

IMPORTANT

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Interview Transcript Title Page

Collection title:	AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive
Ref. no:	217

Interviewee Surname:	Botkai
Forename:	Erika
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	26 August 1938
Interviewee POB:	Budapest, Hungary

Date of Interview:	13 March 2018
Location of Interview:	London
Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
Total Duration (HH:MM):	1 hour 24 minutes



REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV217
NAME: Erika Botkai
DATE: 13 March 2018
LOCATION: London
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[Part One]

[0:00:00]

Today is the 13th of March 2018. We are conducting an interview with Mrs. Erika Botkai. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we are in London.

What is your name please?

Erika Botkai.

And when were you born?

Budapest.

And when?

1938, August 26.

Thank you very much Mrs Botkai for allowing us to interview you for AJR Refugee Voices.

Thank you.

Can you tell me a little bit about your family background?

My family background is... Talking about my father, my father's mother was a war widow from the First World War. And she had two boys. One of them my father. I don't know anything about my father's schooling, but all I know that by the time he- passed away at the age of thirty-six, he had managed to build up a very nice textile retail business. He managed to buy a very nice home in a middle-class well-to-do area. And managed to buy a fruit orchard outside Budapest. But, because I was four years old when he was taken away, I really don't know much else about it, except I'm very proud of his achievement. Because my grandmother had obviously, you know, nothing – no, no money to bring the children up - so he done well. So that's my father. My, my mother came from a normal middle-class background. I don't think she was ever expected to, to work. And the war years had done terrible damage to her. She never really fully recovered - mentally. And she had two sisters. I didn't know either of my grandfathers, because one grandfather died in the First World War. The other one came back, but I don't think- he never, ever was fully functional. I don't know. But he died before I was born, so I didn't know either of my grandfathers.

[0:02:55]

And how did your parents meet? Do you know?

I have no idea. I- I really don't know. It's- it's- I think it was not completely un-typical of my mother; she really didn't speak a lot about my father. Didn't speak about the war years a lot. It was very strange. Even when I found out that my father died, there was a group of people who must have come around and told my mother about it. Nobody actually looked after me, you know, or held me or anything. It was a strange time. And when- when my father had a mass funeral, you know, I wasn't with anybody. I was kind of - loose. Very- very strange how people I think were perhaps emotionally damaged- damaged all round.

Yes. When was that mass funeral?

It must have been- well, it must have been in '45, '46. So, my father is in a mass grave in Budapest. The only thing I remember about that funeral that my uncle, my father's brother,

was crying. And as a child I thought “Oh!” – I didn’t know that grown-ups can cry. And, but you know, no- in today’s day of psychology and psychiatry and caring, and... you know, counselling, [laughs] it was completely unheard of. At least in my case.

Yeah.

Yeah?

Yeah.

Yeah? I think people were just there... So, he is- he is [inaudible]. So that’s- really is, as far as I can tell, he was a successful businessman. And my mother just had a... very difficult time during the war.

And before the war, where did they live? Where did they...?

They lived... at the address I gave you...

Which is?

Which was a- a typical assimilated Jewish area. Assimilated Jewish middle-class area.

What was it called?

[0:05:09]

Lipótváros. And looking back, because, you know, when you are a child - or when- we were busy with just- with our own life - you don’t think about it. But looking back, I find it quite impressive, of what they have achieved in a very short time. That of course disappeared completely. So, the Jews really had a very successful time between the wars.

Yes.

Because they came from, you know a- a smaller town. And the family moved to Budapest and then they became so...

Where had they come from?

One side came from Salgótarján, and the other side came from Pécs. But I, I think, you know, my parents, I think they were born in Budapest. So, the family must have just moved. Moved before.

And what are your earliest memories? What- what can you remember?

Well, my earliest memories- because... over the years I keep trying to think what I could remember of my father. And I, I just- I, I was told or I know... that obviously [s]he was very fond of me, you know, as his daughter. So, I remember just one or two little incidents where he was trying to show off with me, like, you know doing headstands or something like that. But I get frustrated- that I can't recall any memory. No sound, no voice- no- you know. But earliest memories, it depends... Well, I, I remember the- the war years. I remember coming out of the, the cellar when the Russians came and I remember somebody must have told me what is the Russian word for 'bread'. Because I still remember I was asking for *chleba*, which is - bread. And as far as the food was concerned, as far as I know, during the war, we survived on beans and hazelnuts. Where my mother got them from, I, I- I don't know.

But you remember being hungry, or...?

Sorry?

Do you remember being hungry, as a child?

[0:08:02]

I don't.

Right.

I don't actually remember crying for food. What I do remember- but this is a, this is a story I heard from my mother. That when we had to leave our home because we were not a yellow-star house, the- my mother passed- handed over a lot of food to the concierge because she couldn't carry it all. And when we were told that we can go back, because our flat had become part of a yellow-star house, my mother did go to the concierge and asked for the some of the food back. And he didn't. And I remember her saying that, "I just said to him: At least for the child, give some food back." So, you know, don't have much love for the Hungarians.

So, tell us what you- what happened to the family, not from your own memories, but...?

To my family?

Yes, but in the war time.

In the war time. Well, my father was taken away in 1942... to forced labour camp. And I may or may not have seen him once or twice during that time. And my mother and her two sisters, they survived in Budapest. And they continued to live in Budapest till they died. And I have no siblings. So, I have one cousin, who is the son of my father's brother. And he lives in Los Angeles. And really the- there was quite- there was a very large family in the place where my father came from in the place that I mentioned - Salgótarján – and all that family perished. I have no recollection of them because, you know, I was too young. I've got an odd photograph. But - they have perished. You know. Without trace. Because again, a smaller town there was nowhere to- nowhere to hide. So, they were rounded up and, and that was it.

