

My name is Saree Kaminsky and I am interviewing Michael Barany in Chicago. It's April 11, 1995.

What is your name?

Michael Barany

When were you born?

October 29, 1921

And you are how old?

I'm now 74.

Where were you born?

In Budapest, Hungary

Where did you live when you were growing up?

I was living in a small village in Hungary, northern Hungary, this is called Hejobaba

Who was in your immediate family?

My father, my mother and my sister

How old was your sister, older than you or younger?

She was 4 years younger than I.

What was her name?

Lily

And your father's name?

Joseph

What did your father do for a living?

He was a farmer.

And what was your mother's name?

Angela Schlichter

What kind of a farm was it?

This was a general farm with almost everything, animals and also we...

What was the main crop?

Wheat

And as a child did you work on the farm too?

Yes

Where did you go to school?

Well, until I was 20 years old, the first 4 years of school I was at home. We had a teacher, a home teacher. She or he was teaching me, I don't remember if it was a she or a he, there may have been several of them. For 6-10 years, I was in the village. When I was 10, then I went to the nearest city, called Miskolc.

Was your family what we would call well-to-do?

Yes we were a relatively wealthy family

And when you went to school, you went to grammar school and then on into high school?

Yes, the Hungarian system, was like 4 years of grammar school that I just took privately and then I took the exam...also in the city of Miskolc and then all my high school, actually 8 years of high school, I from 10 -18, I took in Miskoc in the city.

Did you complete high school before the war?

Yes

Were you aware of the Jewish community in your town?

In this village, there were 5 Jewish families altogether in the village; the whole village had about 1000, was the population of the village.

Was your family very religious?

Yes, orthodox Jews, a kosher household, we prayed every morning using the tefillin. And of course we kept all the Jewish holidays very vigorously.

Was there a synagogue nearby?

No, but there was no synagogue, first of all, the 5 Jewish families had about 8 males and 2 Jewish students from the neighboring town were coming every Friday so, that the synagogue was in the village with the help of 2 outsiders. Ten were required which is called a minion.

Did you learn Hebrew?

Not really, in Hungary, Hebrew was almost unknown for the Jews.

What did you speak, Yiddish?

No, we did not. We really spoke Hungarian, I knew a little Yiddish, not much.

Do you remember playing with the non-Jewish, any boys, girls that you were friendly with?

Names?

No, just in general.

In general, well there were not too many, all around my education, neither in the village nor in the city. Non Jewish contact was very rare in Hungary between Jews and non Jews.

When were you first aware of anti Semitism?

When I entered the high school. Again, the high school started at the age of 10, it's not the equivalent to the American high school. There was a numerus clausus, Jews were not accepted, only, not accepted without limitation but were accepted all in proportion to the Jewish population, to the overall population. Hungary was 6%, so not more than 6% of the Jewish children could go to school.

How did they choose who got to go to school?

This was on connection, for instance, we had good connections, because my father was wealthy and also our farm was rented from the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church had a very great influence in Hungary. The lawyer of the Catholic Church who made the contract with my father for renting the farm, he brought me into the high school.

Do you remember any incidents where others were mean to you, called you names?

Jews were really second class citizens all the time, so many arrogant comments by the teachers about Jews.

Do you remember any?

Well, for instance, when they spoke about Hungarian history, Jews would not understand this because they are really not Hungarians or when the Jews did something well, for instance, Jews were good in math, they were told this is a Jewish subject.

You were good at math?

I was good at math, yes.

Did you ever question your parents why do they hate Jews?

You learn very early in your childhood that the Jews are not part of the Hungarian nation, therefore there was no need to ask this question. This was something we were born in. All what we shared or what the Jews shared with others were the bad stories about how Jews were treated in general.

I asked about your immediate family, what about your larger family when you were growing up, grandparents, great grandparents...?

My father had 6 brothers and 1 sister. With all the children, this was something like a family of about 25. My mother had 1 sister and 1 brother, so this was a family of something like 8.

Did the whole family get together on the farm, for instance?

Not really

Did you travel to visit with them?

Well, so, my mother was from Czechoslovakia, my mother was very far away from the village. I believe I was once, once, visiting the brother of my mother, who is also a farmer. Otherwise, the whole family was in Miskolc in the city where I was studying at high school. When my father came in on Sunday, and this is a time when we were seen the rest of the family.

What did you have to do on the farm? What were your chores?

I was really not involved in heavy work. As mentioned, we had a relatively large farm and several workers. My job was just helping in supervising how the grain is being collected, how the milk is being collected. I was involved in a little bit handling the animals. But in essential hard work like harvesting the wheat or any other thing, I was not involved.

Do you remember any stories about you and your sister, any particular incidents?

While at home, in the village?

Yeah

In the village, I would not remember anything. In the village, we were respected to a certain extent, because we were wealthy, again. In a population of a thousand, there were really three wealthy families altogether and we were one of the three. This eliminated any major incidents. As mentioned, we were segregated from the rest. We were not, let's say, in any contact with the other two families in the village, the other two rich families in the village, so there was no, no real chance for any accident.

Later in the high school, we were exposed to several (derogatory) remarks.

Like what?

Well, again, "Jew", "he's a Jew", "Don't sit to me". The Jews were a different community. It never occurred to the Jews to join a Christian club or organization, they were just separated. And when there was contact, as mentioned, the contact, was usually unpleasant. And this word Jew was used so common like, a drinking water, or something very, it could be used without any harm.

Tell me about your sister.

