that book be about?

Well, that book would be about what life was like in England. Because I haven’t written about that.

Ok.

About how we have different kinds of freedom and how- well, how it was- what it was like for this generation of emigrants.

Yes. We got a glimpse of it today, but we look forward to reading that. But did you ever experience anti- any anti-Semitism or xenophobia here in England? Did you ever feel...?

No, I never had experience of anti-Semitism in England. No. Did you?

No.

No, I didn't.

Not yet.

But there must have been because at- when I first came, it was just the time when they allowed Jews to enter some of the clubs that they - didn't. And Jack, this is my second. He directed this play called "Posh". You know what that is about? About this group in Oxford that came from Eton.

Yeah?

And they put a play on in Newcastle. He's in Newcastle. The Newcastle University - play group. And he directed it. And there was a lot of discrimination there. And he wanted to take it to Edinburgh, but they- he's now going with another play to Edinburgh.

OK, Gerta thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

Well, thank you for coming and it was a long day for you. I'm sorry.

We're not quite finished, so we're going to look at some of your photographs, if you have.

Oh, where are they?

I don't know. So- in the meantime, thank you so much.

And you're going to come and look at the photographs. Not now?

Let's see what we're going to do.

[End of interview]

[03:17:42]

[03:17:58]

[Start of photographs and documents]

So, I should point?

No, just tell us who is on the picture, please.

Photo 1

This- on the picture is my grandmother and my grandfather. My grandmother Jeanette and my grandfather George. It's in English, I think. And the children, the first one on the left is called Karol, that was the oldest one. And next to my grandfather is my father, Max. Then if you look from left to right, there is my aunt Adela, Olga, then Sandor is in the middle. Then Manci is next and then the one in the corner is called Marishka.

When? When please? When was this taken?

In 1925.

And where?

In Trnava.

And who survived of- of this group of people?

Manci, which is- Mancie, Marishka. That's all. Mancie and Marishka. Those two ladies. And all the others were killed.

Photo 2

Yes, well it's an engagement party. It's a double engagement party of my father and mother, and my aunt and uncle. My mother [Josephine] is sitting in the front row opposite next to my father [Max] the very people in the front are my mother and father. Then behind my mother

is my father's sister Ada. And next to her, is her future husband Artur. And next to Art is my grandmother on my mother's side called Helena. And next to my- next to Ada is my grandfather and then these are their children. They had a- and people they were married to. And behind my mother is- beside my mother is somebody called, her brother, called Ferdinand. And behind is Jetti, my aunt. And then behind Jetti is my aunt Kornel. And next to them are their husbands. And I don't recognise all of them but they have thirteen children, so, all the thirteen children and husbands, some of the husbands are there.

Do you know where and when it was taken?

Well, it was taken in Trnava. And it must have been in the sort of 20s, or no, maybe even before that, because my mother got married in 20s – about '21 or '22. 1921, 1922.

[03:21:48]

Photo 3

Well, this is- this is my- I had a tricycle. And I was driving it in the courtyard of our house in Trnava. And this is the picture of my great effort to drive a tricycle.

Photo 4

Well, this is a place where people sat down to rest after they had a swim in the swimming pool in Trnava, which was a very nice pool for us and we used to go swimming there. And the people there are friends and family. I don't know the person at the left, but then next to him is a little girl and that's me. And behind me is my mother. And next to me is my cousin Manci. And behind Manci is my uncle Hans. And next to Hans is his future wife, Olga. And I think this is- this is most of the people there. The others I don't remember. They are friends but I don't remember the names.

When was it taken?

And it was taken in 1933.

Photo 5

Yes, this is a picture taken in 1944 in Bratislava. And it's in the summer as you can see from the summer dress. And it's me and Rudi [Rudolf Vrba] walking on the street.

Photo 6

Yes, well this was in 1946, in Prague. And it's my- to the right is my friend Inge. Next to it- next to her, it's me and to the left is my other friend Eva. And the three of us came as students to Prague in 1945 and stayed there.

Photo 7

This is a picture of- taken after my graduation. And you can see in the middle is myself with a flower. Next to me is Rudi. And then the other side of me is my mother-in-law, Helena. And next to her is a surviving brother of my mother called Arnold. And the other side of Rudi is his step-sister, Fanci. And next to her is the wife of my mother's brother, Terka.

Which year?

And it was in 1950.

[03:24:58]

Photo 8

This is a picture of my mother-in-law standing up. And on her left is her husband. And then there are my- our two children, Helena and Zuza. And Rudi is next to- next to them, holding them. And Helena is at this stage five and Zuza is three, so this must have been in '55. Or- no, '57. Just before we left England. But before we left Czechoslovakia. And this is the only picture that I have of my mother-in-law together with the children.

Photo 9

This is a picture of myself and my second husband, shortly after we arrived to London in 1960. And it's somewhere in London in- in a street. I don't know where, but it's 1960. Sort of must be autumn because I've got a coat. And it's my second husband Sidney and myself.

Photo 10

Well, this is a picture that was taken in our garden in Birmingham. And it's- I'm holding, in my arms, my son Peter. And my other arm is around my daughter Caroline, which was my third daughter. And Peter was my only son.

Photo 11

Yes, this is a picture that was taken at the launch of my second book. And the people in the first row from left to right is Jack, which is my grandson. Zoe, my granddaughter. Then there is me, and next to me is Danny, my grandson. In the second row from left to right there is Jane, who is the partner of my son Peter. Then Hannah, my granddaughter. Caroline, my daughter. And then Peter behind her. And behind Caroline is part of Matthew. And then next to Peter is Yann, part of Yann. Not all of him. And Zuza and Andrew. I think that's most of them there.

And when was I taken?

And it was taken in 2010, or something like that when my book came out- the second book came out.

[03:03:28]

Photo 12

Well, this is Robin and me. And this is a part of the memorial, Vrba-Wetzler Memorial March where they are crossing the border between Slovakia and Poland. And this is a sort of sculpture that they put up at this site to commemorate this crossing. And that's where they- the marchers stop and read from Wetzler-Vrba's book and- the description of what happened when they crossed the border. And this is really the end of the march because from here on they take the train to Zilina.

Gerta thank you again for sharing your story and showing us your photographs and taking your time.

Well, thank you for doing all this. I mean, it's-

[End of photographs and documents]

[03:29:24]