[0:10:32]

So, your mother and two sisters, how did they survive in Budapest?

They- they, they survived in Budapest, and then my...

But how- how?

How?

Yes.

Well, somehow or other my mother came back from the brick factory assembly line. And then we stayed in our yellow house- yellow-star house. And...so they somehow managed to, to exist and keep me alive. I remember, you know, when my cousin was ill, my aunt had to go out whilst the bombardment was taking place to try to find a doctor. So, I think it was just- just try to manage to survive. But still during the Nazi occupation, as I mentioned, my father had a- a really nice, lovely textile shop. And the Hungarian Nazis have requisitioned it. And the story goes that my mother had to- was standing at the corner opposite the shop, watching two lorries as- being stocked up from the stock of the shop. And the retail shop, at the end of the war, when we went back, there was just four walls. No window, no glass, no stock - nothing. Yes, then she had to start, you know, selling, a dozen pair of socks or... you know, or some buttons. So, the business never recovered. So, I think, you know, she found it very difficult.

But you said- so you were in the building. And you were told to leave, because it wasn't a Jewish- a yellow-star house?

[0:12:31]

At one point we were, yes, but then we went back.

Where- where did you go?

Oh, it was another yellow-star house nearby.

And then you could move back. So how long were you out of this...?

I, I can't tell you. I can't tell you. But at one- one point because this yellow, yellow-star house where we had to go to was near a church. And in fact, I was baptised as well.

And when were you baptised?

It must have been in '44 or '45. All I remember is the drops of water, or whatever, on my head.

Only you or also your mother?

All, all- all- all I know about- the, the drops of holy water on my- on my head. But I- I don't have any paper proof of it.

Right. So, who- when you came back and it became a yellow-star house...?

Yeah.

Can you describe the flat or- who lived in there with you?

[0:13:30]

Well, when we first went back, there must have been other Jewish people as well. And there were in that two-and-a-half room flat, which was, you know, designed for a family, there were twenty-eight of us. And... I don't know for how long. You know, with one toilet one bathroom. So, it was obviously very distressing for my mother. I don't know for how long. But I have a very, very clear picture of having mattresses and things on the floor. And in fact, one of the children came with measles and the rest of us – all, all the other children - picked it up. And we were all lying with measles.

How many- how many children were there?

I can't tell you precisely.

But there were...

There must have been four or five, six... I remember some of the other people. A young man with ruck- a- big rucksacks on his back. But I don't know, and my mother, again, never talked about them.

And what about food - at that point?

Food?

Yes.

I have no idea. Don't- don't forget, well, yeah I was six years-'44 - I was six years old. One incident I remember that- 'cause you only remember the odd incident. I remember my mother leaning against a wall and crying desperately. And all I remember that apparently, she cried because she found some nits in my hair. In my hair - which is not surprising. But at that time nits meant you know, poverty. And I remember her crying. But food... Funnily enough I never thought about it before, but I can't remember... I just remember a sack of hazelnuts and a sack of beans... during the war. Yeah. You know, obviously I hear- I remember the bombardment. I remember when we came out from a cellar- from the cellar one occasion. The next building was bombed, half of it gone. So, a lot of it depends where you are and when.

[0:16:12]

Yeah.

Yeah?

And were you aware of deportations? I mean, you said...

Of the what?

Of deportations. Of some of the yellow-star houses going. Some people leaving.

Oh, the deportations, sorry. Well, I don't know whether I knew this deportation, but I have a distinct memory of our standing by the window of the flat, and looking out, and there were a whole procession of people lined up. And...

Where were they going?

Well, I don't know, but I assume they were taken to the Danube... or, somewhere- similar. I don't know it for a fact so this is not a historical fact, but I have a very clear picture of seeing people queuing up with rucksacks and bags in their hands. But again, I don't think anybody explained anything to me or told me anything. I was just a bystander. And... What was interesting that, after the war, none of us children ever talked about the war years. You've probably heard this before? I don't know. But our friends- were all Jewish. But we never talked about being Jewish. None of us were religious. But our friends in- instinctively somehow, we drew together, which I thought was interesting. But we didn't- we didn't talk about the war years. Not really till almost to our age now.

Right.

And mother didn't talk about it so I only have little bits of... of memory.

So, for example you just showed me the papers, the Schutzbrief, issued by the Swiss...

Yes. Carl Lutz, yes.

Carl Lutz Ambassador. So, do you know anything about it? How did you obtain- how did she obtain these papers?

I have no- no idea, but I, I... I found it among the papers. I don't even think that my mother said, "Look, here you are." I just- I just found it.

And do you know whether- whether she used it or not? Whether it was useful?

I, I don't know. But the fact is that Carl Lutz had saved thousands of Jews with- with the papers that he issued. But whether it actually saved us- all I know that we- we stayed right through the war, except going to that other yellow-star house, in my home.

Yes.

So, I don't know.

But do you think that the Russians came just in time?

Well, I, I'm- I'm, I'm certain. I'm certain because it is a fact that they were rounding people up and taking them to the Danube by then.

And shooting them.

And just- yeah. Yeah, because by that time they ran out of patience. They didn't have enough time to put them on the train. The war was being lost. And they, they- they... An interesting point- an important point to make is, yes, the- the Hungarian Jews didn't seem to be doing any resistance or anything- anything like that. And they are blamed for going like sheep to the slaughterhouse. But they couldn't have. The, the Nazis- the Germans couldn't have done what they have done, without the cooperation of the Hun- enthusiastic cooperation of the Hungarians. And so, without the help of the local population, there was nothing they could- they could do.