My sister followed the same path as I. She was educated 4 years at home and she came to Miskolc, and she graduated also from high school. There were different schools for girls. But, she had also no difficulty getting in to the high school. Again, money, here, was something my father used quite frequently without telling us how much he paid for schools, for teachers and so forth so that we should be accepted.

Were you aware of the Holocaust? I mean, the war came to Hungary later, but were you aware of what was happening in Europe in 1933, '34, '35?

Yah, certainly, we were reading the newspapers, the newspapers were available for everybody. So, we learned the takeover of the power by Hitler in '33 and we followed this with great concern. Again, the Holocaust per se, when does the Holocaust start? The Holocaust started with Auschwitz, this is my definition for the start of the Holocaust. I learned from the Holocaust, actually, in '43, at the very end of '43, when I was already in the army, what was really not the true army, but the working camp, I will talk about this later, but I had a very special position in the army as a Jew. Jews in general were used to make roads, and they were sent to the Russian theater, where they were used to slip mines.

I was a mechanic and as such I was in a very good position.

I was remaining in Budapest, as a matter of fact I was moved to the capital where I was working in a major factory for the army.

As such we had a lot of freedom to go around, which was very unusual that somebody was in the Hungarian army as a Jew could have the freedom to go around, but we did.

As such, once, I went to a Jewish synagogue where there were two people who came from Poland and they were the ones who spoke about Auschwitz and that people were

killed in Auschwitz. This was the first time that I heard about the Holocaust. So, it was clear to me. First of all, my sister was immediately captured when the Germans came to Hungary. Already the Germans entered Hungary on March 19, 1944. So, my sister was captured the first day, actually, and she was never released. And then we learned that she was moved to a German camp, so, again this is 1944, March when I already knew about the existence of Auschwitz. My parents are still in Hungary. The Germans are in Hungary. The Jews are being collected in the ghettos and so forth. The deportation is not announced, that things like this will happen. I already knew what will follow. And I, with very false papers, which I had, and removing the yellow band, which identified me as a Jew, traveled about 2 days to reach my parents and told them they should hide. More than that, I was speaking with people in the village, and asked them they should help to hide my parents. So, this was not successful and my parents, then, very soon became deported and I believe very early, in June, they were already killed in Auschwitz. The existence of the Holocaust was, in general, not known in Hungary. So many people were deported were deported without knowing, really, what would happen to them. Many of them are very religious thought that God would help in the last minute. It is a very sad story, but it belongs to the story. Many people were hoping that God will help and this is what my parents told me. As mentioned, in the most traumatic conditions, I left the army illegally, for which I could have been shot, in order to save my parents. So, I told them, this is the way how I should proceed and these people will hide you. The war was already seen that the Germans can not win, so when the Russians were well advancing, when Italy was already in the hand of the American, English and so forth troops...

So, even the Hungarian government or the Hungarian newspapers made the transfer from the German connection after war connection. Everybody knew who can keep on will survive, but again, these Jews who were very religious did not believe it, that this was the way to go, to hide and so forth. They thought God will help. They were praying when they were put into these cattle wagons which contained 1900 persons, and they just died.

Let me back up a minute, were you drafted into the Hungarian army?

I was, but everybody who reached the 21 year age had been drafted into the army, it was obligatory, there was nothing else, whether Jew or Christian. The Christians became regular soldiers of the Hungarian army. The Jews became working camp labor off of the Hungarian army characterized by the following. They carried the Hungarian army hat which was identical for the regular army and for the Jews. Their clothes were civilian clothes, but they had to carry a yellow band. The Jewish population carried a yellow star, the army carried a yellow band; it was on your coat. This identified you as a member of the Hungarian army, that you had a hat and a yellow band identified you as a Jew.

Now you said you left the army, you deserted the army to go warn your parents?

As mentioned, this was for 2 days, right, I came back. Excuse me, I'd like to clarify. We had relative freedom in this factory type arrangement. Under those conditions, we were not so seriously monitored as any other Jew who was in this labor camp. Every other

Friday night, we were off and we were supposed to report back on Monday morning. So, then I left Friday night, again, took off my yellow band, and also of course, my army cap, imitated as being a regular civilian and had false papers in my pocket. If anybody would ask who I am I could identify myself as X and Y, not certainly a Jew.

Did you have a false name on those papers?

Yah, yah, certainly

What name?

I would not remember, but again this was very common. Almost every Jew, every young Jew who was ready to survive had these false papers, always ready for escape or hiding and so forth.

Where did you get the papers?

I got the papers, as mentioned, I was working in the factory there and there were many civilians in the factory and one of them gave me his papers. The factory workers were in general sympathetic toward the Jews. In Hungary the only sympathetic toward the Jews were the factory workers. They were many times very helpful and they were getting us things that otherwise were illegal and they did this with very little compensation. So, I had the name of someone who really existing, who was registered at the Police, and under his name, I traveled home, but immediately I left, so my whole contact with my parents was not longer than a couple of hours.

How soon after that were they deported?

They were not in the ghetto at the time, they were still in the village. Jews were already combined. They were moved out from their home, which was a relatively wealthy home in the village, they were moved to another Jew, in various conditions. They were free to move, they carried the yellow star, but otherwise, there was no live danger for them. Still, during this time, they tried to move any valuables what they had, all kind of gold, and valuable things.

Where did they take the valuables?

They dug holes in various places in the property of this second Jewish family where they were, and actually they showed me where things are. Things moved extremely fast, then, so these 5 Jewish families from the village were moved to the nearest town which collected then about 200, 300 Jews were perhaps in these villages all around, moved quite early, either in May or June

I was home at the beginning of April, or something like this, and perhaps 4-6 weeks passed while they were transported to Auschwitz.

