



Home > Interviews > Judita Hruza

Judita Hruza

Q: What is your birth name?

A: My birth name is Judita Ilkovics.

Q: And what is your married name?

A: My married name is Judita Hruza.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in Czechoslovakia, on the Hungarian border. Our village – it was a tiny little village of about 100 inhabitants – was half-Hungarian and half-Slovak. My family spoke Hungarian, so that was my mother language.

Q: What date were you born?

A: September 26, 1924.

Q: What was your life like when you were young?

A: My father was a lawyer, but he never practiced law. He rented an agricultural estate from a Hungarian count, and he worked on the estate. It was surrounded by a beautiful park and big trees. I was born in a castle, really, that belonged, of course, to the count. It was a really big estate, and when I had to go to bed, we had to go through six or seven rooms before we got from the living room to the bedroom where I slept.



Judita Hruza

We were the only Jewish family in the village, and we were probably the richest. I felt very out of place because I played with the peasant kids, and they always treated me a little bit differently. When we played – I don't know the English name for it – the game where one person has to catch the others, who run away – they let me win. They always let me catch them. I was the only one who didn't have a chance to lose.

Many of the other kids took their little brothers and little sisters along because they had to take care of them; they were the babysitters, and I envied them terribly. Until five years of age, I was alone. I have a brother who was born when I was five years old, and that's when everything changed. Then I felt much better. I was a helper for my mother. I felt that he was also my baby.

I also envied the kids because they walked barefoot all summer long, but I didn't because they were afraid I would step on a piece of glass or something. So everybody treated me very differently. Those were my surroundings.

Q: What was it like to be the only Jewish family in the village? Did you practice your religion?

A: Well, not very much. My mother came from a neolog Jewish family, and she was raised in a non-kosher household. But my father came from a religious family, and when they got married, my mother had to promise my grandmother, her mother-in-law, that she would lead a kosher household. She did it all for my father, and she did it very correctly. We were not allowed, for instance, to ride

bicycles or cut with scissors on Saturdays. So I hated Saturdays.

My mother also lit candles on Sabbath evening, and she lit one for each of us – for my father, for herself and for the children. She also lit one for one of my father's cousins who participated. We had a joint estate with this man, and since he didn't have a family, he asked my mother to light a candle for him, too.

So that's how it was. Of course, I envied the kids who went to the church on Sundays, and sometimes they took me with them. They had to ask my mother if she would let me go, but I loved to go to the church.

Q: Were there no synagogues?

A: No, no synagogues. For the big holidays, a rabbi would come and use the school as a synagogue. It was a public school, but they still let him use it. There weren't many people who attended, of course, because we were the only Jewish family in the village. There was a little village nearby, and there were only two Jewish families there, so they came, too.

Q: Where did you go to school?

A: In my village, we had only two classrooms, four grades to a classroom: one from first to fourth grade and the other from fifth to eighth grade. My parents, though, wanted to get me into another school so that I could get used to it before gymnasium. So I went to the fourth grade at a Jewish school in Prešov. The city of Prešov, which was about 60 kilometers from our city, was where my paternal grandmother and my maternal grandparents were from. I went to school in Prešov from 1934 until 1938.

Q: Was it a boarding school?

A: No. I lived with my grandparents, whom I adored. They were wonderful, so that was easy.

Q: When did you first notice signs of anti-Semitism? What were your early experiences with anti-Semitism?

A: The kids from other schools knew we were Jews only because we went to school on Sundays, not Saturdays. When we went to school, the kids from other schools, who were not Jewish, used to scream obscenities at us – "stinky Jews" and all that. But it wasn't against just me; they usually screamed things when we were in a group. Sometimes we screamed some ugly words back at them. That was the first time I noticed anti-Semitism.

Q: Did it escalate?

A: Well, it didn't escalate because that was still Czechoslovakia, and it was a very democratic, humanistic country, so anti-Semitism wasn't allowed. But, you know, kids would do it in the streets. Till, it didn't escalate.

Q: Do you remember what year that was?

A: That was in 1934, 1935.

As a matter of fact, my grandfather, who wasn't religious at all, used to tell me that I didn't have to be embarrassed or ashamed that I was Jewish because we came from a very old culture where people went to school and learned and wrote books while, at the same time, the Christian kids could only do agriculture or something like that and didn't even know how to read or write. So I shouldn't be embarrassed.

Q: When did the impending war begin to affect you?

A: Well, in 1938, Hitler decided that he wanted part of Czechoslovakia. The Munich Conference took place and when Czechoslovakia's allies, France and England, came to talk to Mussolini and Hitler, we thought that war would start right away and that Czechoslovakia would begin a general mobilization.