[0:20:22]

Yes.

And, you know, there are plenty of examples. My mother handed out some stock from our shop to some non-Jewish friends when she could see how things are going. And after the war again she went back, "Could we have some of the stock back?" Oh, no, they were all robbed. So, you know, it doesn't leave a good taste for the Hungarian- Hungarians in our- in our mind. But I don't know if you've seen the film *1945*? If you have a chance... I- if you have a chance to, to catch up with it somewhere, it's very interesting. How people can behave in... war situation. But that's an interesting film.

So, at what point did you find what had happened to your father?

Well, I really don't know precisely because I just remember being a...a child. And- and an- an uncle of mine sitting at far end of the table and my mother sitting next to him. And there

were some other people but I can't tell you who. And my mother crying. And I just, for some reason I- I think that that was the point when she was told. But nobody told me.

And what had happened to him?

All I know, that he was on his way back. He was taken to Russia. And I think his- unit, they started to go back to Hungary. And he got as far as Kópháza, as far as I know. And that's where he- he died. And he is supposed to be in this mass grave in Budapest - from Kópháza. And all I know is what my uncle put out in a testimony for Yad Vashem, that he died of starvation and beating.

Was he together with him?

I think at one point they were. I have the odd photograph where they were still together.

So, they went to the forced labour together?

Together, and- or ended up in the same- I-I don't know. Again. You would think that my uncle would have spoken and told me about it. And he didn't. And as a child I didn't ask.

Yes. Where did he live, post-war, the uncle?

[0:23:16]

Well, he lived in Budapest and then he- after, in '56 he moved to Los Angeles, to America. So... it's- it's very- very strange. But I must say, I didn't think of asking. That's again fairly common. When you are young, you don't ask. And when you are ready to ask it's too late. Yeah. Well... So- so that that was it, basically. But my mother's two sisters they also somehow... had a... They- their lives changed completely. They were a- they have become cowed; they, they became afraid of things.

Yeah...

They changed completely.

Did they stay together post-war, the three sisters?

Well, they were all in Budapest, but they didn't live together. My- my grandmother survived and she lived with the youngest sister until she died.

And your mother and you?

And I lived with my mother till I left.

And did you go back to the- did you go stay where you were in the same flat?

In the same flat- yes. Yes, except we had- obviously my mother was frightened by the communists that they will put another family in because it was too big a flat. And so, she had one room taken off the flat. But in spite of that, during the communist years, because we had what was called a 'maid's room', they had put a Hungarian peasant woman in. It really ruined my mother's life. You know. Really, really ruined-

Into the flat?

[0:25:29]

Into the flat. Into the flat. Well, it's a little bit separate because it was of the whole. But it was the- one toilet. I don't even- I can't remember her using the bathroom, actually. One kitchen. She entertained men and I mean I just can't tell you. And it's only after I left that I think my mother paid her to get out of the- of the flat. But, you know, it was- it was terrible years. Not only the war years. And she was on her own. And to put somebody like that into your life.

When in fact you had no choice about it.

Well, she had no choice. It was- she was just put in.

Did she suffer- or you and her, from communism? And how- how did the communism affect you apart from, obviously, in that way?

Well, it- it... How did it affect me? Well, I ended up in this technical school for manufacturing of... brick, glass and cement, which wouldn't have been my choice. Other than that, in a way it was a very simple life for us. Much simpler than for young people now, because I, we didn't know about fashion. We didn't have to follow anything. We had no phone, we had no social media... In our summer holidays we played cards. It's... Yes, we- you know, we didn't, you know for me to, to acquire a watch- it was years before I could get a watch. But in, in that way I don't think I need to complain. My, my mother was a nervous wreck, but that's not necessarily the fault of the communists.

[0:27:40]

What affected your mother the most, do you think?

Well, I- I really don't know what affected her the most. But the fact remains that just about the last time I saw her, because she stayed in- in Budapest and I kept going to visit her. Before she- passed away, the last time I went to visit her, by that time she didn't go out. But I was sitting like here and she was standing by the window and she said, "They are coming. They are coming." And it just shows that it preyed on her mind...

Yes.

Because that was just about the last thing... I heard from her. And then you know because then- the next time she collapsed at home and was taken to hospital. So, I only met- met her again, while she was really- dying, passing away. So, it, it must- it, it must have. It must have.

And tell me about that story you told me before, with your- when your mother was taken away with her sister.

Oh, yes.

What happened?

Well, this is how the story goes, that... she was, she obviously was taken away to a brick factory with her younger sister. And the story goes, that the younger sister was in one line and my mother was in another line. And the younger sister, for whatever reason, drags her across from this line to the other line. And the story goes, whether she shouted that my mother has the right papers or- or what. But she dragged her across to her line. And the one- the line where my mother was, I think they all perished. That's how the story goes. Again, you know. I, I- I, I- I don't know.

And they came back.

[0:29:52]

And they- I remember. I remember- I don't remember my mother coming back, but I remember my aunt suddenly appearing at the top of the steps of the cellar. I don't know. But- and there was- there was one incident still during the Nazi period, where I remember my mother... I think there was a Nazi raid. And my- I seem to remember my mother dashing into the bathroom... and hiding behind dressing gowns and that sort of thing. And I remember that a Nazi went into the bathroom and he actually knew that my mother was there but he didn't give her away, which was- well, a little [laughs] positive thing. So, for some reason he didn't, he didn't give her away.

