

## **UKHMF TESTIMONY TRANSCRIPT – AGNES KAPOSI**

**[Testimony parts 1 & 2 together: 3hrs 22 mins]**

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10:00:00:00

**Agnes**

'My name is Agnes Aranka Kaposi. Er, I am a survivor of the Holocaust. Um, my main characteristics are that I am an engineer, I'm a grandmother, and I'm a socialist. I'm Jewish of course – that is why I was persecuted as the story will tell you, but I'm a completely religionless Jew, and I discovered I was Jewish by the outside world telling it to me. There is nothing spiritual about me being Jewish.

**[Fade to black and back up]**

10:00:40:02

**Interviewer**

Can you start by telling me Agnes about what your family was like before the war? What was it made up of? How did it hang together?

10:00:47:24

**Agnes**

Well family before the war was an interesting bunch. My mother was the eldest of three sisters. Hers was very comfortable middle-class family, far from rich but they were cared for by [?] mother. All three girls educated, intelligent, um, and, er, my mother a musician and quite gifted. She married when she was nineteen and she had me when I [sic] was twenty and that put an end to her career as a pianist but her intelligence, er, was very helpful to the rest of us because she became in my childhood the only breadwinner in the whole extended family. Her, um, youngest sister was a pianist who finished a programme of study at the famous Franz Liszt Academy of Budapest but was not allowed to graduate because she was a Jew. Her middle sister was an artist, er, but,er she could never develop properly because of various restrictions and circumstances.

10:02:14:11

My father was an accountant. Er, the husbands of my mother's sisters were respectively a lawyer and an engineer and none of them could have a job.

10:02:27:02

Um, they were prevented from working in their professions by the anti-Jewish laws. And there was a whole sequence of these which I would tell you about if you would wish otherwise you have discover this historically well established and they either didn't have any job at all or they had such occasional jobs as hoping for the snow to fall down because then they could queue up with other Jewish professionals in front of the municipal offices for wooden shovels to clear the roads before the traffic started. It was that kind of street cleaner's job or similar. That my father and my uncles were reduced to, and this is why my mother was the only breadwinner in the whole family as I described it until my little cousin Eva was born, who was nine years my junior. She was the daughter of my mother's middle sister.

10:03:35:06

I was the only child in the family and that was an essential part of my childhood because I was surrounded by young un-working fathers who had no children of their own so I had these surrogate fathers who, group of them, who helped my childhood,

enriched my life. Um, some of them were like I told you engineers or lawyers, doctors, bankers, accounts like my father was and they introduced me to their life, their way of thinking and helped my development and made my life -, my childhood quite rich and happy. Although I never had any childish playmates, in Budapest where I was brought up because I was surrounded by non-Jewish girls, children who were not allowed to play with me.

10:04:39:07

**Interviewer**

We'll talk more about your childhood and the influences your family had on your which helped you become the extraordinary woman that you then became in a moments time, but Agnes can I ask you to tell me just before the restrictions, before the war, before the outbreak of all the hostilities

10:04:56:02

**Agnes**

Uh huh.

10:04:57:02

**Interviewer**

What kind of comfort did your family live in? How did you live?

10:05:00:21

**Agnes**

Ok

10:05:01:11

**Interviewer**

Did you feel privileged? Did you feel concerned for money? What was it like before the war?

10:05:06:21

**Agnes**

Well, um, when I was born my father was the director of the cooperative movement of the city of Debrecen. Debrecen is a big provincial city which is where I was born and where my family originated from. Um, my father was a very prominent member of the local community. He was hugely gifted man who could not get to university because of restrictions of anti-Jewish laws and others. But he never the less made his way in the socialist movement initiating the, err, the cooperative society which extended to um, shops, advisory services, educational services and so on for working people. He was extremely prominent, very well know and very highly respected and that's when I was born.

10:06:08:00

But by the time I was 1 year old, um, right-wing government by, um, led by somebody called Gömbös came into power the cooperative movement was disbanded, my father was, had lost his job and so exposed and so well-known was he in the social democratic life of the city, that my family felt that he could never really err, get employment. Nobody would dare employ him and they sort anonymity of a big city so they went to Budapest, my parents. I was about 2 when they left

Debrecen. And they went to Budapest and they left me behind with my grandmother, um, and my young aunts, um, my mother's two sisters. They cherished me, they looked after me, never the less it must have been a shock because I understand having been an early and fluent speaker, I acquired a stammer and that accompanied me into school I really managed to overcome it by a combination of help and will-power.

10:07:30:05

And so by the time I started school I no longer had the stammer. I was living with my, my grandmother in reasonably comfortable circumstances, she had two rooms, um, nicely furnished flat, she had a small business. There was no major financial worry, err, I was brought up for two years by my grandmother and then when I was about 4 I joined my parents in the city in Budapest. There um, life was extremely hard.

10:08:08:05

Um, my mother acquired er, managerial job of a small um, shop er, it was um, a dairy um, retailing shop, milk, cheese that kind of thing. One of a chain of about 150 shops in the city, very well-known chain. And hers, because she was a newcomer she was very young and inexperienced, hers was the down and out smallest shop in a terrible part of the city and we that was the small shop and behind it there was a room and we lived in the room. My mother, my father, then later my aunts joined us because they wanted to make their way. My youngest aunt, like I told you, went to the academy of music and they all lived, there were six or seven of us all living in the backroom of my mother's shop. Um, she was m, a successful um, shop keeper and um, the company promoted her when I was just about ready to go to school. They promoted her to one of the top shops of the chain that was in the most glamorous part of the city within a couple of hundred yards of the parl-, houses of parliament. And my school was also in the immediate vicinity of the parliament.

10:09:48:12

And that's where my um, preschool and primary childhood um, was situated. Um, there were no lower middle class people like we were in that area other than a few shop keepers and er, children of the concierge of the big blocks of flats otherwise the, the inhabitants of the district were the moneyed, the MPs, the university professors, the operational of society. And I went to this school which was um, as I say in the immediate vicinity of the parliament and I was lovely there because either people had a lot of money or they were without any books or educational interests and here was I being brought up by a hugely intelligent father and a collection of intellectual young adults, um, so I didn't have much companionship but my um, preschool years were interrupted by happy summers which I spent with my grandmother back in Debrecen. There I had childish friends, as other children would have had. Um, I then went to school, I was nearly 7 because the schooling system starts at the age when you have to be 6 plus and my birthday being in October I had to be nearly 7 when I started school and by then I was reading fluently as you can imagine.

10:11:43:07

I was happy enough at school in the first and second and third year of my schooling and the fourth year was a big drama, which I shall tell you if you are interested. The

– my schooling started on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 which is an inauspicious day – date - day. And my primary schooling finished in also er, a difficult way because I was always the top of the class in every school I went to. I also was in the primary school my school had a senior and junior section and the natural thing would have been for an excellent student would be to proceed to the grammar school bit of the school, but it didn't happen because before I got there, there was already a restriction on how many Jewish children can go to um, state school state grammar school. So the year before me, only the top girl of that year could proceed. She advised me, I had to be perfect in the final year if I had any chance to continue to er, the senior school.

10:13:19:22

Well I was perfect in my record, but by the time it came my turn there was a new anti-Jewish law which er, completely prohibited all Jewish children no matter how excellent they might have been at school. So I could never continue into the senior school, um, and then came um, a broken year, um, then I was shoe-horned into an overcrowded Jewish girls grammar school, but only for a few months because we started the school year in September and that was September 1943 and in March 1944 the Germans occupied Hungary and that was the end for the time being that's when the real drama began.

10:14:19:10

**Interviewer**

We'll talk a bit more about your education in moment's time, but Agnes can I ask you just to give me your earliest memory whether it was happy or sad, what's your earliest memory?

10:14:30:17

**Agnes**

Well, um, my earliest memory has to do with chestnuts and to this day chestnuts are my favourite food. My mother had thrombosis which was a complication with childbirth and at that time the idea was for 6 weeks she was to lie motionless in bed, they wouldn't do that nowadays. That meant that she never fed me and I was brought up without mother's milk and I was put on solids very early, um, because that was the wisdom of that time. Um I was cared for by my aunt [Erka?] and I was still a baby in arms when I was given some beautiful food that I enjoyed and I remember the name for it which was called puree, that was the word, and I enjoyed that and how old exactly I was I don't know but I can't have been even 1. And then come another puree and I hated and spat out. The difference was as it turns out chestnut puree and the second was potato puree. And what I liked was the chestnut and the sweetness of the chestnut puree, which was given me, diluted with milk to be sure. But never the less, um, and the potato puree was not sweet and I wouldn't have it and I'm told by my aunt that they had to put sugar on everything, on fish, on meat, on anything in order for me to eat it as a young child. And that I think is my earliest memory, is to do with puree and chestnuts.

10:16:24:08

**Interviewer**

Wow I've never met anybody who's remembered something when they were so young. That's extraordinary.

10:16:28:23

**Agnes**

I could even -, you know it's very interesting. I can't draw or paint, but I do have a visual memory which is very helpful I'm an engineer, it's very helpful to have a very good visual memory and many of the memories I have are accompanied with pictures and if I could draw pictures I could draw out for you even the place near the window where my aunt was holding me in her arms and there how did the place look like and I do remember and I don't know – I tried to find out from my aunt how old I might have been when she was feeding me- and she said you can't have been more than one because by the time you were one you were - I was not holding you, you were sitting. So that's what I do remember.