Every man from ages 20 to 40 had to report to the army. At that time, my uncle (my grandparents' son), who was 36 and lived near Prešov, had to report. My grandmother was so very, very unhappy. She said, "My husband went to the First War, and I have to go through it again. He will be killed."

At the Munich Conference, they made an agreement, a treaty, in which they let part of Czechoslovakia go to Hitler so there would be no war. My grandmother was very happy about it when she heard and said, "My son is coming back, my son is coming back. Wonderful." And he really did come back, of course – there was demobilization. I remember how my grandmother said to him, "Oh, I am so happy. I don't care what happens to the Sudetenland, but we won't have war, and you are at home again." And he said, "I'm not happy at all, and we are very unhappy and upset about it because Hitler won't stop with this part alone; he will want the entire of Czechoslovakia. And I would rather die on the front than live through this."

Then things went very, very fast. In October 1938, after the Sudetenland was taken and occupied, Slovakia wanted to get away from Czechoslovakia and be its own country. A Catholic priest Josef Tiso, who was extremely anti-Semitic, became the president of Slovakia. And then, because Hungary was Hitler's ally, he rewarded Hungary with the southern part of Slovakia.

I couldn't stay in the Slovakian school because, all of the sudden, there was a border between the town where my grandparents lived and my village, so I went home. But of course, I couldn't go to school there because I was already in gymnasium, in high school, so they sent me to continue school in Budapest, where my mother's best friend lived, and I lived with her. I loved it in Budapest, a big city and all. But they already had two anti-Jewish laws. Then, when this part of Slovakia was given to Hungary, Hungary got a lot of Jewish people, so they made these anti-Jewish laws even more strict.

Q: Do you remember what those laws were?

A: There was a "six percent rule." In every working place, only six percent of the employees could be Jews. And in every university, only six percent of the students could be Jewish. We were still safe – nobody got killed, nobody got deported – but there were these restrictions. Budapest, though, was a city with a lot of culture, and a large percentage of its Jews – much larger than six percent – were playwrights, novelists, actors, filmmakers, owners of factories and companies and so on. If you went to a concert – a classical concert; I don't mean a concert like it denotes today – the audience was mainly Jews. Doctors were also primarily Jewish. Budapest's entire financial element – and also its artistic component – mainly consisted of Jews.

So life went on in Budapest, and I enjoyed it. I came from a village, a small town, and in Budapest there were theaters and concerts and operas and exhibitions and museums and so many opportunities. I loved it. I was just drinking it in. I loved Budapest. Luckily, this was before the Germans came. The people were not anti-Semitic; they didn't treat us differently. I loved it.

Everything went fine until I finished high school. I couldn't go to the university; I couldn't get in due to the six percent rule. So I went to a one-year school that taught students how to be both children's nurses and kindergarten teachers. I graduated, and I thought, I'll get a job; I can go to a kindergarten or to a children's hospital.

Q: Did you still respect Shabbat when you were living in Budapest with your mother's best friend?

A: No, not in Budapest. My mother's friend didn't do it, so we didn't either. And by that time, even my mother had stopped keeping a kosher household because things had changed so much. We moved to another town. Everything was scarce, and we ate what we could buy, even if it was not kosher. My father agreed with this because of the situation. It was war.

On March 19, 1944, all of a sudden, Budapest was occupied by the Germans. Immediately, we got a telegram from my father stating, "Children, we expect you home immediately." We picked up our bags and went to the railroad station, but they wouldn't let us in; they asked us for some proof that we were not Jewish, and we didn't have anything, so we stayed in Budapest.

We found out later that the deportations had started toward the end of April. On June 5, it was written in the papers, "There are no more Jews in the countryside." Our parents had been deported, and that was it. We never saw them again.

Q: Did you know where they went?

A: No, not until after the war. Afterward, we learned that my mother was killed in Auschwitz. We heard many, many years later that my father had died in Buchenwald.

So we stayed in Budapest with this friend, and with the certificate I had earned, I went to babysit for a doctor. Then, some houses were marked with yellow stars, and Jews were only allowed to live in those houses, one family per room; it was pretty crowded. Our house became a yellow star house, and two more families, our neighbors, moved in. We were still able to live because I had my salary; I was the breadwinner in our family, which was two families, really.