German or Hungarian?

I seem to remember Hungarian. But there again, you see... my memories are as best I can-

Yes, of course.

...I can... I can say. Yeah? So that's...

And you said, what did your mother then do post-war in terms of income? What did she-?

Well, the- the income was almost impossible. Really. Sorry I had this. She really- she had to give up- first she- from the big shop that we had, she moved to a smaller shop, but it just wasn't viable. So, she went to work for a union ... leather, leather goods. She had to... to, to

do a certain number of whatever she had to do, in a day. She could barely meet the minimum, I remember. So, financially we were really, really very - badly off. And she really had to write down every expense of how to make ends meet. So that didn't help. And she had a- you know, lots of- lots of stress that way.

Did she ever re-marry?

[0:32:22]

No. No- no, she was- she was- she didn't make friends. We didn't entertain. She was just- I don't know what she would have been like. I don't know what she would have been like. You know. Everybody reacted to this kind of... stress differently. You know like families, some people- some families became more religious. Other families became less religious or had nothing to do with it.

What happened in your family?

Well, my mother did send me to *cheder* after the war. I have to say that I skipped it. When she realised it, she didn't enforce it. And she really didn't teach me a lot about Judaism. So, like a lot of us, we have become emotionally Jewish, rather than having the... background. The- the actual knowledge. Which I'm sorry not to have. And I couldn't pass it on to the children. But I felt- that, you know when the children came along, that in England it was easy to be Jewish. And my father died for no other reason than he was Jewish, so we owe him that the- the children should get a Jewish education. Which they did. But it's not as good as it could have been if I could have backed it up. And of course, he [meaning her husband] couldn't. So- but I've done my- what I could. Because that- that was my attitude, you know. Everybody's different. And as my husband said, now our daughter- they live a very Northwest London Jewish life. With three daughters. And our- our older- older son the children are Jewish and they went to *cheder* and you know, they are more - what is the word? - not cosmopolitan, more... Anyway, so they- they live a form of Jewish life but not as- not as observant as my daughter. And our younger son has got a gorgeous wife from Brazil - not Jewish - but lovely. And they bring the children up as you know, non- non-religion. So, the three fam-families live a slightly different life. But it's fine.

[0:35:27]

And- but your mother was associated with the Jewish community post-war?

Sorry?

Was she- did she go to the synagogue post-war in Budapest? No, post-war.

Before the war?

After the war?

Post-war - she went only for Yom Kippur.

She did go?

She did go for Yom Kippur. Yes.

So this is slightly different...

Yeah.

In your case...

Well, I thought my mother-in-law went as well on Yom Kippur.

Gustav Botkai: Yom Kippur she did.

Aha. OK.

Yes, yes, they went on Yom Kippur. I don't think she went afterwards. She didn't- I, I think she may have gone for Rosh Hashanah...for the High holidays- Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But she didn't... join in any community. But- but talking about whether the Jewish community helped or not.

Yes.

After the war, I was sent on a summer holiday by- with the Joint organisation.

Yes...

And I- I remember that. So, they must have helped my mother. So... that's where I had marmalade for the first time. [laughing] From a huge- from a huge tin.

Where was that camp?

Somewhere along the Balaton, I think - the lake. I don't know. I don't know.... I don't know.

Because there you must have met other children in your situation? Similar?

Well, yes, yes- but I don't- I don't think- well, so now that I come to think- it was obviously a Jewish camp. But I don't remember like, you know, when I sent my children to Jewish camps. I don't remember the Jewish songs or- I don't think we were trying to be brainwashed to go to Israel or do Israeli things. At least I don't recall it. I remember the large tin of marmalade [laughs] for some reason. It was such a strange thing - to have orange jam.

[0:37:40]

Yes - yes.

So that- that's what left a- left, left a- a memory. And then...

And did you experience any anti-Semitism after the war in Hungary?

No. No I didn't. No... no. And I- I'm- I'm glad to say that I haven't experienced it in England. Only one occasion, somebody in the tennis club. It was not to me personally but was referring to somebody, which- "with Jewish characteristics". And I had to confront her over that. And she said, "It's not you, of course." So it- it's- the only reason I mentioned it,

because it really surprised me, that it would come out- without thinking, from somebody middle-class, Hampstead woman.

Yeah.

So, you don't know.

So, when did you think of- when did you realise that you wanted to leave Hungary? Or when- what happened?

[0:38:54]

Well... everybody was leaving. And so, my boyfriend and my girlfriend- I approached my mother. And it is very interesting, because my mother was so strict. I mean even during the 1956 revolution I took- took part in the demonstrations but I had to be at home at eleven. She was so strict, and she had nobody else but me and her two sisters. And she just a-allowed me to leave. For all she knew, she would never see me again! And so, she got herself busy and sewed some gold bracelet into my ski-trouser belt. Gave me the addresses of some distant, distant relations in- in America, and she let me go! And I was also sent back once because we- we were in a pub in the countryside. And we obviously stuck out like a sore thumb. [laughing] And so the police just sent us back. And then we had another go. And then... paid some Hungarian peasants who took us so far. And then we went on our... own. The interesting thing about that crossing, very deep snow, very cold, that I was laughing all the way through... whilst I was cross- whilst I was crossing. I couldn't stop laughing. So it must be a nervous reaction. And... anyway, we, we, we managed to cross on that occasion with my boyfriend and my girlfriend and her uncle. And we were taken to Eisenstadt... where we were in this large, I don't know, there were forty of us on the floor or something, ex-army camp. And then we had to leave it as I told you, because more refugees were coming. And then arrived temporarily in Lon- in London, sixty-one years ago.