10:17:17:21

**Interviewer**

Thank you. We'll tap into your pictures a little bit later when we talk about the camps because that would be very helpful for all of us. Let's talk about your education. Clearly everybody in your family – you were so loved and so valued by all the young adults who were so skilled and they instilled in you a real sense of learning. That for you, felt like a route out and that must have been very, very frustrating when that route was shut for you. Can you,

10:17:52:22

**Agnes**

I couldn't understand it. Well, may I take you back one year? This was – I think this will explain a lot of things, what happened in my final year of my primary school, I was like I told you, without effort, top of the class, partly my father's doing this as. When I got home from school with 95% of the marks, my father wanted to know what went wrong. And I was brought up kindly but under huge discipline to excel and so -, and it wasn't difficult and the schooling was intelligent. The, the mistresses were as they should have been. Two different, one in the first and second, and one in the third year. In the fourth year came a big change, um, I have the name of my mistress, er, her brother was a senior politician, well-known name. She herself [coughs] was an unmarried lady apparently a good teacher but she was a devoted fascist and, er, discipline as I now understand it is that Jews are sub-human.

10:19:22:12

So, um, there she was confronted with a dilemma of a child who was – me - um, who was interested, intelligent, quite good at everything that the school required and yet a Jew. And she could not reconcile her, er, conviction about the sub-human Jews on the one hand and the evidence in front of her - that's me - and her way of coping was to ignore me. Now for a whole year she collected from me the work I did, gave me back the marked work, she never addressed me, she never talked to me, she never asked a question. And there was I, going to school for a whole year, um, being like a fly on the wall. I have a photograph which you can scan for that time and I came across it quite recently and do you know it's sad, it's sad, and that was my final year in the primary school - in the hands of a fascist teacher.

10:20:46:08

Now, it was difficult to understand what was going on and I was incredibly fortunate

to have those men and particularly my father who tried to explain, tried to explain that it wasn't my fault, that it was the fault of the system. They tried to explain the, the antisemitic posters which were surrounding us everywhere. Some of them I have recorded in my book of memories that the, that I have prepared for my grandchildren, um, it was quite difficult to um, comprehend why it was that um, my wonderful uncles and my father were reduced to menial work. One of the ways in which my father earned some money, was to crack walnuts. Now he told me how to do this, the greengrocer would give a sack of newly er, shelled walnuts um, and if you crack them such that the half walnuts are not broken then be paid you twice as much for the work then if they were broken so you had to crack the shell very carefully. You had to prise it open with care and there was my father and I shelling walnuts for pennies.

10:22:28:05

Now why was it that he was so clever, why were my uncles so obviously clever why was it that my beloved uncle Stephen a civil engineer wouldn't work for months and then couldn't go to bed for three or four days because he would be given on the sly in secret a rushed job by a local design office and then he had to do it because that was the job he had for a while, why was he told and they tried their best to explain it to me. And these explanations helped me through that year with my fourth year teacher and subsequently I was taken into their confidence um, for example, radios had to be handed in, Jews couldn't have at one point, radio sets, we might come to that. But secretly we had a radio and that had to be buried among pillows, cushions, eiderdowns, and the family would gather under the cover to try and listen to the voice of London or the Voice of America um, through the air raids very difficult, bad reception. And this was a secret and I was not excluded, I was quite little and I knew that it was a secret and what a privilege it was that the grownups considered me as one of them. So all of this helped me then, and I should say even maybe later in life.

10:24:31:18

**Interviewer**

As you said because you were surrounded by so many grownups who loved you and included you in their life. You were forced to grow up very quickly but still you were a child, can you tell me again about your fourth year teacher. To be ignored for a whole year when you're so young, despite you were told what was going on. What did that feel like? To be sitting in a class like that, if you can take yourself back, what did it feel like to be ostracised, to be ignored so young, and you were doing so brilliantly?

10:25:08:23

**Agnes**

I think, well it felt, um, I felt isolated. I felt isolated from my contemporaries for both, er, social and racial reasons. I felt isolated from the rest of the school by the way my teacher acted and I think that it is part of the reasons why I remained for the rest of my life quite shy. Now, um, if you talk to my students, or my colleagues, or my professional associates or my, my friends, if somebody told them I was shy they would laugh because I managed to create an image, um, not act an image but be somebody who would appear to be reasonably comfortable addressing a conference, or examining PHDs, or you know, I am comfortable enough in those

situations, but give me a cocktail party and I run a mile. I think that some kinds of social intercourse remains difficult and will remain difficult for the rest of my life and I think it may have something to do with being isolated as a child.

10:27:01:09

**Interviewer**

You said when you first talked about it, it made you feel sad.

10:27:06:09

**Agnes**

Yes, um, I tell you a little story of my, of one of my granddaughters, I have five grandchildren, my youngest granddaughter is Tabitha and when she was about to go to school at the age of four she asked me what school was like and whether I had much fun at school and I said to her I always loved school because I loved learning but I didn't have fun at school. The story is quite funny I continued it a little bit, um, her eldest sister was also in the audience I was trying to settle them down in my house, they were to go to bed, tabby asked the question was school fun and my answer was no fun it wasn't though I liked school and she said, well why wasn't it fun and I said well, because there was a war on and er, war is not much fun. So Tabby says which war and I say the World war so Molly chimes in and she's older more knowledgeable, she's six. So she says the first or the second? So I say it was the second. And tabby says who won? So I said the British and the Americans, the allies won. 'Eeeee' they were very happy that the right side won. And um, and I also mentioned of course the Soviet Union, then Molly whose father is an amateur historian who says ahh, but the Soviet Union had fallen apart recently and I say yes it had fallen apart recently. I don't understand that.

10:29:08:21

So then came one of my educational challenges, I pride myself as being a teacher, of how to I explain to my four year old and six year old that I am trying to put to sleep that the Soviet Union had fallen apart. So in the end I settled this problem but I'm telling you the story that because it illustrates that school was not fun. I was, I think, deprived of a - excuse me - of a childhood and of youth and my life didn't really properly begin until I set foot in this country. I was 24 when I arrived in Britain and not until then was I treated as a human being by Hungarian society, by what happened in the War, what happened in Communist times, it wasn't until 1957 and I arrived in this country that I really began life as a full human being. Now if that's not sad, I don't know what is. I think it's sad, don't you?

10:30:43:06

**Interviewer**

I do. It's very hard to re-live all those memories isn't it?

10:30:55:12

**Agnes**

I didn't realise that I was going to react like I am obviously reacting. I didn't realise that, um, these are – I like to separate fact from comment and I'm trying to concentrate on fact so I'm telling you facts and facts should be stripped from emotional content, they are facts so I'm telling you facts and yet suddenly I'm caught by a bit of emotion.



10:31:27:08

**Interviewer**

But that's fine. Thank you for sharing it with us. It's sad hearing you talk about your childhood like that.

10:31:35:22

**Agnes**

The part of my childhood, it was still my childhood, which I knew um, to be emotionally charged, um, this I didn't, I didn't realise that my schooling will lead me to an emotional pit but the part I am, I am aware of which is deeply emotionally charged it what happened to all those young men. Now the young men of my family were all mothers approximately my mother's contemporaries – her brothers in law, my father's younger brother, and my mother's cousins and so on, they were more or less my mother's contemporary and my mother was eleven years younger than my father so what happened to these young men is different from what happened to my father because there was a distinction in the way the Hungarians dealt with their Jewish men, there was a distinction by age. Um is it the right moment to tell you?

10:32:53:05

**Interviewer**

Um, I want to ask you now to talk, you were talking about your uncles. Can you tell me all about their names and what they actually did and what became of them if you're just able to do that?

10:33:04:03

**Agnes**

Ok. Well, I have to tell you that Hungarian names are back to front compared with everybody else they start with the surname and the given name comes second. Um, I shall give you the names of these people in the way I addressed them which are informal. I can give you their formal names as well. Um, my mother's middle sister whose name was [Terka?], [Terka?]'s husband is the only one who survived out of all these young men who surrounded me and enriched my life. He was a lawyer and later in life he became a judge and a university lecturer of law. Quite a distinguished career he had, um, his name was [Shebesh?]. Um, he, um, was an interesting part of my childish life because we shared our home with them, um, we lived later on when my mother was promoted to this elevated shop like I told you about, we actually had a flat we didn't live behind a shop anymore, we had a flat and it was, the flat had two rooms and in one room lived my mother, father and me and in the other room live [Terka?] and her husband [Terry?] and later their little daughter Eva when she was born. You understand not two bedrooms, these are two rooms, um, so I knew very, very well he had a lot of problems with his heart I remember him having to be in a semi-reclining position, um, in the daytime a lot of the time because he had heart problem. Er, what caused it? Was it because he was maltreated by life at the time? I don't know.

**[cut for card change]**

10:35:28:13

**Interviewer**

You wanted to talk to me, Agnes, about facts and emotion.

10:35:32:02

**Agnes**

Well, um, not so much facts and, well alright, um, I, I'm a researcher. I'm an engineer. Um, I, uh, distinguish between fact and comment and even deeper, emotion. And I try to make sure that what I'm telling you is biased on the side of the facts and as accurate as they can be.