What was hard at the time was that we had those air raids twice a day, at 11 a.m. and 11 p.m. We didn't have a real shelter; it was a subterranean store only about three steps under the surface, so it wasn't very safe. If we had been hit by a bomb, nobody would have survived, and that was a little scary. But, at the same time, we knew that on the Russian front, the Germans were retreating. We just waited for the Russians because we thought that they would be our liberators.

During this time, we heard about Wallenberg. We knew who he was and that he was giving out those protective passports. We considered it, thinking maybe we should go there. But we couldn't go because people had to stand in a line, which was very long. Sometimes people went the night before to get a place in line, but I don't really know how they did that because Jews were only allowed to leave their houses between 2 a.m. and 5 p.m. Otherwise, we had to stay inside. We were locked in for 21 hours every day. Anyway, we decided that we didn't know what would await us. We just didn't know. We had no idea what would happen to us. We had been bombed, but we thought that the war would be over soon. So we didn't go, we didn't ask for protective passports.

Q: How did you hear about Raoul Wallenberg? Did other families mention him?

A: Well, yes, some other families mentioned him. Also, there was the Jewish Gemeinde, an association that had a weekly newspaper, and they wrote about that. Of course, they had to be very careful what they wrote about. And then, October 15 came.

October 15 started out very well because the regent of Hungary, Horthy, proclaimed that he was making a separate peace treaty with Germany and Italy. He stated that they would bring home all of the Hungarian soldiers from the Russian front and that the inhuman treatment against the Jews was against his will and that all the laws and illegalities against Jews were to be stopped immediately. All we could do was save the Budapest Jews; he couldn't do anything about the country Jews. So we all went outside of the Jewish houses, and we hugged each other. And the Christians, who did not wear the yellow stars, came and tore them off of us and said, "It is shameful that we did it to you, and you will never wear this yellow star again." Everybody was happy, and everything was OK.

Then, in the afternoon, there was another proclamation. It was from Szálasi, the ultra-Nazi who had a party that was, perhaps, even worse than the German Nazi party. He announced that they had arrested the traitor Horthy and that everything was back to how it had been, except that he was introducing new laws against the Jews, and of course, they started immediately. The women between the ages of 16 and 40 and all men between the ages of 16 and 60 had to report for work. We fell into his category.

Q: How old were you?

A: I was not quite twenty.

So we reported for work. At first, we said, "Well, we can work. We are strong. What can we do? We will do whatever we can." But, then, they sent us on our way, and we had to reach the first destination, a Budapest airport. It started to rain, and we were all soaked. Our backpacks were soaked – they were very heavy – and we wanted to rest. But they said, "No, no, no. You have to go." We thought, OK, we will get to the airport, and we will have a roof over our heads, and we will take off all the wet stuff and dry it somehow.

Finally, we got there. We saw the building, and we had to go inside a gate. The rain hadn't stopped,

and because the roof was gone (it had been bombed away), we were still being rained on. We went upstairs, and it was so tight that we had to stand. We stood there all night with the rain accumulating around our feet. And that was it. That was the first night. Later, we got used to it.

Q: Were you expected to work?

A: At first, we dug traps against the Russians, which was hard work, very hard work. I wasn't used to that kind of work, and I also used to be very thin; I was a very bad eater. When we would go on school trips out in nature somewhere, they would always leave me at home because they said, "You won't be able to go up this hill." I was always very unhappy about it.

We had to walk farther, and we always slept outside. It was the end of October or November. We dug those tank traps, but then the Russians got too close so we were marched back to Budapest. Eventually, we ended up in the brick factory.

Q: Can you tell me about the brick factory?

A: Well, it had a roof, but it didn't have any walls because they dried the bricks there. It was full of people – and not just the people from our original group but many people from Budapest as well. People were sitting there on their backpacks. We had to go upstairs again, and it was dark; we couldn't even see when we stepped on somebody. We spent the night there. We thought that we had already gone through so much, but at least there we had a roof over our heads. Still, it was very windy.

The next day, we continued on the death march, as they called it, when they sent us on our way to Austria. We dragged ourselves along, so it wasn't really a "march," but we weren't allowed to stop. Again, everything was the same. It was November, and we slept outside. We got to eat every other day, and we didn't get any water. We only got the water that came from the rain, and it was raining almost constantly. Then the worst part started when we all got dysentery. It was just running out of us. We weren't allowed to sit down and relieve ourselves; we had to march. So, really, our blood and liquids were just running down our legs. And we kept marching. Then, this fantastic thing happened.