[0:41:36]

So, there was a big flow of Hungarian refugees...

Oh yes.

...into Austria?

Into, into Austria. And the camp was getting full so they said, “Well, you know, you have to go to a camp on the way to America.”

And who was running these camps? Do you know?

I don't know who was running it. There- there were some volunteers. I have no idea. I really had no idea that there are different organisations. You know, in Hungary it was simple, you know, it was the communists - and that was it.

Yeah. So you were flown here. You didn't have any money, I assume?

Oh, nothing! Oh, I had- I had the gold bracelets.

In the-

In my belt. Yeah.

In your belt. So, what did you do with that?

I don't think it bought me anything. I think at the end- I may have one still. Yeah. It actually wasn't worth very much because according to the English, the gold wasn't good enough or...

So, what were your first impressions when you arrived here?

What was the- what?

What were your first impressions when you arrived in England?

[0:42:44]

Impressions? Well... The first impression was that in this first shelter I was in- they gave us white bread sandwiches. And I remember writing to my mother that this must be a very rich country because we had white bread. Because in Hungary, the white bread, perhaps you had it at the weekend, you know? That was- that was a special occasion. And they just gave us white- it- it was like blotting paper, but to me, it was white bread. And so that was one thing. The other thing is... What were my first impressions? Well, one of the things that we were- I can't remember- perhaps because there was a lady who kept in touch with us from the Jewish Committee, Mrs. Singer. I think we were told how to behave in England. And one of the things was... you- never ask anybody how much they earn. You never ask anybody what political party they vote for. And you don't cheat on public transport. [laughs] That- these were- this was our guideline, for living the British life. And other than that, I was terribly worried because I heard that the table manners of the English are exceptionally good. So, when I arrived at the hall of university, the first lunch they had there was crisps [chips?] and peas. So, you should have seen me struggling, trying to pick it all up on my fork, because I thought well, I have to eat that with a fork. And what other impressions? On the- on the, on the whole, I have to say that... I had- people have been very kind and we've been very lucky to end up where we did. I- I managed to get a university grant. ...Our children went to university. We didn't have to pay tuition fees. And they all made a life for themselves. So, I can only be, only be grateful. What the future will hold, I don't know. But... what else have I got to tell you? And as I said, I worked for ICI in Harrogate. That was my first job.

ICI stands for?

ICI [Imperial Chemical Industries]. It was called ICI Fibres Division. And in those days went for an interview. We were given- I was given dinner and I got the job! That's how it was. And then when we got married, I moved to Manchester because- cause [t]his job was there. And I worked for ICI again, in Hyde. And that's where I met the friend who is now the business partner of my husband.

[0:46:30]

And what did you do at ICI? What was your job?

I had some technical jobs. Testing fabrics and ...and...

And why did you study textiles? What?

Well, that's again- again because of the communist system. I was put into this technical college. And so, when I applied to go to university in Leeds, they said, "Well, what have you got?" So, I told them I studied the manufacturing and chemistry of brick, glass and... and cement. They thought well they will put me into the chemistry department. Well, they put me into the chemistry department to do A-levels- to- to do A-level chemistry and physics. And I was put together with students who have been doing physics and chemistry for... for years.

Yes...

For years. Whilst for me, it was one of twelve subjects. Well, you know, a lot of us we couldn't- we couldn't. This was intro, not the A-level. They have done A-levels just in those subjects. And I- and then you had to do intro, to carry on with the university. So, I couldn't cope with that. So, they called me in and they said, "Why don't you try to go to the textile department?" And, "You will be alright there." Which I did. And I was alright there. So, it- it wasn't that I had a lifelong ambition- ambition to study textiles. But it was fine. And then you know when the second- I went- I had to go back to work... to get a deposit for our first house. But by that time, we had a little girl. And then when I was expecting my second child, I stopped working. Then I was at home for years and years and years waiting for the third one as well. Then with a friend, we opened the shop, so we could manage family and...

What shop? What shop?

The shop- it was a gift shop. And...

[0:48:47]

In Manchester?

In Manchester, yes. Near where- where we lived. And then we sold that, and twenty-one years ago we moved to London, by which time... two- two of our children already lived in London. So, I dragged my husband along. [laughs] And then... our oldest son unfortunately,

lost- lost his wife when the children- they were eight and- seven and nine, so then for years we were very involved helping there. But they- they are grown up now. They don't need us anymore. And... And basically, that's it. The younger son... had ME for a number of years. I don't know if you've heard of ME [myalgic encephalomyelitis] – which set him back somewhat. But thankfully he's got this lovely wife from Brazil and two boys, so he's- he's managing.

How- I mean, how did you manage? Because you came here all by yourself...

Well...

...at a young age. Eighteen.

Eighteen. Well, you just, you, you, you just do. I had twenty-eight pounds university grant. And ...

What about your language? Did you speak some English?

Not really. Not really. I mean, when I first went for lectures, I had to copy everybody else's notes. And had to try to laugh when everybody else was laughing. Not really. Not really... Not really. But it's- I don't know. I suppose it's our generation. You, you- you go through... And also at the age of eighteen I had no dependents. I wasn't starving. You know, I wasn't worried about fashion or how I look or... you just- you just got on.

And did you manage to visit your Mum in Budapest? How...?