10:36:00:12

Um, but I'm not a historian researcher. Um, only recently did I realise that historians want two independent sources to coincidentally uh, report the same and they they think oh well that maybe that is something like a fact.

10:36:21:09

Um, nevertheless I was looking for um, authentication, verification, of my early memories. After all, many of the things I am telling you happened to me when I was quite young. How can I trust my memories of a age of eight, ten, whatever.

10:36:43:21

Um, my husband while he was alive ah, helped, ah, in searching backgrounds. Digging up people whose experiences might have been similar to mine. And I must say, I was reasonably accurate in my first memories, and if anything I discovered that I played them down rather than exaggerated them. Um, so, I am reasonably secure in what I am telling you to be the truth,

10:37:17:00

and if I can give you a short anecdote about this, it concerns my granddaughter Molly who was about six or so when ah, I overheard her saying to the others, you can believe every word that [Onyu?] says, that is because she has no imagination. Now, I think that it's a good observation, ah, my imagination, um, I think, in the sphere of engineering, is reasonably vivid. But in other areas, and especially in the recalling of these facts, imagination has no place. So I have facts for you. Um, and I hope that you would find any background source to confirm them to be as truthful as I can make them.

10:38:13:00

**Interviewer**

Thank you for being so eloquent, that was so beautifully said.

10:38:16:06

**Agnes**

Thank you.

10:38:16:21

**Interviewer**

Um, and I believe everything that you say. But there's still emotion.

10:38:24 :00

## **Agnes**

Well, um, different people, um, cope with horrible experiences in different ways. Many of my friends and acquaintances push them away. And they don't ah, revisit them, and they certainly don't repeat them. Um, one of my friends suffered seriously because she couldn't understand until the age of fourteen why it was that other people had aunties and grannies and cousins, and she didn't. What was wrong with her? And she was seriously damaged by her parents' silence. Her parents' experience was pretty awful, they were Polish Jews who just survived. Ah, but I think that if they shielded her by not telling her, they were misguided.

10:39:16:21

Um, I think I was um, I was prepared by um, the openness with which my father and my uncles dealt with these problems. And maybe this is why I can distance myself from the emotional content.

10:39:34:18

The only part of my whole story that I know is emotionally deeply charged is the history of those young men. And I find it very um, unjust that while the Holocaust history of the civilians, of the old, the young, the women, is well explored, the history of the, extraordinary history of the young Jewish men in the forced labour camps of the Ukraine is sketchily treated by historians. And I do hope that I shall find some historian of sufficient interest in search of a PHD theme or something who will go into some of the detail. These young men disappeared almost without a trace. And I think history should honour them by investigating their story to the full. This is the part, their history is the part which catches me, and I find it difficult to cope with it without emotional, without being aware of the emotional content.

10:40:57:11

Uh, you asked me before who these uncles were. And I mentioned one, my uh, Aunt Terka's husband who was the lawyer.

10:41:08:04

Um, my Aunt Clara, my um, mother's youngest sister, we called her [Peti?], er, her husband was other than my father the hero of my childhood. He was a civil engineer, he was handsome, multi-talented, a linguist, a draftsman, a sportsman, uh, underground communist. Um, he was the one who occasionally burst into works because he would be given some task over a short period of time but otherwise not. Um, a civil engineering drawing I have you know is a multi-coloured one because the different services for example of a building are different coloured on the uh, water with green, and electricity red and whatever. And ah, as he was doing his work, ah, I would be practicing the piano or just being around him, young child, um, and he would give me a little sum to do. And I would work out the little sum, um, and he would then write with the appropriate ink on his drawing something that I had worked and then the whole family could come and my uncle Steven would show it to everyone, Agnes worked this out. And I felt ten tall, ten storeys tall.

10:42:43:14

## **Agnes**

Ah, his name was ah, [Isvan Diescht?]. He, I know how he died. He is the only one, ah, whose death I know. There was a place well recorded in, in war records, near

Kiev, west of Kiev, um, a place called [Doroschiff?]. Eight hundred Jews who suffered from typhoid fever were concentrated into this wooden building which was meant to be a hospital. And the hospital building was uh, burnt, and they were burnt in that building. And that's how he died.

10:43:25:23

He had a twin brother who was a doctor, ah, his name was András Deutsch and he was one of those who acquainted me with ideas about the human body, so when I had an operation age seven ah, on my appendix out, um. There was an incident. They wanted to fob me off that they are just going to take me to this building but the, this room with a few lights and I said I know what you are going to do, you are going to operate on it. Anyhow so that was Andy. Ah, I don't know how he died.

10:44:11:14

Ah, my father had a younger brother, half brother actually, ah, Loti. He was a, an industrial artist and a shoe designer in particular.

10:44:25:19

Ah, my grandfather, his father, ah was a craftsman, shoemaker, craftsman. And ah, Loti had a workshop where his designs, shoe designs, were turned into uppers for shoes. Wherever we went he always had a, um, sketchbook with him, and anything he saw was turned into motifs for shoe designs. He was very handsome; I have photographs of him.

10:44:58:20

Um, one of my, um, fond memories is a, another lawyer in the family, my mother's first cousin, um, he was a very successful lawyer before he was eliminated in the same way as the others, and he was married to a renowned um, artist, um, very well known in the country, um, [?], who designed china. And the personal history that I had written includes a picture of the uh, china coffee set that they gave as a present to my parents at their wedding anniversary. She and her little boy went to Auschwitz. There's a history there, a little story about that, do you want that? Not now?

10:45:56:00

**Interviewer**

Just keep going.

10:45:57:19

**Agnes**

Um, there are, there are lots, lots of others, these are cousins of my mother's. Oh, a very important man, maybe the last one I mention. Uh, very very dear to me. Ah, my cousin Clara's husband, Frankau Miklós?, he was a banker. Very gifted, and, I don't know whether he ever met his little son. Because I think by the time his little boy was born he might have already been conscripted. Ah, in any case he had no influence in the upbringing of little George.

10:46:39:22

Now little George was with us in the camps, and he was one of two toddlers who we managed to save through the camps. He was damaged in the camps, he acquired TB, later on he had uh, polio, ah so he was not ah, healthy adult. But um, later in his

young adulthood he went to Israel, and became a prominent uh, banker, why a banker? Same profession as his father, a father he never knew. Um, Miklós was uh, like I say, a banker, but he also taught me to swim and taught me some other physical exercise. I loved him dearly and I will always miss him. There are others, a long list of others. They were all dead and I don't know how. The only one I know is the one of [?] I told you.

10:47:46:10

**Interviewer**

Have you ever calculated how many members of your family were killed?

10:47:50:17

**Agnes**

No, because the question is how wide do you draw the circle? Um, my immediate family, that is to say I had no brothers and sisters, that goes without saying, ah, if a family had any child at all that would be usually one child at the time, times were so hard, harsh. And my family consisted of, of,

10:48:18:18

oh yes there was one other I should mention. Um, ah, my mother had a beloved cousin, my Aunt Rose. Ah, she was uh, important, um, character in my personal history. It was she who introduced my mother into being the businesswoman that she was. Rose was older, she was also the one who first um, ah, queued up in front of the opera house for season tickets to the opera. We were so poor, I mean, the living circumstances I told you, we were extremely poor, but important things had to have priority and going to the opera was. And my Aunt Rose and my mother, throughout my childhood, um, even in the worst times, ah until it became forbidden for Jews to go to places of entertainment, my mother and my Aunt Rose had season tickets to the opera. The Budapest opera is a famous institution. We lived very near it ah, where ah, my mother's second shop was. And I quite often accompanied them and they were beginning to get used to me. So the two of them would go to the opera and I would sit on the steps. So as long as I can remember, I attended something like twenty performances - a season - in the Budapest opera. And we continued it later when I became a young adult living in Hungary.

10:50:06:08

Now, my um, beloved Aunt Rose had a son, um, and uh, he was among those who were lost. He was ah, younger than me, I guess he would have been early twenties.

10:50:24:24

**Interviewer**

There's so much to ask you about Agnes, I'm going to now try and not to skip through but try to establish a few bits of information and, then we'll talk about the camp and how that was for you.

10:50:35:02

**Agnes**

Ok.

10:50:37:04

**Interviewer**

So, it doesn't sound like there was a particular turning point in your life that you suddenly, you became aware that life was changing.

10:50:44:16

**Agnes**

No.

10:50:45:22

**Interviewer**

Because it sounds like you were born into it.

10:50:48:13

**Agnes**

I was born into it and my father was an unusual man. Everybody disapproved of him because he believed in everybody being entitled to dignity, including a child. And if a child asked a question, then the child was entitled to the best answer he could give. If a child was right and an adult was wrong in a conflict, ah, his sense of justice favoured the child. So he brought me up ah, with this sense of being allowed to ask anything, talk, any, talk about anything, and being entitled to the best information. And I can't remember not knowing that we were living in a, a very difficult situation which was not my doing, it wasn't my fault.

10:51:43:17

Do you know, uh children have this sense that that things are, When there is a divorce the child suffers because he thinks it's his fault. I was shielded from any notion of the horror around me, the injustices that happened, being my fault. It's not my fault. This was, gave me a certain amount of security if you understand what I mean.