We were about one week into our march when this car pulled up next to us. It was a diplomatic car with a little Swedish flag. I was somewhat close to it, and I thought to myself, This is a Swedish car; that must be Wallenberg. Wallenberg got out, and he had a huge canvas bag with him. He put it down on the side of the road, and he said in German, "I am Raoul Wallenberg, and I brought you some unclaimed Schutzpasses. Please look at them, and distribute them the best you can. God bless you, and good luck." And everybody cried. It was so fantastic. It was as if an angel had come over.

At the next stop, we distributed the Schutzpasses, but of course, not to everybody. I was so lucky that I got one. We got a pair of Schutzpasses for a mother and daughter about our ages. From there, we told the guard, "We have passes; we cannot be deported." He said that at the end of the march they would examine the papers. So we marched for another week, but somehow, there was such a difference because we said, "Oh, this will come to an end, and we have these papers in our hands." Finally, we got to the border.

There was a room with an Arrow Cross supervisor. In the yard, there were two or three trucks with Red Cross signs on them, so we knew, Oh, they are here to take us home, and we have these papers. We stood in line, and I thought, I survived, I survived. If my parents survived, as I have, then everything will be OK. We got closer and closer, and I held tight to the Schutzpass. I handed it to the man when it was my turn, and he looked at it and tore it apart. I didn't know why. I thought that maybe they knew that it was not my name, but it was because that Schutzpass had been issued after October 15. By then, Szálasi was in power, and he didn't accept those papers. Those who had papers that were issued earlier could go home on the trucks. We had to continue marching.

Then, something happened, and I know now what happened and why. We got through the border to Austria, which was then Germany. That was the first time that I started to get really desperate. I thought, Why? Why do I do this? Why do I go and march and drag myself...? My feet hurt because they were full of blisters from the marching, and I thought that it would be much easier if I let myself be shot. Then it would be over. I started to look for a convenient place to sit down – because they shot

everybody who sat down, no questions asked. I was looking, and then I heard my mother's voice. At that time, I didn't know about hallucinations, but she was talking to me, and she said, "Oh, sweetheart, don't do that. You will survive this, and then there will be a time when you will talk about it with your children and your friends. This will just be a very, very heavy piece of your life when you were 20, so don't throw it away." That was what I heard. So I calmed down because I knew my mother had never lied to me. I got back my strength, and I thought, OK, as long as there is one other person still walking, I will be the second one still walking.

I think I had to go through these extremely desperate conditions and situations to get my strength back. I think Wallenberg helped me make it to the border in the first place because of the hope I had in the Schutzpass. I'll never forget him for that. Then, if I hadn't gone through these experiences, I wouldn't have been in such a condition that I could hallucinate. I had to get into such a condition that I could hear my mother.

Q: A lot of people we talk with say that one of the most important outcomes of meeting Raoul Wallenberg or knowing about his existence was this idea of hope, as you mentioned. It didn't matter if Wallenberg was absolutely responsible for their livelihood or not; he gave them the hope that they could be saved or the knowledge that somebody cared about them.

A: Yes, it was fantastic.

Q: How was Raoul Wallenberg when you saw him? Do you remember him physically?

A: He was a young man; he was about ten years older than I was. He was very sympathetic, and he was smiling.

Q: Did you see his driver? He usually went everywhere with his driver.

A: No, his driver stayed in the car. Wallenberg got out on the right-hand side.

I read a lot about Wallenberg later on. It is so unbelievable that he was so daring and that he was able to outsmart and achieve what he did with the SS. He was such a young man. And it had to be our liberators who got him.

I read a lot about how, later, it seemed that the entire world looked for Wallenberg and tried to get him back. But not Sweden. My daughter showed me an article about how his family got no help at all from the Swedish government. They didn't give his family any information. His family tried to get to the Swedish authorities, but they didn't want to get involved with the Russians. They said, "No, we are friends, and we cannot." What the Russians told them, which was all lies, they just accepted. Sweden said, "Oh, he is OK, don't worry. He is alive, and they are working on it, and he will be back."

When I lived in Sweden, I was also very much surprised when I told people, "I love your country because the best person in the world is your Raoul Wallenberg," and most of the younger people didn't know about him at all.

Q: What years were you in Sweden?

A: 1967 to 1970.

Q: And how did you get out of Austria?

A: First, they put us in K?szeg, a slave labor camp on the Hungarian-Austrian border, and we were there for four months. We got used to everything, but the worst was the lice. When you wore knitted wool garments, like t-shirts or sweaters, they would make nests in the seams. Every evening, when we came back from digging, we had to kill them, and we counted them. I was once the winner because I killed 212 lice. But we got used to it.

Somehow, we even got used to the work because we learned how to make-believe and just go through the emotions. But some terrible things happened there, too.