[0:51:25]

Yes, well, for- for five years we didn't see each other at all. She couldn't travel and I couldn't travel. And... So, I made phone calls through an operator [laughing] every so often. And I do admire my mother who was very difficult, actually. But when it came to the crunch, she just, she just let me- let me go. And she never reproached me for it. So, she really done the maximum any mother can do, because she could have been entitled to hang on to me, because she had nobody else. But she didn't. So, I- I have to pay tribute to her...

Yes.

Really. And I have to pay tribute to my father achieving so much in such, you know, such a few years of- of what the Jewish people could do then. I think it's remarkable, really.

Anything else you want to know?

And your mother, to how- how old was she when she passed away?

Eighty-three. Eighty-three. But she- she was- mentally my- you know, she was hearing voices and not very, not very well. As I say, I don't know what she would have been like, but...

You feel it affected her very much?

It must have done.

Yeah.

It, it- it must have done. Must have done. But- you know she started off a nice middle-class life. They, you know, they- they had the right kind of china, the right kind of silver, the right kind of furniture, the right kind of flat. Not particularly religious, I don't think. But I think I, I have some- I know which synagogue they belonged to. And she got married- and they got married in a synagogue.

So which synagogue was that?

[0:53:40]

Somewhere... somewhere in Buda. Interesting you should ask. Because, when my daughter was due to get married, the groom, her husband comes from a- observant family. And for some reason, they arranged for us to go and see a Dayan Fisher. I don't think he's around anymore, because he Bar Mitzvah-ed, you know, my daughter's husband. And we were asked all sorts of questions... my husband and myself. And one of the things that he got... One of

the things he said, he turned to my daughter and said, "I just want to make sure that you are pure Jewish." And I had to control my husband under the table. Because that was a very unfortunate expression that he used. And then he was so worried about us being 'pure Jewish' that he offered to go and find the synagogue that we- where my mother and father got married. And he was the one who discovered that- the name of the synagogue. Of course, didn't- didn't exist anymore. But that, the whole procedure upset us at the time.

But they accepted it in the end?

Pardon?

Did they accept it? - did they accept it?

[0:55:34]

Oh they- they got married and they've been married thankfully for thirty-one, thirty-two years now. It's just that we didn't think it was a very sensitive interview. Because he was sitting here, he, he- he lived through his life in London during the war. And- he didn't realise that you go through a lot- and, yes, he kept asking for papers. Anyway. At the end we went to Manchester to- to a Rabbi Carlebach who was a, you know, from the Continent, from Germany. And as soon as, you know, we asked him to marry our daughter, there was absolutely no problem. Everything was fine - because he understood.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And you said that the war affected your mother. How did it affect you? What impact, do you think, did it have on your life?

I- I didn't, I didn't think it affected me at all through... teenage years or anything, but I think, looking at us now and in general, we are just more serious than perhaps we would have been. And also- yes, we are more serious. We are more- I'm happy to have a good time. But on- also I think on the surface we are absolutely fine. And we have functioned perfectly

normally. But you only need to scratch the surface a little bit and then you get- you can see it on my husband as well, you get all the emotions coming out. But I'm not complaining because we survived. And- and we- we- enabled us- enabled us to bring up a family. And what you- you can't say that it didn't affect you because it must have done.

Yeah...

It must have done. It makes you a little bit less able to be- relate to the real frivolities and stupidity of life [laughs] that occupies some people now.

But it strikes me is that your- you and your husband's stories have similarities.

Well-

You lost your father, he lost- was that important for you? Do you think that's important that you two have a similar background in some ways, or-?

[0:58:17]

Well, we understand each other. We know where we come from, which I think helps. But as far as I'm concerned, the older I get, the more resentful I get of not having had the experience to have my father or at least having some- something to hang on to. I- yeah, I'm not spending my time being resentful, but- but I do feel- also, because my mother became so difficult that as a child, from that point of view, I had a difficult time. And there was nobody to balance her. And it might have been different, or she might have been more- better balanced herself if there had been somebody by her side. But as it is, she didn't. So, the fact that my father died when he was thirty-six had a huge effect on me. So, to some extent I had to learn parenting from scratch, if, if you like, you know, when the children came along.

Yeah... And what was important for you in terms of parenting?

Sorry?

What was important for you in terms of parenting? How- How did you want to bring up your children?

Well, I wanted to be different than my mother [laughs] because she was very difficult. But other than that, because we were so busy building up a life, and building a living, and... having enough material- having enough money to, to- to educ- to clothe them, feed them, educate them. That's I think what we were both aiming for. So, it was different than what they do now. There is this entertaining children and this and that and the other. Education, education, education: that was important. So, you know, they had whatever schools could offer, coaching, you know. So, I- it's... It's... Well, I think we done as much as we could. Sorry I-

No problem. But in which ways do you think your mother was not a good mother, or, in terms of your relationship?

[1:00:47]

It's- well, she was a good mother because she let me come away, so I have to keep on saying that. But other than that, ...well, she was impatient. She wasn't really- and I think if anybody told her that a child needs to be entertained or something like that, she wouldn't have known what on earth you were talking about. But that- but that was typical of that generation anyway. So, she did shout a bit. But I don't- I really don't want to...

I understand.

...to- to say too much because she, you know, she had no money. She- she had to write down how much she spent on milk and bread and you know. And I always tell this story that- because I didn't get any pocket money. So, I decided to cheat. And would tell my mother, "I need a pencil." "I need an exercise book." "I, I need- I need a ruler – for school." And, and she gave me the money for it, and then I would buy the minimum ice scoop. And on one occasion I come across a piece of paper, where I have seen that she wrote down: *milk, butter, matches, exercise book for Erika*. And I felt so guilty. So that I still remember it. And I stopped cheating after that. So, you know, she had a difficult time. Yeah? I mean, there was, because she got this absolute minimum wage - and nothing else. So, so she- so it- so it

wasn't- wasn't easy. But you know, she was affected like that. Her older sister, who also lost her husband - she wasn't affected like that. She- she was all sweet and soft. Yeah, it's... you- you don't know how any of us would react to terrible events. It's really what I feel about it. You know?