10:52:11:03

**Interviewer**

It sounds like your parents dealt with the situation as well as they possibly could have done. And they gave you um, a great deal of respect right from the very beginning.

10:52:20:04

**Agnes**

My father, my mother was not an important part of my life, very sadly, because she worked from dawn to dusk. She was the breadwinner of the family. And she was up at five in the morning because the shop had to be opened in time for the deliveries of the fresh milk and bread and so on to appear in the doorsteps of ah, of her customers. So she was in the shop first thing in the morning. Um, everybody always wanted her. She had helpers, including my aunts, they were willing helpers, my father, they would have been, but everybody wanted my mother because she was quick, she was clever, ah, she was popular among her customers. Ah, she had ah, half-hour rest in the middle of the day, putting her head down like this in the middle of the day, every day. And then she continued and she worked six days a week and on Sunday mornings she slept.

10:53:28:03

And I had very, very little contact with my mother. It's part of the sadness of my childhood. We tried later to repair this uh, the damage of the lack of bonding. You see she wasn't able even to feed me as a baby as I told you. She was pretty, clever, intelligent, resourceful, musical, but not much of a mother. So, when you say my, my parents. My father and my uncles were the ones who helped me.

10:54:04:01

**Interviewer**

Your mother was only doing what she could because the family needed her.

10:54:07:05

**Agnes**

She was doing more than she could, yeah, without her there wouldn't have been anywhere to live, anything to eat. And I was made, it was made sure that I understood why it was that my mother was sometimes in tears with tiredness, and she had no time for me.

10:54:28:01

Ah, what I did get from her, more than from anybody else was the love of music. When she had, the radio was on later, while we could have a radio the radio was on and good music was heard. And particularly singing. She thought that the musical instrument of the voice is uppermost.

10:54:55:14

May I tell you something about my mother briefly? She was ten when she was orphaned, ah her father died when she was ten and her sister smaller. And she was always musical, and my grandmother sent her to the local music school as soon as they would have her. From the age of six she studied music and she was obviously very gifted. And other people had radios and they didn't yet at that time because their family was not sophisticated enough. And somehow she got the idea as a young child, maybe a young teenager that you could have sheet music of symphonies and operas; and she saved up money and she bought them, bought them, and played them and sung them to herself so she taught herself those aspects of the musical literature that she could get hold of. And she remained, she died in her early nineties, she remained hugely knowledgeable about music, and music was the last bit of what remained, she had Alzheimer's, and there's an anecdote she will never get there which shows that she had almost nothing left but music was still there. I had great admiration for my mother, but she wasn't much of a mother.

10:56:31:15

**Interviewer**

In the way that we imagine a mother to be.

10:56:33:05

**Agnes**

Yes, in a way most people have yeah, or in a way I suppose you are, or in a way I tried to be. I was a working mother, but I was never the lesser mother. In fact my mother brought up my children much more than she brought me up because

circumstances were different.

10:56:55:00

**Interviewer**

Agnes can you remember the Germans arriving in Budapest?

10:56:58:16

**Agnes**

Oh yes.

10:56:59:17

**Interviewer**

Tell me.

10:57:00:11

**Agnes**

Well, I was going to this Jewish Girl's Grammar school for those few months, and I actually acquired friends. Now this was new you see, because up until then, like I told you, I didn't have friends friends in Budapest at all. And I had two friends, and we had Saturday afternoons um, taking in turn in whose house we were having a get together: the mothers, the girls, my mother was no longer working because Jews could not work anymore. So, and it was our turn to have them coming to us to tea on this Saturday afternoon, the 19th of March 1944; and one of them turned up and not the other. And we lived in a small two room flat as I told you, at the back of a block of flats. And we were impatient, my friend and I, where was the third of, of my friends? I still know their names if you like. So we ran downstairs, um, to see whether they are coming. Um, our house was on a major thoroughfare leading from the north into the heart of Budapest called [?]. [?] it's called at present because they have a passion for changing the name of streets. And instead of our friends we saw the goose-stepping German soldiers. They were coming in. And that was on the 19th of March 1944.

10:58:39:12

Now, um, when we went back to tell our mothers that there are German soldiers coming in with armoured vehicles and whatever, my mother, my mother's reaction was, this is big trouble. We have to go to Debrecen because in Debrecen my native city is where my grandmother was. By then my two aunts were there too because they had no livelihood, their two husbands had gone away, um, and so they went home to mum. Ah, and so my mother's idea was we have to be together. The great good fortune was my father was at home on sick leave from his forced labour camps like I told you perhaps. He couldn't go to the Ukraine like the others had done, like them my uncles uh, who all were murdered because he was too young by the time they conscripted him. The front had moved back um towards the west. So he was in the territory of Buda, of Hungary. He was in the forced labour camps, but he was at home on sick leave. Well, within twenty-four hours, we were on the train to Debrecen.

The last thing I did was to dash over to my Aunt Rose's house very close saying we are going to Debrecen. There's big trouble, the Germans have arrived. Ah, come with us.



11:00:14:13

And she and her mother, my beloved [?] uh mama, she said they can't come because they are waiting for her husband and her son to arrive back from the front and where would they, er, find, how could they find them if they came with us, so they stayed behind and didn't come with us.

11:00:39:04

Later I tracked it down that they were shot into the river. Had we have not gone to Debrecen we would have been together. We, they were like, they were the closest family. She was like another sister to my mother. Um, I don't know whether you had seen um, there's a memorial of the shoes by the, the side of the river Danube. On the corner of my Aunt Rose's street is where that memorial is.

11:01:12:15

Um, anyhow, we went on a by train. Jews were not meant to travel on trains, but there was confusion and we managed in the confusion to get from Budapest to Debrecen carrying with us next to nothing.

11:01:33:18

And thereafter my story is bound up with uh, the provincial Jews. The history of the provincial Jews of Hungary as opposed to the Budapest Jews. These two histories become very different to each other. If there is time I shall tell you.

11:01:57:20

**Interviewer**

Tell me what, um there's just so many little things I want to ask you about how you felt about finding out about your aunt. So quickly tell me about that and we'll move onto,

11:02:06:08

**Agnes**

How I felt about?

11:02:07:14

**Interviewer**

When you found out that she had been shot into the river.

11:02:11:23

**Agnes**

It took us a long time to find that out. Um, when the whole story was over um, as far as we were concerned, in other words we were finally liberated by the Russians, and we went back to Budapest.

11:02:29:06

Um, alright I have to tell you why did we go back to Budapest, it never occurred to us not to. I mean we had been incredibly maltreated by the Hungarians, a natural question to ask why did you go back to Hungary? Well, there was no other way to

become reunited with all those men of our family. We expected to meet up with them. And we didn't like meet one. So there was no, no other option, we had to and when we got back to Budapest my father was a well built man of middle height, he was by then down to thirty-five kilograms like those walking corpses that you have seen many pictures of.

11:03:11:16

All the rest of us, were, women or grannies or toddlers or me, I was by then twelve, um, and when we arrived back we found that our flat had been um, allocated to a bombed-out family, so we no longer had a home. Um, we could have demanded our home back, but that would have been entering into an acrimonious ah, situation with these poor, beaten, bombed-out people. So the simplest thing to do was to say oh well ok, we haven't got this, maybe the council could allocate another home for us.

11:03:56:20

And ah, it was tracked down that there is a suburb. We lived in the very heart of Budapest as I told you. There is a suburb whose name we hardly knew, in fact at that time it wasn't even a suburb. It was a distinct, small town, and later it was incorporated into Greater Budapest, um it's called Újpest. And that, and we were told that there are plenty of homes and we can have a home allocated to us in Újpest. What they didn't tell us is that there were twenty thousands Jews killed in Újpest and that was why there were spare homes in Újpest. Újpest was, ah, one of those de-Jewified, that's a proper term, did you know that? Have you ever heard of the term? Uh, so that was one of those de-Jewified towns and we were given a, a flat there and that was when I met my husband, ah, and I was twelve. And that's when I met him.

11:05:00:22

**Interviewer**

We'll talk about him in a moment, um, in terms of information being fed to you, then did you, were you, it sounds like for many years you didn't actually know the facts of what happened to your family.

11:05:13:19

**Agnes**

No, it was, ah, it came gradually. Ah, when ah, we were still waiting for allocation of the new flat in Újpest we were still sharing ah, that small, two roomed flat with this other family. I mean it was much better ah, living conditions although there were so many of us all crowded together it was still much better than the camps that we had been accustomed to. So being over crowded there, or in the ghetto before, it was never a problem.

11:05:47:13

Ah, and then, various members of the family in ones and twos, if they survived at all they came to look us up. And they came and told, some friends as well of my parents, they came and told uh, told tales of how they survived. And I was listening to them, ah, sceptical as I was taught by my father to be, and uh, at one point I said to my father, ah, they are telling tall tales. And my father said yes, unless they have very tall tales to tell, they wouldn't be here to tell any tales at all.

So yes, ah, we heard some of them surviving, most of them were the only members

of their family, in some cases big extended families the only member; ah but there was nothing systematic about it. For years after the war people were still searching for surviving relatives.