One day, they called us for appel so they could count us. Everybody had to be there, and they always counted us once, twice, and there was always a mistake. On this day, the guard went to the barracks

and said, "Everybody out. Everybody out." In one barrack, there was a doctor, a young man, who was taking care of somebody. This doctor had to amputate the leg of a prisoner, and he was busy operating. The guard said, "You, too. You, get out. He [the patient] doesn't have to, but you, get out." The doctor said, "I am almost ready, but I have to stop the bleeding here." The guard said, "OK, I'll give you a choice. You either come out as you were told, or I let you finish, and then I shoot you." The doctor didn't even look up; he kept operating. I was very close to what was happening, so I heard it all. We stayed outside, praying, "Oh, my God, don't let him, don't let him. Please save him; don't let him be shot," with all our hearts. And then we heard the shot, and he was dead. I haven't prayed since.

[I decided that I would become a doctor. I don't think I would be brave enough to do what that doctor did, but I thought that doctors must have known a secret that we didn't. They always behaved in a certain way, even on those marches. Whenever we made it through a night, people would always come and put up a Red Cross flag. They couldn't do too much, perhaps clean some wounds, and they ran out of everything they had. They would say, "Oh, you will be OK. Try this...", and I just thought, I have to find out what that secret is. So I became a doctor. Both my children are doctors.]

After four months, they evacuated this camp as well, and during the months of March and April, sent us on a 17-day death march through the Austrian hills. We slept outside, as always, which, in the mountains, is severe. Many people never woke up; they froze to death.

One day, before we got to a very steep hill, they gave us a fantastic meal. It was a very thick soup and quite a generous piece of bread. I ate the soup and hid my bread for when times got worse. Then, we went up the hill, which was really hard work to climb. When we were almost to the top, we heard a lot of shots. We were used to hearing individual shots – from when somebody sat down or something and was killed – but these were uninterrupted machine guns – ra-ta-ta-ta. We didn't know where they were coming from.

We got to the top of the hill, and we started to descend a winding road, into the valley of Eisenertz, when we realized what was happening down the hill. We saw a lot of bleeding bodies, and we stopped, but they screamed at us, "Lass, lass, Sau Juden," which means, "Rush, rush, Jewish pigs." On both sides of the road, there were guards who had their guns pointed at us, and they were just shooting indiscriminately. We all thought the same thing (we later compared our experiences), which was that they wanted to get us here, on this mountain, where there were no houses, no witnesses and no interferences. There couldn't have been a better place. They had given us food so we would have the strength to climb all the way, and now they were doing what we were afraid they would do the whole time – do away with us before the Americans or the Russians came to liberate us.

I was past being scared. I was sure that I was going to die, and I had these thoughts that were not quite logical. I still remember them, and I will never forget them. The first one was: I will be dead, and I will have a piece of bread in my pocket. Another was: I will be dead, and I have never seen the sea. Then, the worst was: I would like to take 20 more breaths. I have lived for 20 years, and how many zillions of times have I taken a breath and never even given it a second thought? I would just like to take 20 more breaths, but I won't because I will be dead. Then, I thought the last thought: I don't know how one dies, and now I will find out. It was as if I was going for a test, and I was not prepared.

We were running and jumping, trying not to jump on the bodies. We were just pressing together so nobody would get some guard's attention – because if somebody was shot but did not lie down, they would come and shoot him again. Anna fell over a body, or over a backpack, and a man and I pulled her up so they wouldn't see her lying there. She was full of blood; I asked her, "Did they shoot you?" and she said, "No, I just hit my face on something on the ground." I took my bandana off, and I wiped her so they wouldn't see her bleeding.

This lasted for 40 minutes before we got to the valley, where they stopped shooting and let us stay. They walked around and talked amongst themselves. Apparently, they just wanted to scare us because they said things like, "Oh, not yet; we will wait for dark." But when night came, nothing happened.

We found out later that an SS soldier had gone by on a motorcycle and asked whether they had an order to shoot at us like that. One of the guards said, "Oh no, we are just having a little...they're just Jews. They have to go to Mauthausen, so we just thought that maybe they don't all have to get there." The soldier said, "No, not without an order. Don't do it. Stop it immediately."

That happened in 1945. Twenty years later, my brother and my children and I were on our way from Vienna to Italy when I saw an arrow that read, "Eisenerz." I said, "Take me there. I have to see it," and my brother did. We went up the hill, and he stopped. I got out of the car, and I walked around. I said, "Oh, it's wonderful." I could still hear what had happened in 1945 – the screaming and all that – but I said, "But I am here. And I can breathe more than 20 times. I can take as many breaths as I want."