[1:03:29]

But for you, it was important to join a community once you were in Manchester?

It was very important for me. Because, as I told you before, my father died for absolutely no reason other than that he happened to be Jewish. And- and I looked around life in, in Manchester, in England, that it's very easy to be Jewish. No problem. You don't- you don't get persecuted. So, I, I insisted that the children should have a Jewish education. And, because I said they can always make a decision to decide which way they go once- once they grow up and once, they have something to decide from. And so, we joined the Reform synagogue and of course then they made friends like you do. But we had- we had two groups of friends. We had the professional friends who were not Jewish, who moved to Manchester for their professions, whether they would be doctors or lawyers or barristers. So, we moved in that circle as well as the Jewish circle most of them whom were born in Manchester. And they had established businesses. But they were very nice and you know, we became long-term friends with both sets.

So, was it a big decision for you to come to London, or-?

[1:05:08]

Well, I- I had to be fairly determined. Because I could see- we kept coming up and down, up and down, up and down. And we were already approaching the huge age of sixty. And I just wondered how long we can carry on doing that. We already had a little flat with- which we still have, in Belsize Park. And, you know, it was tiring; pack up here, pack up there, pack up here, pack up there. And at the end of the day, we had no other relations but the children. And yes, we had a wonderful life in Manchester. We had friends, we had- you know, two lots of- two groups of friends. We had our doctors, lawyer, everything there, set up. But I felt that because- we're moving, because of the children. But we don't want to live through the

children. And if we leave it any longer, we won't be able to create a life for ourselves. And so I managed to just about persuade my husband, who was kicking and screaming. And... So I was, I was anxious to do it sooner rather than later, which I, I think it's- as it happens, it was- well, we weren't to know, but in fact my daughter-in-law passed away, so it was just as well we lived, lived near. And I can see some other people leaving it a bit late.

So, you're happy you moved to London?

Oh, yes, I mean, I'm missing the friends from Manchester. And the life is different here anyway. There, we could pop in; you lived there much closer.

Yeah.

But, you know, it's no good looking back. I'm very happy to live in West Hampstead.

Where would you- where do you feel at home?

[1:07:25]

Where do I feel at home? Oh, well. Here. Here. You know, we've been now in England sixty-one years. Life moved on in Hungary as well. Even the language is, we- I mean we speak Hungarian obviously, but you know how language changes. It's changed. And their background now is- I have one friend and one cousin in- left in Hungary. That's all. Well, their life is different - from ours. I certainly wouldn't feel at home in Hungary now. I've only been there eighteen years.

And how do you feel when you go back to Budapest?

Well, it's fine for a few days. Fine, but I don't like the Hungarians. No, they haven't behaved well... and... they are going that way again. It's... Yes, it's nice to go to the opera, it's nice to go to concerts. Nice to go even to the theatre as we speak the language. And it's a lovely city if you don't go to the areas that are really run down. You know, as a tourist you are only in the nice area. It's just the place I happen to be born. And yes, first eighteen years, very formative. But my life is here. And I never, I never looked back.

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

Well, I'm definitely British. I'm taken up with the politics here. There is plenty of politics around.

Are you- in politic- are you active?

Pardon?

Are you active in-?

No- no, I just read it and follow it and get upset by it. [laughs] So, so I very much feel at home here. But yes, even after sixty-one years if I meet somebody, they say, "Oh are you here on holiday?" Because of my accent. But it doesn't bother me. Doesn't matter- look, I'm lucky on several accounts. First of all, I survived. You know, it wasn't meant- it wasn't part of Hitler's plan. Yeah? I survived. I managed to come to a country that has been very good to me. Thank God, I have a family. So... So don't- don't complain. But. If I want to leave a message, because you have asked my husband...

[1:10:27]

Yes. I would have asked you.

By all means, assimilate and contribute as much as to the society and the country where you live. And do it. But just be aware that if you look at history, Jewish communities have settled for hundreds of years in countries only to find that from one day to the next they are not wanted. Just, therefore, concentrate on education that you can take with yourself. You know what I mean?

Yeah.

Yeah. That's... From where I'm sitting that's what I have seen. And that's what I- I feel.

So, you think education is very important?

Well, we- it was always said that that you can take with yourself.

Yeah.

Yeah. That's the most important thing. Look, I mean, just, just look at history. I mean- whichever empire you look at. The Jews had settled, contributed...

Is there anything else you think we haven't discussed you would like to add?

Well, I don't think so. I think I talked about my- my father as much as I could. That's- I think I just- I think I just about covered everything. Thank you.

Gustav Botkai: I kept quiet.

Pardon?

Gustav Botkai: I kept quiet.

Yes, you did. Yes, you were very good. No, I can't produce a singer or an actor or a Countess. [laughs] Very boring.

No need.

Pardon?

No need. It's not necessary.

That's what it is: the three sisters. It really crushed them, the war. Really crushed them.

All of them?

[1:12:36]

Really- yes, all of them. Really crushed them. ...Am I still on?

You are still on.