April 11, 1995, Tape 2

How did you hear that your parents had been deported?

I don't know whether I heard this right away. This was not in any newspaper. As mentioned, I was in Budapest. All what I knew that the whole Hungarian Jew population was deported between May and perhaps August, so I just had to conclude indirectly that my parents were also deported. I believe later on, when I returned to Hungary, more details became available from the village and this is really how I concluded that they were deported sometime in May, this is how I concluded, but as mentioned directly there was no letter from them stating, I am leaving now or whatever it is and God should bless you, what you would expect. Everything went very suddenly and rather drastically. The Jews when collected were not staying for too long time together, they were moved. So, I believe looking back now, how the whole system worked, everything was well programmed. As soon as the Germans came to Hungary, it was decided that Hungarian Jews would be deported. This was organized in a way, step by step, the Jews were collected and depending on the availability of the transportation, which was a problem for the German army already. In the spring of 1944, when the Russians moved so far and they came through Romania, very near to Hungary, the deportation of the Jews did require free railway. This was not always available. So, this part of the program, of course, I don't know how this was organized, but I believe depending on the location of the Jewish community, in other words, south or east or north of Hungary, they had various ways to transport them to Poland. So, the way to Auschwitz from Hungary was through the eastern part of Hungary, depending on how they moved their troops toward the eastern front, did they move the Jews. So the number one thing was the movement of the troops and the number two thing was the movement of the Jews.

Now you went back to warn your parents, did you ever think about going back again?

No, no, this really would've been impossible, this was a major risk I have taken. To a certain extent, I felt that I could not help anymore. It may not have been as simple as I thought, but when I spoke to them and I had seen their resistance against my idea to hide, I felt it was hopeless, but it was not only hopeless, it was practically impossible, so to do this twice, to escape from the army was very risky. There were frequent checks on the train so if I would've been caught in such a check that I escaped as a Jew from the army, even for a short time, this would've been immediately identical to death.

Did you realize that they would soon be coming for you also?

That what, that they would come for me, the Germans? No, as mentioned, the Jews were deported only from the country of Hungary, not from the capital. Budapest was relatively immune to the deportation. The reason of it was several fold. One reason was the Hungarian government, itself, wanted to use the Jews as a good gesture from the Hungarian government toward approaching the west. Another reason was that in Budapest, there were many of these Red Cross type organizations, like the Swedish Embassy. These of course were known. Rolf Wallenberg who find all kind of ways to

help the Jews sheltered. And the third reason was that in Budapest were the wealthiest Jews living, and the money was still something which counted. So, officially, they could not take away the wealth of the Jews. The wealth was in a different form, as compared to today when people have bank accounts, and whatever I should say, bonds. The wealth was mainly in the form in gold. Gold was the wealth, the expression of the wealth, during the Second World War. And honest, they did not go into an apartment and was forcing people to hand over the gold. It was very difficult to take it away. So for gold, you could get a lot of things, so the Jews in Budapest were using the gold to bribe and make arrangements. For these various reasons, Budapest remained relatively immune, but the rest of Hungary was deported. Now, again, for me, to think about deportation, was very unrealistic at the time, when the majority of the Jews were being deported, because I was so to speak in a safe haven. I was in the part of the army which was needed for the war. We were well treated in order to produce whatever the army needed. So, nobody ever thought that we would be sacrificed for any reason. This came much later.

But you were sacrificed

I was sacrificed again, but only in the second phase of the German invasion of Hungary. The first phase is March 19, 1944 and between March 19 and October 15, all the country Jews are being deported, the Jews in Budapest are remaining, the war is progressing to an extent that Hungary is already a target of the Russian troops who are circling Hungary from the east and the south. And the Hungarian government is very anxious to follow the example of the Romanian government who switched over from the Hitler type connection to the western type connection sometime in August. This was the time when Romania officially announced they were not part anymore of the of the German treaty and Romania wants to be free, so to speak. This was identical to say that Romania is changing course and is moving toward the west, which at the time was really moving toward the Russians. And so on March 15, the Hungarian government tried to do the same, they announced Hungary is leaving the German treaty at the same time, they also denounced the Germans, how drastically they treated the Jews and so forth. This announcement came about 1:00, it was a Sunday, October 15th, when the Hungarian radio announced this speech. It was not later than 3:00 in the afternoon, in other words, 2 hours later, when the anti Hungarian government came to power and this was really a copy of the German Nazi system. It was called Arrowhead, Arrowhead organization which was drastically against Jews and which was for the war. So, this was the time when really my Holocaust started which was in two phases. The one from October 15th to December 4th, while I was still in Hungary and the second was between December 2nd until April 11th, when I was deported and most of this time was spent in Buchenwald.

How were you deported? You were in the army.

Well, again, on the 1st or 2nd of December, we got the order that this whole group, this Jewish mechanic group, will be moved from Budapest to a western city of Hungary by train.. This order is what was given to us officially and we were asked to pack and we did so and we indeed were taken to the railway station, but then we were pressed into the cattle wagons, these cars, these cattle cars, I should say...90-100, 100 of us were

jammed into this cars. We traveled until December 4th, this was when the door was locked until December 25, when the door was opened in Buchenwald, so 21 days, 21 days, about 90-100 people so there was absolutely no space for movement and we were just sitting near to each other, as close as possible. We had some food with us which was, so to speak, in our packing bag which we could use and during this time, once, in Prague, when the train stopped in Prague, then they dropped some bread through the window. But for 21 days, we were in the car and during this time, 3 or 4 people actually died and all young people, 21 years old, everyone is 21 and in relatively good shape. So, they let us out in Buchenwald on the 25th of December. Then we were registered, all our belongings were taken away.