Then we went down to the village of Eisenerz. It is a beautiful place, the mountains and all. We went to a little store to buy some cards, and nobody else was in the store so the shopkeeper made small talk. "Oh, don't we have a beautiful place here?", he asked. "Is this your first visit?" I said, "It is the first time my family has been here, but I was here 20 years ago on my way to Mauthausen." He said, "Oh, I remember, I remember. Those were bad times during the war. We all suffered from the war." I said, "Well, in the valley it wasn't so bad, but what happened when we got up there...," and I told him that 250 people were killed there. He got very upset, and he said, "That is a lie. Don't spread any Communist propaganda in my store. They may have killed one or two people who tried to run away, or maybe they killed them in Mauthausen, but not here in Eisenerz." I got so angry that I just wanted to scratch his eyes from his fat, pink face. My brother hugged me and said, "Don't do anything to make it worse," so I stopped, and I just cried and cried and cried. We had looked for something, some memorial somewhere that noted what had happened there. After that, we understood why we didn't find one.

In 1993, somebody sent me a Hungarian newspaper clipping that said a man named Michael Zuzanek from Austria was looking for survivors of the Austrian death marches because he wanted to make a documentary. He wanted to get in touch with people who were willing to go back to death march locations and talk about their experiences in front of the camera. I immediately wrote to him and told him what I went through and that I would be more than happy to go back to those places and tell the world what had happened. He and his two colleagues immediately came to New York to see me, and they stayed for about a week. Every day, we talked about what had happened. He would show me pictures, and I would show him where we had been. Then, in the spring of 1993, they invited me to Austria, and they took me to all those places, and I told them again what it had been like.

About five years later, I got a letter from the students at a school, a gymnasium, in Austria who had seen the documentary and decided that a memorial, or monument, should be erected. So they went to the mayor of Eisenerz and showed him the movie, and said that something should be done about it. They started an action, and the mayor called the mayors from the neighboring villages and towns, and they decided they really should do something. They created a competition for the memorial's design, and it was won by an organization called "Angry Youths against Violence and Racism." Then, they started advertising in the newspaper that they were looking for people from the neighboring villages who remembered what had happened and would like to take part in the action to erect a monument. They got people together, and many people wrote about their memories.

They invited me to the unveiling of this monument. It was a big celebration. Beforehand, they had sent me a list of 30 questions about my life before, during and after the war, and a German teacher used my responses to write a performance that was part recitation, part musical and part symbolic movements. This performance was presented by children at the unveiling. There were a lot of speeches given there, too. It was wonderful. It was a fantastic thing.

The program started at the point where we had been given the food before climbing the hill in 1945, and we walked the same route. I was the one who started the march, and a man took my hand, and he said, "Now you will say, 'Rush, rush.' You tell them." Those who couldn't walk were taken up by car. We went up, and the young people overtook us – they overtook me, at least, because I wasn't 20 years old anymore. After a while, I had to stop and catch my breath, and a car came to pick me up – the cars were cruising there to pick up people who could not walk anymore. I was the one to unveil the

memorial, and it was beautiful. I'll show you the pictures. It was really wonderful.

Q: That's a great ending. I hope the shop owner was invited and saw it.

A: When we made the movie, the man who wrote it wanted to go to the shop, but I didn't know which house it was – I had been there so many years before that I couldn't find him.

Q: From which camp were you liberated?

A: The last camp we occupied was Guns kirchen. I wrote down my remem brances of the day of liberation, and I sent it to the 71st Division of the US Army, which had liberated me. Somehow, they found me – perhaps because I wrote a lot – and a man called me and said that they were having a reunion of the 71st Division, and they would like me to come. I couldn't attend because I had to be somewhere else – I think a family member of mine was graduating – so I wrote and told him what I remembered about our liberation. They made a poster of what I had written, and they put it up at the reunion so everybody could read it. After that, a lot of them wrote me, and I got a lot of letters saying how happy they were because, after what they had seen in Guns kirchen, where they couldn't tell who was alive and who was dead (mostly the people were dead), they couldn't believe that one of those people had turned out to be a normal person. When they found out that I have a family and a career and that I've seen the sea, they were so grateful to me, and I became their mascot. Many of them have since died.

Q: You speak to schoolchildren about your experiences. How do you feel about telling your stories to young people and to your family? Have you told your children and grandchildren about what happened to you?

A: Well, yes. My daughter is quite active as a second generation survivor, and she also speaks at schools. My grandchildren are also very much interested. It's a part of me.