11:06:51:17

Ah, my mother-in-law died ah in something like 1975, something like this. No wrong, 1985. And she was still, systematically trying to search for her son, my husband's older brother. And of course he would have been long since dead. But people didn't give up. And this information came in dribs and drabs and many of them I have no information at all, like I told you. It's completely by chance that I know my uncle Steven died in [*Dorochicht*] but where did his twin brother died for example? I have no idea. I have no idea.

11:07:37:21

**Interviewer**

Back to your experiences now Agnes, the ghetto. What was that like?

11:07:43:13

**Agnes**

Well, ah that was interesting. Um, so there we were now, came by train, we were in Debrecen. And my grandmother had the customary two-roomed flat, and there were, um how many of us? My mother, my father, my grandmother, my two aunts and my baby um cousin Ava. Six of us in a two -, ah, no problem.

11:08:09:11

And then um, my father's priority was that I had to go to school. Um, there was a boy's grammar school, a Jewish boy's grammar school in Debrecen. And he marched along, took me along, and there had never been a boy, ah, a girl, in the boy's grammar school. But they took me, ah, because he allowed no other solution. So far ah, two or three weeks, maybe two weeks, I have the dates, um, the school still functioned, um,

11:08:43:24

then the, the area of the ghetto was um publicised by um, the mayor of Debrecen, the ghetto to be, and six days were given for the Jews who lived outside of this area to be consolidated into the area of the ghetto, I have the map. Um, and it so happens that on the northern edge of the ghetto was a street called [?] and my grandmother's house was on the southern side of it, which was the ghetto side. So my grandmother's home, it so happens, was in the area that was to be the ghetto. This was fortunate for us, but there were lots of people, members of the family, who lived outside this area, they had to come in. So my cousin Clara with her little boy George, who later became the banker, they came to live with us, that is now eight. Ah, my step grandmother, that's nine, and two more grannies. um, so altogether there were eleven of us in this two-roomed house in the ghetto. Um, it wasn't a house, it was a little flat, opening from a courtyard.

11:10:03:12

Now, they bricked up the faces, ah, the windows or gates or whatever, which would have been on the edge of the ghetto, including the whole of that side of the house

where my grandmother lived. Um, and, um, the consequence of this being bricked up all around and totally isolated was that certain streets were not accessible anymore because the thoroughfares had been blocked off. So they broke through the homes of people so that you could go from uh, from place to place. Um, some people managed to crowd into the homes of relatives, others couldn't.

Ah, there were some, uh, about six thousand Jews in this ghetto and the area was very small. Ah, and a lot of people had to sleep um, in tents or in the open air. It, there wasn't a great deal of problem because by then it was kind of May ah, and early June and the weather was warm enough, ah when it rained then it was hard luck.

Um, I honestly don't remember, maybe I blotted it out, but I don't remember any acrimony. Any quarrels, any among the Jews about the overcrowded Jews.

11:11:33:00

But there was an aspect which was very very painful, um, The rich were, fared the worst. They were immediately ah, identified, prominent members of the community. Ah, they were then taken away and beaten, mostly for the purpose of revealing where they had hidden wealth if they had, ah, whatever. Ah, some of them never came back. Some of them came back dripping with blood, some of them came back uh, you know, madness was quite frequent. Some of them came back raving, and we were afraid of what might happen because there would be these raids of people.

11:12:19:04

Now, it was a question in my mind for a while, how did they do this? Because the, the ghetto was isolated completely, and no non-Jew could enter, any more than Jews could go out. So how did they do this? And the answer came and I found this unfortunately recently, ah, that there was a Jewish police, student police, set up quite early. Ah who these were, how they identify these people I couldn't tell you, and they were the ones who were doing the collection of the people and handing over of the people at the gates of the ghetto to the others. And they were the ones who were responsible for law and order inside the ghetto.

11:13:07:15

**Interviewer**

What was your worst memory of that time?

11:13:11:03

**Agnes**

Ah, I don't know, um, my worst memory would be I'm quite sure, I have pictures, of these people coming back covered in blood but fortunately for me we were not rich enough so none of my, my close uh, relations, family members were involved in, in these kinds of beatings.

Ah, later on, my um, um, my mother's cousin's wife, the beautiful artist, the china artist I told you, her story has to be told but it wasn't in the ghetto, it was later. I shall hope to have a chance to tell you that story.

But I have two ah, nice memories, would you like those?

11:14:05:22

**Interviewer**

Yes

11:14:07:17

**Agnes**

While they were still able to line my way to school, um, through these ah, makeshift passages like I told you, because they had to break through, yeah. I was going to school and on the way back I suddenly heard piano playing from a window. Music is, is a central thing in my life, it must have already emerged. Um, and I knew that should know the piece. And I know whereabouts, knew whereabouts to place it but I didn't know this piece. And I dashed home and I got Clara my, my aunt, who was the pianist, come, listen to this. Beautiful playing, beautiful music. Well it turned out later, ah like years later, that the pianist was someone called Schneider, Hédya, a well-known pianist, ah and she was in the ghetto, and she was playing Bach's *Italian Concerto*. Now, I then looked around that house as much as I could in case I could overhear her um, I can't remember any other instance when she was playing something quite so memorable but that's a little bit of a memory.

11:15:27:08

**Agnes**

And then there is another, completely different. Ah my mother I told you um, suffered from Alzheimer's and when she was still in charge of herself but realising how quickly she was descending into this, ah she insisted that she wants to be in a home because she felt that she would feel more secure and it would be easier for us. Well, she went to a Jewish care home, ah and she died in the Jewish care home. They treated her beautifully and we cherished her until the end of her life. And towards the end of her life a lady visited me and said, and I don't remember her name, and she said she came from Jewish care and they wanted to collect some information about my mother, what was her background. And I dropped the word that my mother and I were in these camps. And she got very excited about this, and she said did you work in the ghetto? And I said well come on, how can anybody work in the ghetto? Well tell me about life in the ghetto.

11:16:37:22

So while we were in the ghetto came the, um, the demand that we wear ten by ten centimetre yellow stars, and they had to be beautifully made, because otherwise the Jewish police beat you if it was not ah, geometrically correct and if it was sagging. Um, so how did you make these beautiful stars she said. Well I said a hexagon as my father taught me how to make with the aid of a compass, so I could draw a hexagon and I told her how you do that, and ah, um, we then cut out hexagons from cardboard and my grandmother covered it with yellow cloth which she, she found somewhere. And we did this for, for a lot of the people in the community. And she got so excited and she got a piece of paper and she filled it all in and 'sign here' she said. I was working in the ghetto, in a factory making yellow stars, so she said. Now, the only compensation anybody in my family ever got for what happened to us was two thousand pounds for making yellow stars in the um, in the factory in the ghetto.

11:18:06:02

**Agnes**

Oh um there was something else which was very significant. It was obvious to my fantastic, hugely intelligent, resourceful grandmother - who stood four foot six - she

was miniscule, tiny, but she was full of energy and strength. Without her I wouldn't be here, none of us would have survived. It was clear to her that we are on our way. This can't be here for long. And she conceived of the idea of making rucksacks for us, made to measure. Um, you wouldn't say it rucksack but ah, is that, rucksack, however. The Germans would say rucksack. Out of canvas that you would use to make deck chairs, you know. Red and white stripes. And she cut them out. She made up -, she measured everybody including me, and she and my aunt Terka - who could sew - they made them up. Um, she also created her haversacks, um, um, ropes which, um, could be made into like a rucksack for the grannies, each of the-, we had three grannies - she herself and two more I have mentioned - um to roll up blankets and towels inside them to be carried on their back.

11:19:34:17

So when it came to be taken away, we carried our babies in our hands and we could hand them and we had two of them, one almost two years old and the other one three. My little cousin Ava, and George. And we could -, our hands were free, because we carried what we needed to carry on our backs. Now everybody else was lugging suitcases, or bundles. There are photographs of it-, them and it was so pathetic and so inefficient and they abandoned quite often what they badly needed because they couldn't carry them. And we went around, through the camps with these wonderful, ah, durable, rucksacks, I only wish I had one of them. And this was just one of several things that my grandmother assisted us in surviving.

**[Cut for card change]**

11:20:27:13

**Interviewer**

When you left the ghetto how did you leave? Where did you think you were going?

**[Cut for camera]**

11:20:34:19

**Agnes**

I have been thinking recently that, erm, being deprived of information err is a very effective form of torture. We were deprived of information we never knew from one day to the next from one minute to the next what was happening to us. We didn't know when we were to be taken away from the ghetto though it was quite clear to us sooner or later that we would have to - where we were going who knew.

11:21:06:21

But one day and I have the date recorded the gates of the ghetto were broken open and we were driven along by ox cart or a rudimentary, lorries, along the street where my grandmother's house was [Hotnufutza?] and its continuation to what had been a brick factory, a brick yard. This was a very convenient way to house a couple of thousand Jews because the drying sheds are roofs without sides, on stilts, a roof on stilts that's where we were housed and there was a railway line and along that railway line as it now turns out from the records that I have found since three transports was taken, two out of the three to Auschwitz and one to Strasshof near Vienna.

11:22:14:16

There are, controversial tales about how it happened that we were on that we were on that transport. I can tell you a version in case you are interested how it happened that we were taken to Vienna entirely by chance.