Let me go back one moment, you were on the train for 21 days, when did you realize that you were not going to Hungary?

Immediately, immediately, as soon as we were jammed into this train, into this car. We immediately realized this can not be a legal transfer of a working unit of the army, this must be a Jewish deportation, so there was no doubt about it. But there was no way to escape. The car had two windows, which were really so small that nobody could cross the window, even if you would've wanted to escape, but there was only one way through the window but you were surrounded by this Hungarian SS type of army. There was no doubt about what would happen.

Now you said that you had food with you and you got some bread, what about water?

Water, this, we had also some food with us. This is why many people died or a few people died, because of simply dehydration. We were drinking our own urine, this was another way to do, to replace the water.

What did you think of on the train? What were you thinking about, I mean 21 days, t on the train?

There was no, no, we were all hoping that once we would get out from this, it was very unpleasant, so to speak, We could not sleep, we really were hoping that whatever can happen it will happen outside the train. So many of us became sick, including myself, who became sick, so after awhile, we became completely senseless, you're unable to think, you're unable to act, you were just waiting for something to happen, but you did not that you were waiting, so, your unconsciousness, so to speak.

Did you realize how long you were on the train?

As mentioned, back on the calendar ,this was the last day I know was December 4th, I know this because on December 2nd we got the orders to move and it took 2 days to reach the railway station, this is how I know it was 2 days. When we arrived then to Buchenwald someone told it was Christmas Day and then I knew it was December 25th. It was exactly this, I'd say, December 25th.

Had you heard of Buchenwald before?

No.

Did you know what type of camp it was?

No.

You arrived there, what happened? What was the first thing that happened?

Well, the first thing that happened was, we were walking, it was very cold, but it was refreshing. We had enough clothes on to be able to tolerate the cold, so I remember exactly when we passed the gate. "Freiheit macht frei" which in English it means "Work makes you free". This was the headline on the gate.

In German?

Yes, in German.

So, you went through the gate...

We went through the gate and then eventually we went to a room where we were registered, so to speak. It was something you felt a little bit comfortable with it, so after 21 days in the wagon then you were moving and then somebody was asking questions of you that made sense, what's your name and so forth. But then, then they gave us a number, so the name disappeared, everybody got a number, I don't know, I had a very high number, which I would not remember. It was a 6 digit number.

Where was the number?

The number, it was put on your wrist, on your wrist there was a number.

Like a bracelet?

Yes

A band?

Yes, it was a band, a band, it was permanent so to speak, you could not remove this anymore. Your number was always, always on your wrist.

And then, everything has been taken away from us, all our clothes were, naked we were passed through a shower type pass, and when we came out we were given these clothes, these striped clothes, a trouser and a coat and a shoe out of wooden. This was from now on my outfit between December 25 and April 11; one coat, one trouser and wooden shoes.

And then we were walking already on the night of December 25, which was a very cold night, we were walking, walking, walking and then we were put in a barrack, in a big building in which there were many people already and we were asked to occupy places on the shelf wherever we could find something.

On the shelf?

Right, right,

All these barracks were built of shelves, like in a storeroom, you have shelves and shelves are above each other, many shelves, 6-8 shelves and we moved to the first shelf where we could find a space and we then we just fell to sleep.

Were you able to stretch out?

Everything was very tight, so there were 600 people in a barrack like this.

And you slept?

Yah

Then what happened?

Then, in the next couple of days, most of my colleagues were called to the platform and they were inspected and they were taken away. They were taken to true work and I've never seen them anymore. I was suffering from some skin disease so my whole body was red, especially my face was red. I was considered as a useless person, and as such I was left there. I was not taken away. All during my time in Buchenwald, I was advancing in one barrack with the exception of the last 5 days which was barrack number 106 and this was all where I spent my life.

What did you do with your days?

Absolutely nothing. Every morning at 3:00 we were woken up and were given what was called a coffee, which was actually black water and one piece of bread was given at 3:00 in the morning and then you had time until 1:00 in the afternoon, when then you were given a soup, a soup which for 6 days was carrots, sweet, sweet carrots or something like this, sugar beet, actually. This was the second and the last meal of the day. And then at 3:00 the counting started. 3:00, everybody who was alive, in the barrack, had to go to the courtyard and we then were waiting for the German soldier who came and counted us.

So, this is 3:00 in the afternoon?

3:00 in the afternoon. So the waiting time was usually 2 hours. It took from 2:00-5:00 while we were standing outside in the cold winter and we were counted, then we were allowed to go back.

Were there many of the other people in the barracks, were there others like you were allowed to stay in the barracks all day?

Well the population of the barrack varied. First of all, people died on a regular basis. The number of deaths was from 10-15 per day. As the war progressed, new of these prisoners were brought into Buchenwald, one of them was Auschwitz, so the Auschwitz camp was evacuated to Buchenwald and then all these barracks were immediately refilled. So, it was always a population which was enough to fill the barrack.

Why do they think they let you live, rather than just take you and do away with you?

There was no way, there was no way of doing it, Buchenwald was not like Auschwitz, which was prepared for massive killing. The crematorium of Buchenwald was used exclusively to burn the people who died there. It was full time busy, busy, because there were 100 barracks of this and an average of 10 deaths per day, so 1000 people were burned every day. There was no way for any systematic killing of a large number of people. The number of prisoners was 60,000, it went up as high as 80,000 and perhaps it went down to 50, 000 and in the season, it was never less than 50, 000 and in the end 21, 000 remained.