It is interesting that, until I moved to Sweden, I couldn't speak about my experiences – not because I didn't want to but because in the Communist states, they said, "Oh, come on. We have heroes of Communism who did something. You just went as sheep; you didn't do anything." We heard that, and we all suffered. Somehow, it wasn't decent to talk about it, so I didn't. Of course, I talked with my friends and my family about it. But when I got to Sweden, where I spent three and a half years, somebody I'd become friends with once asked me, "Listen, I don't know if I should ask you or not...I understand if you don't want to talk, but could you tell me how you survived and how it was?" I said, "No, I can't tell you," but I started to talk, and I couldn't stop – like now. I found out that it's therapeutic for me, and then, after what happened to me in Eisenerz with the shopkeeper, I feel that it's a relief for me to talk about it. Now, I have become obsessed thinking, How long will I be able to talk? How long will I be alive? It's like an obsession. I have to. And whenever anybody calls me, I'm glad to speak about it.

I talk with eighth and ninth graders at schools, and I say, "I just want to tell you what it was like for somebody who came from a really pampered environment, surrounded with love, to suddenly be thrown into the dead." Even worse, I don't dream about what happened to me, but I dream a lot about my mother. Whenever I think about it, I just have to cry.

Q: You mentioned that you went back to Eisenerz with your brother. How did he survive?

A: My brother was wonderful. He was 15 years old, and he didn't really have to report for work because he wasn't 16. But they came to get people from the houses, and they came to our apartment because the super told them that a young boy lived there. They came, and we said, "He's 15; he doesn't have to go," but they said, "Oh, we don't want to see any papers," and they took him.

My brother told me afterward, that in the camp they would put the prisoners in a row, and every tenth prisoner had to step out and was shot. Luckily, my brother wasn't shot, but he decided that he would run away, and he did. He didn't have any papers, so I think he stole somebody's Christian, Baptist certificate. Nobody would have thought that my brother was Jewish, but he took these papers and reported to a refugee center in Budapest. There were many non-Jewish refugees who, as the front approached from the east, went to this refugee center. My brother told them that he was from such and such a town (which was a lie), and that, running from the Russians, he had come to Budapest with

his parents, and their train had been bombed. (He found out which train had been bombed a few years before and gave the name of that train.) He said that both his parents had been killed and that now he was there alone, that he didn't have any money or anything, that he just had this paper they had given him, which he was told he should always have with him, and he had nowhere to go. They said OK, and they gave him some papers that assigned him to a factory where he was to work. They also let him rent a room in which to stay.

He went to the factory, and he started working, and everything was OK. But he had kept his old papers and some letters from our parents, and one Sunday afternoon, he was sitting in his little room going through the papers and looking at the pictures, and the landlady came in for something, and she said, "Oh, do you have some pictures? Let me see, let me see. I am curious to see pictures." She looked at the pictures, which were in an envelope with a letter, and she looked at the envelope and said, "So, this is your name? So, you are not such and such?" And she said, "Oh, you must be a Jew." And he said, "No, no, not really." But she opened the window and called out to the street, "Brothers, brothers, come. I caught a Jew for you."

The men came in, and they took my brother's Jewish papers, and they took him to the headquarters of Szálasi (the ultra-Nazi), where nobody ever came out alive. Of course, he was terribly frightened. The guards took him to a higher officer and handed over the Jewish papers, and the man said to the guards, "OK, OK, thank you. You can go." So they left, and this guy started to look at the papers, but then the door opened and another guard brought in a bunch of men who they said were deserters. (If you weren't Jewish and were between the ages of 16 and 60, you had to be in the army). The officer got some papers and started to take care of those, and somehow, they didn't look at my brother, and he got mixed in with the deserters. When it was his turn to go before the officer, he took out his certificate, and he said, "Brother, this other brother didn't believe that I'm not 16, but I'm not 16 yet, so I was brought here by mistake." The officer looked at the certificate, and he said, "You are right, you are right, brother. You don't belong here," so he took him out to the guard who was in front of his office. He said, "Take this boy downstairs and let him go because he was brought here by mistake." Then, of course, he couldn't go back to where he lived, and he couldn't go back to the factory, so he went through the whole thing again at another refugee center, and they sent him somewhere else to work.

Q: How did you reunite with your brother?

A: Well, we were liberated on May 4, and before I got back to Budapest on August 15, we were in a displaced persons' camp. Somehow, there were negotiations between the Russians and the Americans about who would take care of the camp. Finally, the Russians took over our camp. They marched us toward Budapest. Starving, sleeping outdoors exposed to the elements and shoots if we tried to escape. Anna and I succeeded to run away and arrived in Budapest in August of 1945.