11:22:32:07

When I talk about my experience in survival I describe my survival as a sequence of miracles and one of the miracles is that somebody had made a mistake not taking a transport to Vienna who were destined for it, and that would have been various illustrious scholars and artists and whatever they should have been saved, to be 'exchange' Jews - they were negotiating an exchange of some Jews - and they would have been thought to be better currency than ordinary run-of-the-mill Jews like we were but this illustrious bunch was taken mistakenly to Auschwitz. So the next transport was directed to Vienna instead and that was us, and if it hadn't been so I wouldn't be here to tell you the tale.

11:23:25:14

Among those who were killed was a very close dear member of my family, the artist who worked in porcelain. She paid capitation fees she was tricked into paying capitation fees for the privilege of taken what she was told, Switzerland. But instead she paid her money and she was taken to Auschwitz

11:23:51:20

, but the rest of us, the eleven of us we all survived, which is all but a miracle because, there were five adults in this bunch. There was me aged 11. There was a two a three-year-old and three grannies and this was not a very viable group. Never the less we all survived. Partly because of the wisdom of my grandmother to a very large extent because of the fierce loyalty of all of the members towards all of the others. In my own case because of the motivation that I remember feeling towards saving the babies and I would have done everything I could, and I did all kinds of crazy things, not for my sake but the sake of these babies and I deserve no medal for that that was just part of the spirit of the family.

11:24:57:00

**Interviewer**

What kind of things did you do?

11:24:59:11

**Agnes**

I stole out of the camp several times and the idea was that if you -, I mean nobody had any permission to leave, to, er, leave the camp but we were not very effectively guarded in the first work camp where we were. I should tell you about it if time permits. There the guard was not effective, and, um, so I could, I could sneak out of the camp I was small and mobile aged eleven. I stole from the fields. I begged from the villages. I had dogs set upon me by some of the Austrian peasants but others gave me a little piece of bread. Um, I risked whatever I could so as to get a little, a little bite of food for our babies.

11:26:01:07

You see in this first work camp where we worked, the rule was that only those were given food ration who worked. Now, um, the-, the age limit, the lower age limit for working was 14 and I was 11. And the family agreed with me that was my suggestion that we lie that I am 14. I was tall enough, I am small now but I was then tall for my age and the Germans were not at all interested in the precision of my age, but a pair of hands. Not very strong hands but nevertheless a pair of hands to work. So there were 6 of us working, the 5 adults plus me, and there were 5 who weren't, and we had to share what food we had among us. And, we were starving, and, so this the best answer I can give to you what everything I tried. I even tried to steal food while we were working in this agricultural camp. For example we were harvesting grapes. Now this was a very difficult thing to do because we were starving and I needed the grapes for my babies. And we were guarded, by then we were guarded by Germans, from the moment of arriving into Austria we were guarded either by Ukrainians or Germans. The Hungarians had finished. We were passed the Hungarian border, we had a SS guard, and when we arrived to harvest the grapes. The first act he did was to take his pistol and shoot an inch to my, next to my foot, and he said, 'any of you I catch eating a grape I will not miss next time.' So it was, wasn't so easy to harvest grapes but that wasn't the hardest job, there were harder jobs to do while we were in the camps.

11:28:00:22

**Interviewer**

Were you scared?

11:28:03:06

**Agnes**

Do you know I don't think I was, and I think from him, I was, I mean everybody was afraid of him I mean he was ruthless, he was SS. He was 18 years old. He looked like a Greek god. He looked like exactly like the Aryan idea of it, blonde hair blue eyes and broad shoulders he was -, um, but he was an SS officer and that was his job and he took it very seriously, and of course we were frightened of him but by in large I was not scared because there were other emotions and other feelings - most of all hunger, but there were other things as well and these overrode fear and also I can tell you with a clear conscious that when it came to getting something for those babies I was fearless.

11:29:02:11

**Interviewer**

What a sense of responsibility at the age of 11.

11:29:04:21

**Agnes**

We all had the same responsibility we all felt the same including the grannies. These grannies were heroes and they; they did all they could. Everybody did. And my grandmother was an absolute treasure she had been brought up in the country and she knew trees and, and roots and berries and leaves and she was not part of the wo, working party, because grannies were excluded, but she taught us, what to look for and we got edible bits and pieces from the field with us home, because she told us which berries were poisonous and which berries were edible, and whatever.



11:29:55:01

**Interviewer**

When we have spoken to other survivors they've talked of hunger being a form of madness and that you would do anything, to fight it.

11:30:06:12

**Agnes**

I don't, I mean hunger was there all the time and, and yes it was, it, (*laughs*) it was the, I had to fight certain things.

11:30:25:14

One of the things I had to fight and I had to teach myself how to fight was envy. You, the natural thing would have been that if you family had a food ration per head and my family had a food ration practically to share between two then I envy you. This, or you are in that corner of the camp and there is less draft where you are and I am in the drafty bit and then I envy you and the envy can be destructive. It can be painful, and I recognised very early that I had to teach myself not to be envious of fellow sufferers. Um, and that helped this self-discipline of fighting envy. This helped even to overcome hunger, or overcome a lot of other things,

11:31:26:14

There were heroes, (*clears throat*) in that camp, including one of my friends who risked his life he didn't have babies in family, and he risked his life, in our next camp, which was in a factory, in an armament factory, which was under constant practically constant bombardment, and he stole during air raids bits of metal from the bombed-out buildings. Now during air raid, is the word staturium is that an English word? It is when you shoot without questions this is a military discipline. If during air raid anything moves then, then the soldiers shoot, that is, the Hungarian is staturium under those conditions he still moved he stole bits of metal and he built, he was 13 he was an old boy he was 13, he built little stoves for the, for the camp and he stole bits of wood under similar circumstances so that we could make fire and by then it was the winter of 1944/45 and we were freezing, There were no windows, there were people who were heroes. He didn't even have babies I at least had the motivation of our babies.

11:32:57:01

There were people who behaved unspeakably badly and there were people who were heroes and my friend, who lives in Chigwell I can give you his name if you like, he was a hero. He was the one who was 13 at the time.

11:33:15:22

**Interviewer**

Despite all of the hardship you maintained as a family a very strong moral compass about what was right and what was wrong,

11:33:22:11

**Agnes**

Absolutely, and now a days I hear about, Kindertransport people going around telling their stories. One of grandchildren said they, They masquerade as survivors. They didn't survive they escaped the holocaust. Well I think in a way they had a worst time of it than I because I was with my family and they were without, they were in the

safety of Britain to be sure they were lucky but they were without their family whereas I had my family.

11:34:02:16 *[Interrupted by Agnes]*

**Interviewer**

You moved from one camp to the next,

11:34:05:15

**Agnes**

Yes,

11:34:05:14

**Interviewer**

,did it get worse?

11:34:07:14

**Agnes**

It was different, the first camp was, we were, this was a state- owned farm and we worked from dawn till sundown. Literally. Our sleeping quarters were on top of a hill in Betzenburg under the medium-wave transmitter tower. That's where the farm buildings were. And we had to go downhill to the fields where we were working and we started out in the dark and by the time we arrived at the field it was just beginning to be light and we worked until the light was failing and then we, in the, the dark, we went all the way up the hill. How many hours that was depended on when the sun rose and when the sun set. There was no interruption other than a short break at lunchtime, lunchtime, but I soon discovered that I can't sit down in the middle of the day because once I sat down I can't get up. So that was working and it was hard work.

11:35:29:12

The worst of it was, the last bit of work, I can describe it to you if time permits, which was picking sugar beet. That was the last most bit of work and after that the farm shut down for the winter and that's when on foot we were taken from the north, slightly north-east of Vienna all the way to the south which was where the factory was in the 10th district.

11:36:03:14

The work at the factory was, not as, as long. It was not as persistent. It was a completely different kind of work it was quite hard, But work wise it was easier, in the factor, And also it didn't last long because the air raids were constant so we, constantly, we were interrupted and finally the whole of the factory, which was camouflaged under beautiful gardens on top. They were all single floor buildings except one the Jewish *laager* was an old 19th century building 5 floors that was the only one that didn't get a direct hit that's one of my miracles but all the other buildings, the working factory buildings, They were hit, and all destroyed until finally they gave up on it. So the work was quite hard. We had to carry up and down stairs something like, 25 kilogram cast iron board on which the anti-aircraft guns' parts were mounted. Why they did it like this I don't know but we had to carry up the stairs two children, similar age to me I was the youngest, take them upstairs there they assembled it, it became heavier consequently and then we had to take it back down

again. It was very heavy but it was not persistent whereas the agricultural work was, yeah,

11:37:55:21

There were various aspects of it for examples you would have thought if it rained it was a good idea because the agricultural work had to stop but not a bit of it because there was something that we could then do which is air the grain. Now I explain that to you there would be a large rectangular barn and on one side, piled up, would be the grain and then whenever time permitted because we couldn't work on the fields you went with a wooden shovel and you had to throw the grain from one side to the other because that aired it, if you understood, and at the bottom it would of already started to ferment and rot and smell and so it was necessary to so, but the problem was that the chaff went into your eyes, your lungs, your hair, and there you were working, and also you could work from earlier on until later on because they could turn the light on. So working indoors this and other similar bits of task were worst if anything than working on the fields.