Tape 3

You mentioned about 10-15 people dying in your barracks everyday. How did you know what was happening in the other barracks? How did you communicate?

We have seen when we went out, we have seen the corpses piled up, in front of the barracks. this was the rule, The dead people were taken out of the barracks and they were waiting for the dead pick up, these were regular hand driven cars, which was collecting these corpses and they were taken to the crematorium.

Now you spent 4 months sitting in the barracks

Less than 4 months

Had you thought of trying to escape?

There was no way to escape. This was out of the question.

We were not too far from the main fence of the camp, this was on the electrical current, so all around there were these watchtowers, which were loaded with these SS troops. Nobody ever came to this idea that one could escape from a camp, until you were in the camp.

Did you get any news from outside the camp?

No, absolutely not.

Did you know how the war was going?

The only thing we knew about the war was when we heard the bombing, when the air bombing of the neighboring cities was going on, this could be heard in the camp, and later on when the war advanced, we could hear the shots.

And what did you do with yourself all day, you're sitting in the barracks, except for those few times you went out to be counted. You're sitting in the barracks, did you have anything to read,

Oh, no, there was absolutely nothing there. The only you could do was talk to other people you could exchange so to speak news, so for instance when Auschwitz people came and we heard what was going on in Auschwitz when somebody came from Greece, you could talk and ask what happened in Greece. So, there was a little bit of exchange between prisoners. In principle, we were so weak, most of the time, we were just on the shelf. Also, losing the shelf during the day and some people were on the floor and other people were on the shelf so we had more room.

What did you think about? What went through your mind?

The only thing which went through our mind was the hope that one day we will be liberated; by the outside forces.

Did you pray a lot?

Not at all

Did you ever think about God and why he let his happen?

No, never.

How did the guards treat you?

German guards? The German guards had nothing to do with us. The only German person who I have seen was this soldier, as mentioned, who did the counting. But otherwise, we were treated by other prisoners, the rule was in these German camps that they were run by the prisoners themselves. For instance Buchenwald which was founded in '34 had a large number of old prisoners, and they were the ones who were running the camp.

How did they treat you?

There was no treatment, the treatment was just to distribute the food

So, there were no beatings?

No, no beatings.

They just left you?

Yes.

What were the first signs that you had that the war might be at an end?

The only thing which was indicating it was that the gunshot came closer and closer, we heard it better and better, so this was the only sign.

Now, how did you feel physically, did you ever think you were going to die there?

Well, until you're young, it is difficult to say that you will die, but elderly people, there were elderly people and later on, when the population became mixed, there were all kinds of people, all ages, then several of the elderly people felt that they would die and they would say so. I have one or two days left.

What was your lowest point, the worst time for you?

The most traumatic was the liberation itself. When we already knew that whatever army it can be is coming near to the camp and we noticed that the food is not distributed anymore in the barrack itself, but we had to go outside to get food. It soon became evident why. Those people who went to get their food did not return, they were taken away by the Germans. As soon as this became evident, then I did not go for my food, and for 5 days in a row, I did not eat anything. During this time, the neighboring barracks became empty and I with 4 others were hiding in these barracks and then the Germans came, when this became recognized that people are actually hiding, then they came to search for them and we were digging holes in the floor, under the carpet or whatever it may be, the wooden floor, we dug holes and we were hiding in these holes. For 5 days, we had no food, the only thing we could have then was water and even this, only at night.

About how many of you were there?

5 of us, there were 5 of us and on then April 11...

That's 50 years ago today, right?

Right.

What happened on April 11?

So, then at 2:00, one of us noticed that the German guard is not at the tower anymore and then at 2:30 the megaphone, the camp had a megaphone, and the megaphone announced that the camp is free and at 6:30, they will serve a meal, at 6:30, and then at 6:30, we got our first meal.

Who served the meal?

The meal was served by the older prisoners and the older prisoners were well acquainted with the situation and they knew the storage of the camp and so forth and they moved into the SS area and they emptied as much as they could and there were also pigs there which were killed and so, actually, this supper on April 11 at 6:30 was pig meal.

Who liberated this camp?

Americans

When did you first see an American?

The American army, we had seen the American army moving. This was seen between 2:30 and 6:30, the American army was moving but did not enter the camp per se. We had seen the first American, I believe, 2 or 3 days later. First the medical people came and the regular soldiers came.

What were your first thoughts? I mean, this was all over.

First of all, this was the first time I was happy I was alive. 1000 people died after the liberation. I realized I was fortunate that I am alive. I was so weak, I could hardly move.

About how much did you weigh?

I have no idea, but I was just out of bone.

Do you remember the first American words you heard, or was that from the doctor?

Not really.

So after the medical personnel examined you...

Right, right, the medical personnel was a mixed American and prisoner population. When I was examined I was already told that I had problems, so long.

And then what?

So, then I was there in the hospital between April 12th or I'd say April 14th or so until the middle of May.

This was still in Buchenwald?

Yes, in Buchenwald, right, around the camp there all kinds of facilities were built, German headquarters, around the camp were converted too.

Do you remember the first time you walked out through those gates?

Now this was very early, so I moved out quite early through the gates. As mentioned, 21,000 were treated, so to treat 21,000 people takes time but I was quite early moved out of the camp and then I was put in a temporary hospital there.

And then where did you go?

In the middle of May, I started to return to Hungary.

Did you know immediately that you wanted to go back home?