We got to Vienna, where the joint commission took care of us and put us on a train to Budapest, where we arrived late in the evening. We first went to see Anna's ex-mother-in-law, who wasn't Jewish, and who she thought had probably survived. She was very happy to see us, and of course, Anna asked about her son, who was only a few years old. Her ex-mother-in-law said, "He's OK, he's fine." He was in an orphanage, so he survived. I asked about my brother, and she said, "Oh, yes, he is OK. He is fine. Sometimes we have him over for dinner, and we help him." (My brother was only 15, but he worked, repairing the electricity in people's dorms and houses. Money was of no worth because of the inflation, so they gave him bread or salami or stuff like that for his work.) She said, "We take care of him a little sometimes because he has no parents." I just let that go. I thought I must have misheard her. I thought that perhaps she had said that his parents were not yet home.

The interesting thing is: I forgot that I had heard her say he had no parents. (I recall it now.) My brother told me he hadn't heard anything about our parents, so I insisted that we go every day to the rail station where the trains came in, bringing the survivors. Then, after awhile, we looked at each other and said, "No, I don't want to go anymore" – because it was always just a disappointment. So we stopped going. We thought that if they were alive, we would hear from them.

My brother went home to our town. He went to our house, but the people who had moved in couldn't let him in the house. He said, "I don't want anything. I would just like to find some pictures or

some letters or something from my parents," and they said, "No, they're not yours anymore. The pictures and the letters, everything is ours," and they wouldn't let him in. He went out to my mother's garden and put some soil in his handkerchief and brought it back with him. I never went back there; I couldn't.

Q: How did you get here to New Jersey?

A: We moved into Anna's place because Anna went to live with her sister who had come back from Russia. (Anna's sister and brother-in-law had lived in the Soviet Union since World War I, and he was in a very, very high position after the war. We changed his name so that Anna never knew that the minister of transportation was her brother-in-law.) We came home, and we had nothing to wear, and all of a sudden Anna went to live in a very fancy mansion. So when Anna left, my brother moved into her old apartment, and I went to live there, too.

One day, my brother came home, and he gave me a registration paper, a certificate, for an American school in Budapest. I said, "How did you do that?," and he said, "Well, I took your papers and I registered you." I said, "No, you can't do that. How will we live? What will we live off of?," and he said, "Come on, how did we live? Now we will live like kings if you compare it to what we went through. So don't worry." He didn't want me talking about it. "So now you are a doctor," he said. That's how I started.

Then, one year later, my father's youngest brother said he and his two sisters who had survived were in Prague, and we should go there so that our family would be together. (This brother had disappeared before the war started, and nobody knew where he had been. It turned out that he was a Czechoslovakian soldier with the headquarters in London. It was an illegal army, but he had gone there and had fought.)

We went to Czechoslovakia and I continued at the university in Slovakia, but there were so many anti-Semites that I could not stand it. Eventually, I transferred to the university in Prague, which was good because I found my dear husband there, and I had my two children there. Later, it got a little difficult to live there because it was such a dictatorship – not as bad as the Nazis were, but you know, if somebody wanted your apartment, they would just report you, saying that you were listening to the BBC. Then you would be arrested and thrown out of your job and your apartment. It was very hard, and we didn't want the children to grow up there. Most of the intellectuals – the doctors and engineers – were very unhappy there and always talked about getting out somehow.

My husband was invited to New York for research. I took our kids (15 and 11 at that time) to Sweden and waited for 3 ½ years for our visas for the USA. We learned Swedish, my children went to school, I got Swedish medical license. In 1970 we arrived in the USA.

Q: We have some time left. Is there anything you would like to say, in closing?

A: I have some habits that remain from the time of my Holocaust experience. For instance, whenever I know I will be traveling by car for several hours, I have to take a piece of bread with me. I can never leave without a piece of bread. Then, there is another thing: if I'm outside and it's terrible winter weather, raining and windy, and I'm wet and cold, I get very elated because I know that in a few minutes I will be inside, and it will be dry and safe and beautiful and warm. And there's something else: whenever something happens to me that could make me depressed, I find myself counting my breaths, and I know that I can take as many breaths as I want. With the time I have left, I am doing and making and learning what I want to. It is terrible that I lost my family, but I have such a wonderful new family. So I am a really happy person.

Interviewed by: Nathalia Therra and Daniela Bajar

Transcribed by: Nathalia Terra