11:39:15:18

Working on the fields had an emotional element. if you had for example to pick peas and you were standing at this end of the field and you could see the other end of the field and you were given this pair of rows to pick that was alright but if the, er, the horizon was not visible because the field was so long that it dipped over it was almost unbearable that you would be doing this for ever there is no end to it and knowing this is emotional, of course there had to be an end to it, but you didn't see it and it was hard.

The sugar beet, can I tell you the sugar beet?

11:40:05:01

**Interviewer**

Yes please.

11:40:06:13

**Agnes**

The sugar beet has to be in the ground until the frost comes, because the frost brings out the sugar. It's a biological process which I don't understand. The sugar beet is kind of, foot and half long, huge, it has -, it's shaped like a radish it has green shoots on the top and the soil in, near Vienna is clay so the beet is stuck in the clay and you have a pitch fork and you by now 12 years old because by now my October birthday had passed; but you are still quite light and hungry and you have to dig out the beet which is stuck in the clay and Herr Prackticant, the SS is watching you and if you damaged the beet then, (*sighs*), so you dig out the beet finally it comes out with a kind of a, like a big kissing sound as it parts from the wet clay and you do the same to the other beet and then you get hold of the green and you beat together the two beets to shake off the soil then you chop off the green and you throw it in the sack.

11:41:30:21

Now the, the beet -, the soil, comes off and deposits itself on your clothing and the sleet is flowing, is, is falling because by now it is frost time so you become like a, Golem and your arms are heavy and, you know, and you pick the beet. I have

frozen hands, and I bless this country's climate it's not cold enough for the frostbite to renew, but in my history there is a picture of what my hands looked like. It's not my hands, but its somebody's how frozen hands look like. That was the worst work, is the picking of the sugar beets.

11:42:20:13

**Natasha**

Does that still haunt you that time?

11:42:23:09

**Agnes**

For a long time it did but there were other things haunting me, For example, my daughter Ester was born in 1959 and she was a little girl in a, a push chair and I became aware that I still have to push her over to the other side of the road when anybody in uniform was coming because I couldn't pass them. You know Salvation Army it didn't matter what uniform, any uniform like some people a fear of the dark or fear of heights or agoraphobia I had fear of uniforms for a long, long time.

11:43:02:07

**Natasha**

Do you still?

11:43:03:23

**Agnes**

Not a consciously no, no, I am very pleased that my grandsons choose not to join the cadets which is an option but instead do some social work for GCSE level involvement rather than putting on a uniform, but no I don't think I am afraid anymore.

11:43:27:01

**Natasha**

There are so many things I need to ask you I am sorry,

11:43:30:14

**Agnes**

Can I tell you one more mi, miracle.

11:43:32:24

**Natasha**

,yes of course.

11:43:34:18

**Agnes**

Erm when we were told that tomorrow morning are leaving. I mean that's all you had at the most 5 or 6 hours, for, of any change and we didn't know where were going; but anyhow off we went on foot and we carried our rucksacks and our babies and so on and, its, I have got a map in my story book how long it is meant to be according to Google Maps. It would be, I don't know 5 or 6 hours to walk from there to there. But it took us much more than that because we were who we were, and, whoever. And then we were about half way as it now turns out when there came an air raid and

and there was a bridge and we sheltered under the bridge and then the military guard through that was a bad idea to shelter under a bridge in an air raid so they got us out from under the bridge into the, staircase of a block of flats and that's where we stayed for the rest of the raid. And then the air raid was over we went back to continue our route and the bridge wasn't there.

11:44:54:09

Now I was interested, I remember this vividly and I could draw you where we went map I have in my head, but I didn't know the date and clearly it had to be past the coming of the frost otherwise the sugar beet wouldn't have been ready and it can't have been way into the winter because by then the ground would have been so frozen that you wouldn't of been able to get out the sugar beet. So there was a window of a few weeks, late November early December but I don't, didn't know when and I found not long ago a record of all the air raids in and around Vienna and there was an air raid on the 2nd of December the target was Floridsdorf which is exactly midway between there and there and there is a river bridge on the Danube at Floridsdorf and Floridsdorf was the location of an air, Oil refinery, it was a target and it was therefore I can say with some confidence it was the second of December. Erm, so that's when we were walking and we arrived at the far end and we were there until it was, no longer viable because like I told you the factory was, had fallen apart by the bombing, then they had,

11:46:28:00

Then they clearly had a problem what to do with these Jews and by then I imagine about half were not really properly capable of work because even my father was so frail by then. I don't know whether he must of still worked but only just, and they then conceived of the idea that they use us to clear bomb damage in Vienna. So you will name the landmark of beautiful Vienna and I went around it with a wheel barrow clearing the bomb damage like the Belvidere Palace and the Opera House, I have been there, But that didn't last very long, it was very good because you could beg from passers-by and they were sometimes kind.

11:47:20:15

I had one particular incident; may I tell you? I find an elderly lady struggling with some luggage and I sneak out from my, my work group and I say may I help you my German was good and she said yes thank you so we go to her first floor flat I could draw the outlay, the ou-, of her kitchen and I put down the bags and she says, 'let me give you something to eat.' So I say please can you wrap it up for my, well complicated to explain, for my little brother and little sister, they were not really my, never mind, She said, "no, you eat it. You look hungry" and I say, "no please" and she demanded that I eat it and there I sat with my strangulated throat and with tears flowing down my face eating a dish which is to this day one of my favourite dishes: it's potato gnocchi. There is a Hungarian/Austrian version of it and that was what it was and I must say I almost choked on it and she insisted.

11:48:39:11

Anyhow, that soon finished because they discovered soon that we were not making much inroad into, the, damaged, Vienna, in fact the allies were gaining on us. They were bombing faster than we were clearing. So they took us back to Strasshof. Strasshof was our starting point in Austria and it was our finishing point in Austria as

well. And thereby hang more tails but it's your turn to ask.

11:49:18:05

**Interviewer**

The loyalty of your family you credit with your whole, all of you surviving,

11:49:23:08

**Agnes**

Yup.

11:46:32

**Interviewer**

Erm, it's incredibly clear that you and your father had a very, very special bond. It must have been very hard for you watching him because you said he ended up being 35 kilograms watching him almost disappear.

11:49:41:17

**Agnes**

He in fact disappeared from my life almost completely. Even, by then, He and I never rekindled our relationship. I don't know why. He never was the same man after this than he was before. He, lived with us he came to England following us with my mother. He remained intelligent perceptive I have lots of fond memories but we never rekindled the relationship he was never the same, ah I don't know whether he was the same man or I was not the same person but our great bond was one of the, the casualties of this war.

11:50:30:16

**Interviewer**

You were both traumatised,

11:50:32:16

**Agnes**

Yes, I don't know why. I have lovely little story of my father but that is too far removed from what you,

11:50:44:17

**Interviewer**

Would you like to tell it?

11:50:46:24

**Agnes**

My father and the English. Here is my father right. Erm, the school he went to was monastery school. Priest priests taught there and they picked him up because he was so spectacularly gifted as a mathematician. They taught history in Latin and geometry in Greek at that school and, but nothing as frivolous as a modern language, no nothing like that. They taught him whatever mathematician he could absorb and he could absorb almost anything and when I became an undergraduate I discovered that he knew most of an engineering undergraduate's mathematics taught to him by the fathers.

11:51:35:08

But he was a socialist and godless and didn't speak any English and then they arrived in England he had Parkinson's disease so my husband worked and my mother worked and I worked and my father was at home and this was a newer state in Nottingham near the university Bramcote Hills and one day, the local vicar came to the door and my father opened the door and the vicar said 'new house, new parishioners' can I come to talk to you and my father in broken English said to him, 'there's no point in talking to me I am a godless Jew and you are clearly a, Anglican, priest or whatever', and the man said but you have time haven't time haven't you? And my father said 'time I have' and that's how friendship began and they remained friends until the time we left Nottingham and he came this vicar regularly to visit my father. They both had rudimentary Hebrew and that was the language that they favoured because you see, the, Catholic fathers taught them some Hebrew, it's an ancient language after all, so they somehow conversed and became good friends. It can only happen in England.

11:53:04:05

**Interviewer**

Thank you.

**[Cut for direction]**

11:53:04:23

**Interviewer**

I want to ask you about your husband and then I want to ask you some general questions; so I am sorry that we have left your husband right to the end because obviously he was such an extraordinary man and you met him when you were 12.

11:53:16:13

**Agnes**

He was, um, a great, great good fortune. We got to know each other when I was 12 and he was 16, and there was an event - doesn't matter what it was - where he played Beethoven romance on the violin and when it was all finished he came over to me and said 'do you like music?' And those were the first words that he said to me And when I told this tale to my grandchildren my grandson then 16 said 'what had a 16 year-old boy to do talking to a 12 year-old girl?' and I said I wish you had asked that from your grandfather when he was still alive by then John wasn't there anymore. But he knew about chamber music and I knew about operas, and he knew about symphonies and so on, and I knew about piano so music started us and we married when I was 19.

11:54:23:18

We came to this country mostly because we wanted a family and we felt that in that country and in that regime we wouldn't want a family we wouldn't want a family. So we arrived here in 1957 and 1959 Ester was duly born. He was an engineer but the fact that I became an engineer had nothing to do with this, long story why and I won't tell you not interesting enough how I became an engineer He was an engineer proper. He was for example managing director or technical director of various, of factories to do with electronic equipment and audio equipment and such like whereas I was always a theoretician. I was a researcher and I was never

comfortable with gadgets so often John teased me that I'll never make an engineer but, ours, Even if I say so was harmonious and very happy marriage my daughters even said that their father might have spoilt their chance of a good marriage because he was such a difficult act to follow. Um, he was, he was tolerant kind even tempered dignified I tried to find something wrong about him there is one thing wrong about him.