Yes, I wanted to study. This was two driving forces, the one to continue studying or resume studying and the second was I still wanted to see what happened with my family.

Did you go back to the farm?

I did, I did, for a very short time.

It was still there?

No, everything was taken away.

When did you get news about your family, what happened to your parents?

It was roughly the time that I returned to Hungary that I spoke with somebody who was in the same train complex where they were so he mentioned that my parents were sent toward the left which indicated the gas chamber in Auschwitz.

What about your sister?

My sister, she returned. My sister returned.

When were you reunited with your sister?

Sometime in June, 1945

Where had she been during the war?

She was in Auschwitz and she was in one of these German concentration camps.

So, you came back to Budapest?

Right.

Did you live with your sister?

We had various relatives there, who were helping us, relatives or friends, at this time, this was quite common, there was no difficulty for somebody who returned to find a place to live or stay.

And you went back to University?

I came back in June, 1945 and then I entered the medical university in September, 1945, so I had about 2 months, so to speak.

What university?

this was the medical University of Budapest.

You knew you wanted to be a doctor?

Right.

What happened, how did you live, how did you have the money?

Well again, between June and September we were just supported by everybody who remained alive and was not deported. These people were able to recover their wealth rather rapidly. And there were all kinds of help organizations and then from September 1, the American Joint was supporting us.

The Joint distribution committee?

Yes, this was extremely efficient.

When did you meet your wife?

This was 4 years after I started medical school in June '49, 1949

How did you meet her?

I was living in one of these Jewish student homes and she cut her finger she came into my room for medical help and so then I helped her.

And then what?

Also these Jewish organizations, they were helping to have a vacation. There were actually 2 weeks of vacation, when we went for vacation, and this was in August. So, I

met her in June and then just happened that we went together for vacation, this was more accidental than planned. But, then I engaged her on the 4th of August and married her on the 20th of October.

Wait, wait, wait, you got engaged to her that soon?

August 4th.

Yes, that soon?

June, the acquaintance, August 4, the engagement, the marriage, October 20, but this was again very common, this was not very specific. Many, many people like me, boys and girls who came back from the concentration camps, who really had nobody, married quite rapidly and then happily.

You talked to each other about what you had been through?

Yes, certainly,

And she was also in a camp?

She was.

She was in...?

Auschwitz , and then later on in a German concentration camp, Birkenbaum.

When you were married, how were you able to live? You were in school, she was in school?

I was already employed as a fourth year medical student in a research institute and then I had a very nice stipend from which we could live. The living standard was very low, but we already were above the ceiling from the Joint account. The joint was for a certain income. I could've stayed on the Joint account and could have also stayed in the Joint student home, but with my income, and her father was still living so she was really not a Joint supported person, but her father did not support us. She was also teaching and so forth, we were able to get together.

Now, your specialty was what?

I became a biochemist very early during my medical studies, already in the second year, I entered this research institute, which was a biochemical institute, this was where I was staying.

What made you decide on this?

It was the leader of this institute was a Nobel Prize winner and just his fame brought me there.

Did you and your wife work together?

Yes, so later on, she became associated with me at the same place, but in a different institution.

You started to have children?

The children came much later. Six years after our marriage came the first child.

And the first child was a boy?

A boy

and then what?

And then we left Hungary in '56. My career in Hungary was very much handicapped due to the fact my father had a farm and as such, in the communist system, I became again a second class system, this time because of my origin. Though my father had died and the farm was taken away I was still considered as a son of a capitalist. I could not advance in Hungary, as a matter of fact, I had major difficulties because of my father's occupation. So, when the Hungarian revolution came and the border was opened, then we decided to escape. This was a major undertaking.

And it was an escape, you couldn't just leave?

Right, right, absolutely, actually we tried three times and only the third one was successful and it was not absolutely simple, the border was mined and the border was watched, the border was wired, so to escape was not absolutely simple.

This was you and your wife and your son?

The first son was 22 months old. The second son, was already...Kate was pregnant with the second son, she was in the 7th straight month. This is when we escaped. Three of us with one help who took us to the border in the winter.

Did you have any feelings that you might not make it this time?

No, never, never, we never thought that we can not make it, we just walked about 6 miles in the winter that night. The border was a very deep groove. You had to go down, like you would go down one floor, you had to go down and up. We had absolutely nothing. I carried my son and Kate was just walking on her own.

Where did you escape to?

And then we went to Yugoslavia. This was the Yugoslavian border, we escaped. We could not make the Austrian border, the Austrian border was much more (...). Yugoslavian border was still ok.

Were you able to take any valuables with you?

Absolutely not. Everything we had we had we paid for the person who took us to the border. This was the trick in the escape to find the right person who was cashing on the service as much as he could. So, we gave him all the earnings that we had.

How did you live in Yugoslavia?

This was terrible, a major camp with many, many people in a single room. We were not there too long, we were there for a week only.

What kind of a camp was this?

This was what would be today, Croatia, Zagreb is the name of the town.

This was not a concentration camp?

This was not a concentration camp, this was a camp for refugees, a camp for refugees who were restricted in their movement. They could not go out of this area.

But you were together, the three of you?

Yes, certainly.

And when was your second son born?

The second son was born April 4th.

And were you still in the camp?

No, a long time ago, we left the camp.

Where did you go?

We went to Israel.

Why?

Israel was the only place where one could go immediately. I wanted to leave the camp as soon as possible.

Did you plan on staying there?

Originally we were planning to stay there.

What happened?

We had difficulties there in making a living and there was not much interest in the research I was doing.