All right. OK. I just very, just- just to give you an idea. One of the first times we went back to Hungary, my daughter must have been about eight years old and we went with the three children to visit. And we went to my aunts. And my daughter had a little Star of David, little necklace. And we went into the room and my aunt, without saying 'Hello' or anything, noticed this little Star of David on my daughter's neck - and put it behind her sweater. Without- it, it was so subconscious. It was- she just - just like that! Done it so quickly. And that was quite a few years after the war. So that's what I mean that... That's how the Hungarian Jews were left. She didn't say why, or how, or said 'Hello' to us: [makes a noise and shows the gesture the aunt made].

So, for you what is the most important aspect of your Hungarian heritage, or...?

[1:14:00]

Well, I- I didn't feel it much in, in my teenage years. I mean it's- I was- I wasn't un- unhappy about that. It's something- we didn't talk about it. I was more aware of that we really didn't have any money. I mean, my mother and I, when we had to- when my mother got a voucher to go on holiday from her official... from the- her job, you know we had to share one voucher when we went on holiday. So, one portion of meal we had to share. So, I was aware that we really were, well, not poor, but poor. But it- it- it didn't- I didn't go around feeling sorry for myself. You just didn't. I don't know... we- you just- you know, I was longing for things. I would spend hours looking at... a box of Faber coloured pencils. I- I would look at the corner- there was a corner ...what is the paper shop called? ...A shop, with all papers and pencils and pens. I would spend hours you know, looking at- I never got it. But I didn't declare myself unhappy. I would have loved to have had it. But... But I didn't get it. And for months I would be walking around the street pretending I have a watch. I didn't. It took years before I got one, but I would walk around and pretend to have a watch. But it, it also- it makes you appreciate things in life. ...You know, there was only one way to go and it- it's up.

And did you talk about your past to your children?

[1:16:12]

Well, we tried- really, we only talked to them when they were quite young and we were in the car, funnily enough. But... they are certainly not interested now. Robert asked us- Robert, our middle one, asked us to write a- autobiography, tell our story. But that's done now. So, they are- they are busy with their lives. And I'm certain the grandchildren are busy with their lives. But it- our experiences must have affected them, to some extent. I don't know how but must have done. But we can't help it. They can't help it. So, there we are.

Ok...

Alright. Thank you very much

Thank you very much for this interview.

I thank you.

We're going to look at your- both your photographs and documents.

Alright. Ok.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[End of interview]

[1:17:15]

[1:17:33]

[Start of photographs and documents]

Photo 1

This is my maternal grandmother with her three daughters. Ilus, Joli and Bözsi. Joli is my mother.

And what's her name?

Pardon?

The grandmother, what's her name?

Oh... You see I never used her. Well, Hir, ...Hirsch... Hirsch, I can't think of it all of a sudden.

Photo 2

This is a picture of my maternal grandfather. He is the one on the right-hand side of the picture. The picture is from the First World War. His name is Hirsch, Hermann.

Document 1

This postcard been sent to my maternal grandmother by my maternal grandfather from the front in 1916 - from Russia to Budapest. It was written in German.

Photo 3

This is my father's picture. I think a picture of him, as he was joining the Scouts. Well, it...it must have been about 19...20, something like that. 1920.

Photo 4

My parents' wedding photograph in 1936, August. In- in a synagogue in Buda. [Jolan Hirsch Rottenberg and Istvan Rottenberg]

Photo 5

Photograph of my parents' civil marriage, with the two mothers, i.e. my two grandmothers. 1936, August.

[1:19:56]

Photo 6

It's me and my mother. It must be 1939. I was on a holiday with her because I had whooping cough. I had to have fresh air.

Photo 7

I'm in the fruit orchard with my father. He bought a fruit orchard in 1942. He absolutely adored it.

Photo 8

I'm in the fruit orchard with my paternal grandmother and my cousin Robbie. Must be 1942/43.

Photo 9

I'm with my mother and father in the zoo in Budapest. It must be about 1941.

Photo 10

This is the picture of the outside of my father's textile shop. It must be around 1940.

Photo 11

It's a picture of me. I must be about four years old. 1942.

[1:21:21]

Photo 12

A photograph of my father's work unit from forced labour camp. He's on the top right-hand corner. 1942.

Photo 13

My father's photograph from the forced labour period. The other person is his brother [???Laszi – short for Laszlo?]. This again, must date from 1942.

Where is he? Where is your father on the picture?

On the right-hand side.

Photo 14

The mass grave of where my father was laid to rest. It is a mass grave of all the victims of Kópháza. It is in the Jewish cemetery in Budapest.

Photo 15

School photograph from 1946-47. I am in the second row, second from the right.

Photo 16

This is a picture to show that we had to re- re-build the school before we could start the second- secondary school properly. First, we had to re-build the school and then we could start our school year. *[Which year?] 1952.*

Photo 17

This is my photograph on my eighteenth birthday, which was my last birthday in Budapest. It is with my mother and aunt Bözsi. 1956.

[1:23:12]

Photo 18

Our wedding photograph in 1962, 21st of July. And this is at the reception. Bingley Arms in Yorkshire.

Photo 19

These are- this is a picture of my lovely three children. Karen, Robert and Mark. Must be about in 1974.

Photo 20

I'm with my seven gorgeous grandchildren on my seventieth birthday. 19... What was the year? I will be eighty now - 2008.

Document 2

This is a protection letter issued by the Swiss embassy to my mother. It is a group protection certificate to try to prove that she was a Swiss citizen, therefore she shouldn't be hung by the Nazis. I don't know if she ever used this, but it showed the desperation of her wanting to get something like that.

Erika, thank you very much for this interview sharing your photographs and documents with us.

It's been a pleasure - and very emotional.

Thank you.

[End of photographs and documents]

[1:24:39]