Where did you go from there?

I wrote letters all around the world. I was taken by German Professor Weber in Heidelberg in Max Planck Institute.

How did you feel about going to Germany?

It was a very difficult decision, but I wanted to make a scientific career and I had seen I will never make it in Israel whereas the German professor was very famous and it was not my intention to stay in Germany.

But you were a Jew

I was a Jew

And he was a German

And he was a German, right. In spite of the fact, he never showed us that he was a German and he was very well aware that we were Jews. We were treated there like Jews and qualified researchers.

Was there still discrimination, anti-Semitism?

In Germany at that time, there was not.

Now, you were studying at the Heidelberg Institute?

I was not studying, I was doing research

What was your wife doing meanwhile?

She was also employed there, she was also getting her PhD in Frankfurt, in a neighboring..

Did you think about staying on in Germany?

No, we never thought about this.

How long were you there?

We were there 2 years, exactly 2 years.

And then what?

Then we came to America, I was already in America soon after I was in Germany, I came to America already in '58.

Was it easy to get to America?

I was invited to speak on a symposium.

Oh, you just came for a brief visit?

For a brief visit, but during this time, I already arranged our coming over to America. I came back to Germany with the knowledge that we were coming to America in '60. So, we arrived in May '58 and I was in America, September '58 and then we came to America in May 1, 1960 we did arrive in New York City.

Tape 4.

Let me go back a step, I had asked you about anti-Semitism when you were in Germany, What about after the war, when you were in Yugoslavia, when you were in Hungary? Were there any anti-Semitic incidents then?

Not too many, I would say

Were people still calling you a ...Jew?

No, no , no, this was already the communist system which was in Hungary when I returned. There was really no open anti-Semitic..

*So, it was the **capitalist** system?*

The capitalist is the major emphasis, right.

That was it.

How did you come to the United States?

I came under a first preference (...) I came under very favorable conditions.

Did you all come over together?

Yes, right.

Do you remember what ship?

Hanseatic

You came to New York? Did you have work awaiting you?

Right

And where did you work in New York?

I was working in an institute that was called the institute for Muscle Disease. This was where Cornell University is, where Rockefeller University is, where Sloane Ketterling is. This was the one, if not the largest medical center of the whole world in 1960.

What was your position there?

I was a department head there.

And you were also doing research?

Right

And teaching?

There was no teaching there, this was a pure research institute.

Was your wife also working there?

Also, correct.

What was your life like in New York?

We were living in Queens for 5 years and then we moved to Manhattan. We were living very nearby to our work on the 1st avenue, 76th St. and 1st avenue. I was working at 72nd in New York.

Were you doing well financially?

Sooner or later, yes.

Did you still think about the camp now and then as far as when you were eating something special or when it was extra cold out? Did camp memories stay with you?

Not really, very occasionally.

Like when?

If something very traumatic happened in the world, let's say when Kennedy was shot, then for a moment, I was thinking on the camp, but in principle, I would say not.

Did you know that you wanted to stay in the United States for the rest of your life?

Yes, right, yes

Did you feel safe here?

Right

How did you feel as a Jew?

Here? I never felt any reason to think about this

Did you become involved with the Jewish community?

Not really

Synagogue?

Not, I'm not religious.

Do you still believe in God?

Not

Why?

I tell you when I lost God. I lost God first when I heard my parents saying God would help. And when I became a scientist, a life scientist, then I couldn't find God anymore.

Did you think of God when your children were born, when you looked at their faces?

Not, not.

Do you think you raised your children differently because of what you had been through?

No

Did they go to public school in New York?

Yes

How long did you stay in New York?

14 years.

What made you leave?

This institute was closed, this was a research institute, and they felt there was no need for this type of research anymore.

So, what happened?

So, you had to go out and find a job?

Right, it was not difficult,

You came to Chicago?

Right

What is your job here?

Yes, currently I am already professor emeritus. I was a full professor of chemistry from '74 –'92

Where?

Here at the University of Illinois at Chicago at the medical school.

Were you doing research?

Mainly research and some teaching.

What are you doing now as professor emeritus?

I was writing a book, I just finished the book now.

What is the name of the book?

Biochemistry of Smooth Muscle Construction. It will be published by Academic press.

In your research, did you come up with any specific examples, any specific things that help to combat muscle disease. Are there specific ends to the research?

In New York, I was working on this, but, I was not successful. Nobody else was successful, I should say, but at least we tried. Here, in Chicago, the best I came near to it, was to develop techniques to measure on live patients, the concentration of the phosphate

metabolites in the muscle which are decreasing very much in muscle diseases, especially in muscular dystrophy.

Tell me about your sons.

The first one was born in what year?

The first was born in '55

And his name... ?

His name is George. He is now full professor of chemistry at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. He was 16 years old when he was admitted from the high school directly to the graduate school by the Rockefeller University. He was 21 years old when he got his PhD. He was 24 years old when he became assistant professor, 31 years old when he became full professor.

The other son, he came here with us to Chicago.

He was born..?

He was born in '57 and he graduated here from the University of Illinois in the chemistry department in 2 years. He graduated also from the Rockefeller University in New York, where his brother graduated, in 5 years. He was with the Nobel Prize winner, Hamilton Smith, at Johns Hopkins for 3 years. He became assistant professor of Cornell Medical School in New York at the age of 30 and he became full professor, now, at the age of 38.

How did you raise such brilliant sons?

We were raised in the lab, we were living nearby to the lab, we were living at the 76th St and we were working at the 72nd St in New York, if you are familiar with this area of New York on the east side. So the children from the school came to the lab, this is where they were raised, in the lab, so they learned science very early in their age.

Did you talk about science or practice at home?

A lot of science was taught at home and they were practicing in science all the time. My wife carries a lot of responsibility for their success. She was teaching them math, both of them were trained first as a mathematician, and then as a physicist and only then did they switch to biochemistry.

Do your sons ever ask you about what happened during the war, what happened in the camps?

Yes, little.

What do you tell them? Do you tell them everything? Do you try and make it easier for them?

They were asking for this tape and perhaps this will be the best information for them about the camp. In principle, they know our hard life, but we were not anxious to tell them all the experiences we had. We let them grow, we let them become scientists, become happy.

When they studied about the war in school, did they ask you questions about the fact that you were in Europe during the war when they heard about the camps?

They both were in science high school where the main emphasis was on science, little emphasis was on history and so forth, so really they did not.

How old are your grandchildren?

The oldest one is 8, the next one is 6 and the little one is, now 1 and a half

So, even the 8 year old is a bit young to be asking you questions about the war?

Correct, right.

Why did you decide you wanted to talk on this tape?

The only reason why I decided this is that I heard that many people don't believe that this happened so I thought that I should tell the truth.

Now, it's 50 years today that your camp was liberated. What do you think about the last 50 years? Do you think this kind of thing could happen again, such a Holocaust?

Seems unlikely to me, this was really such a planned homicide, it probably will not happen once more in humanity, in mankind. There are many killings, many people will die, without good reason, but such a well planned killing, I don't think will happen once more.

What are some of the highpoints of the last 50 years? Some of the special good things that happened to you in the last 50 years?

Mainly my research, my family, my happiness is my wife, to see my children continue my life. Hopefully, I will still see my grandchildren continue my life through the life of my children.

Do a lot of your associates at the University know?

Yes, they are very understanding. On the 50th anniversary of Auschwitz, they have sent us flowers, and all kinds of gifts and nice letters and just express their appreciation, in general of humanity, I would say. I would not consider this as an appreciation of us and we came back what I call the normal life. This is what we represent this happen and this is what they appreciate.

Do you consider yourself a role model?

Not really, no, in no way.

Many of them did the same way, as we did, and move much more forward...

Do you think you've inspired many of your students to follow in your path?

Yes, concerning scientific

We're coming to the end of our talk, Is there anything else you want to say for your children, your grandchildren to hear? Any final thoughts?

That life is a fight. Everybody must fight one way or another. Hope is what makes a human being a better one and everybody should aim for more humanity and the only lesson what the Holocaust teaches that we should work for a better world, independent of race and religion and always keep in mind that the human being is the number one in life.

Thank you, thank you.

So, this is my father, at the age of 55, about 2 years before he was killed. His name is Joseph.

This is my mother, Angela at the age of 44, 2 years before she was killed along with my father in Auschwitz.

Kate and I got married on October 20, 1949, we are leaving the Jewish temple in Budapest Hungary.

Our family in Flushing New York, in 1962, On the left, Kate, with George in front of her and on the right, I, with Francis in front of me.

Kate and I at the Institute for Muscle Disease in New York City in the early '60s. The picture shows Kate adjusting the (shirring) pattern in the ultra (...) centrifuge while I am watching the pattern.

Kate and I in New York City in 1969 celebrating our 20th anniversary.

The cover of the Science Digest, 1984, December, showing America's 100 brightest scientists under the age of 40.

George, at the age of 29, selected among the 100 young scientists, being an associate professor of chemistry University of Minnesota. The picture shows the peptide that George synthesized. Mets is the favorite baseball team of George in spite of being in Minneapolis, he supports the New York team.

Francis, our younger son, at the age of 17, on the cover of the New York Times, showing his Westinghouse science fair finalist project which was a Venus fly trap.

Francis at the age of 33, at Cornell University, department of microbiology, after he discovered the (...) chain reaction.

Our vacation in northern Minnesota in 1994, Michael is 7 and Deborah is 5.

This is Francis and Rachel and their one year old baby in New York.

Isabelle is the baby's name.

*What is the secret to staying married for 46 years?
Michael?*

To find a person who resonates on you.

And Kate?

I think the most important is to choose the right partner, you have to be compatible intellectually, psychologically, and physically. I do believe you have to work on the marriage.

What are some of Michael's best qualities?

He is a very dedicated good person. He is a dedicated scientist and he is a dedicated husband, and he is really a warm, wonderful person. He really likes to work and I respect this very much.

And Michael, what are some of Kate's best qualities?

Kate is full of love. This is reflected toward me, toward our sons, toward our grandchildren. She is a very clever person who has helped me many times carry through difficulties in our lives. She is also very cultural. She is an artist and a scientist.

Thinking back 50 years, have you every thought of going back to Europe, back to Buchenwald?

Not, I believe we closed Buchenwald in our lives, we keep the experience of Buchenwald and want to pass it to the next generation, but Buchenwald was the abnormal part of our

life and we want to return to the normal life, and this does not require to revisit Buchenwald.

What one memory stays in your mind through all these years?

Liberation.

Is there any special message you want to leave your grandchildren, to your great grandchildren when they see this tape 50 years from now, 100 years from now?

This tape shows a part of our life; it shows the difficulties we had when we were young. It also shows our success to overcome these difficulties. It shows our love of science, humanity, and family life and it should give you an example living together with your life partner is perhaps the basis of your life.

Last time you gave her a kiss off camera, you can do it on camera if you like.

Thank you, thank you both.