11:55:48:23

When we were newly married I wanted to have a row about something and I remembered this so well and I could draw the picture of the room and I was jumping up and down because, and he was looking at me with sort of a faint smile on his face and after a while when nothing comes back you run out of steam. And so there was John sitting on the settee like this and so I slowly slowed down and he said 'have you quite finished dear because if you have come and sit by me,' and that was the row. I had to learn -he could sulk so I have to avoid annoying him because otherwise he would sulk.

11:56:33:18

There is something else I want to tell you about John which I overheard my daughter Anna say to her friends. Her friends were mostly, they lived in south London, in Surrey in fact, mostly Anglicans, but they were church goers and they said to Anna 'how do you know right from wrong, there is no religion in your family?' and Anna said, 'ah but yes our father makes it very difficult for us because we have to make out every case there is no code written for what is correct and what is, we have to work out every case for ourselves and when we get it wrong my father's face has an expression on it which we don't want to repeat.' And he was lovely, and I miss him and always shall. And everybody who knew him I must say loved him.

11:57:30:16

There is one more thing about John when the 1956 revolution broke out the first thing that happened was that people broke into personal departments, files where your feared files were kept and I have Johns, and I have all kinds of reports. Reports by this that, and there is summary somewhere that says he is a mystery because he is technically and culturally astute but when it comes to political matters he is a moron. And I think this was a great triumph on John's part, that he could maintain an image of a political moron while he was running a successful engineering career.

11:58:16:20

**Interviewer**

Thank you for sharing that. Um, I feel like we have just started your story and we're really running out of time so I really apologise for that. Um, in summary I would like you to imagine you grandchildren's children and their children listening to you and what message you would like them to learn from the great trauma that you have experienced in your life.

11:58:46:14

**Agnes**

I asked this kind of question from myself when I go to talk to schools. I don't think my story is a Jewish story. I think it is a story of intolerance, injustice. I think that, um for example the homosexual son of one of our friends who was persecuted in Hungary



and finally left the country - er, he was not a Jew. All kinds of, of stories I could, I could give you about people in my own experience and the world over of intolerance that is what I, I am against. If any lesson is to be learnt from this story is the lesson that intolerance is evil, that it can all but destroy people. It almost destroyed me and it destroyed many, many of the people that I loved. I hope that my children, my grandchildren, their children will learn the lesson that human beings are valuable. They all are entitled to dignity. Tolerance is what I'd like to teach. Have I answered you?

12:00:20:08

**Natasha**

You have. I was just giving you a moment unless there was something else you wanted to add.

12:00:26:21

**Agnes**

There was a meeting which you're, the Prime Minister's initiative involved, in Wembley Stadium. You must have been there. I certainly was [*talk over each other*]

12:00:40:02

**Natasha**

Mmm, Mmm.

12:00:41:14

**Agnes**

And there was in fact a controversy to some extent about what the Holocaust Memorial,

12:00:50:17

**Natasha**

Absolutely,

12:00:51:01

**Agnes**

should be about and there was those who felt that it would dilute the, the trauma the, the entitlement of Jews to justice it would dilute it if it was to be broadened. I am not on that side. I hope that whatever you do will be to promote tolerance.

12:01:18:04

**Natasha**

Have you found peace in your life Agnes?

12:01:20:23

**Agnes**

Peace [*long pause*] I find solace in music. I find joy in my grandchildren. I find pleasure in learning, and always will I hope. I suppose those this must amount to some, and I have a lot of good friends a lot of good friends including one who died two days ago, and I am going to his funeral now when we finish. Um, I think what I told you amounts to something like peace don't you think? Something like peace?

12:02:10:03

**Natasha**

As I said there are so many questions that I would still like to ask you but is there anything that you would like to add?

12:02:18:06

**Agnes**

Not really. Um, you are renowned for being the most skillful of interviewers. Um, I also have lots of details that I could recount. Yeah alright, I can tell you two things. One, a friend of John's is a psychiatrist and, um, he qualified in Hungary - he is not a Jew - and left in 1956 and first went to Belgium and re-qualified and went to Switzerland and re-qualified and when he went to Belgium there was. In course of qualification he had to find a thesis and he chose the mentality of the refugee as his subject and he interviewed hundreds or thousands even of Hungarian refugees and he found that to his surprise that everybody had recurrent nightmares about going back to their native country and either finding themselves there and being frustrated - why am I here in this hell once I have escaped from it - or else they find themselves unable to breakout again and he found this was consistent and that's when John and I shared that we both had such recurrent nightmares and, his name is Doctor Emanuel Pinter? and he then when he went to Switzerland that was passed the check to check story and he repeated his exercise with the Czechs, and there is the consistent recurrence of the nightmare.

**[Camera card change]**

## END OF INTERVIEW PART ONE

## INTERVIEW PART TWO

**Natasha**

So the first thing that we're going to pick up on is the commission report that was published on Holocaust Memorial Day, the 27th of January this year. And there was a particular quote that has really resonated with you hasn't it, since you've read it.

**Agnes**

It has, it has. Um, in the report there's a quote from a pastor, presumably he would be some kind of a priest. Who describes that first, in his experience, they came to take away the socialists and he did nothing, because he was not a socialist. Next they collected the trade unionists, and he did nothing because he was not a trade unionist. Third they came to collect all the Jews and he still did nothing because he was not a Jew. And by the time they came to collect him, there was nobody to speak up for him. Now, I think that this is a very moving quote in itself but for me it's especially um, meaningful because my father was a socialist, a trade unionist and a Jew. And when I was first born my brilliant father was still an important, well-respected member of the community. But by the time I was two the right-wing regime stripped him of any job and throughout my childhood he never had a job because he was a socialist, a trade unionist and a Jew. So, that's what I wanted to tell you, it's a very pertinent quote for me.

**Natasha**

Thank you, and very moving to hear you talk about that. Oh dear ok. All of your story is all back in my mind. It's um, we had a very, it was a very intense interview, wasn't it when we spoke?

**Agnes**

I found it um, when I looked at um, a clip which you sent me just to see what it was like, I was surprised how relaxed I was, and how easy it was. The impression that I had at the time was that I am talking to you. It was an intimate conversation between two people who were in harmony and that's a great credit to you that you could create such an atmosphere where it is easy to talk about very difficult things.

**Natasha**

Well thank you Agnes, it was um, a very moving experience hearing you talk, and I was really grateful the other day when you spoke so eloquently in front of everyone at that meeting so thank you very much. Um, I'm just going to ask you, we'll go through these questions there's about twenty of them.

**Natasha**

I know, sorry.

**Agnes**

Oh no it's no problem.

**Natasha**

It's because you're so eloquent, they want more of you that's the problem.

**Agnes**

Go ahead.

**Natasha**

But just in um, to kind of refresh ourselves but to go back on a question that I asked you on Thursday in that advisory meeting that we were at together, about why you feel it's so important to give testimony for people who, who haven't ever given testimony before and why you decided to do it.

**Agnes**

Well I was very busy working. I had a very full, a very rewarding working life, um and somehow I never felt it a particularly central issue that I was a Jew and a Holocaust survivor. Like I told you there is no religion in my family, there is a very strong moral basis, a humanitarian and a socialist basis to my family's atmosphere. And religion was not missing. Ah, and it wasn't until my granddaughter Tabitha asked me to go and talk to her school about my experience, she said she was ten at the time, she's seventeen now. She said, why should I learn it out of a book when I can learn it from you? Why don't you talk to my school? And I said I don't know to talk to your school I would be very happy to have you and your friends come and sit around me in my sitting room and I shall talk to them if you want. Ah, but if you want me to go to your

school, you school has to invite me. And her school invited me, and I didn't even properly know about the program, this outreach program that you have where survivors talk to schools. I just did what I thought I should. I collected some materials, some data, some pictures, and I talked to this bunch of ten-year-olds at Tabitha's school. Ah and again there was again hiatus, Tabby asked questions, I started to write, I have written something which would amount to a sizeable novel if it were ever to be published, I have one half of it here in case my grandchildren would want to read it. It wasn't for public consumption. And about ah, a year, year and a half ago by chance I sat next to somebody at a political meeting, who said by way of conversation, what did you do in the war? So I said I was in the camps. And he got very excited, and he is part of the group which advises the Holocaust education people. And so he got them after me and I have since then talked to two schools and now they want me to do more. So somehow and another I became aware that there is an organisation such as this, and I am still forever surprised at how extensive it is, I done really nothing before then. I think it is important though, um, I think it is important from, not primarily from the Jewish viewpoint, but from the viewpoint of being citizens of the world. I mean look what is happening even now. In my family around the dinner table there is a fierce argument. There was one two days ago. Ah, shall we or shall we not bomb ISIS eh Syria, in Syria. Um my grandchildren have individual views. My sixteen-year-old is a member of a political party. Um, he's the youngest of the whole bunch. They are very strongly on the side of tolerance and humanity, and understanding among people. And respecting people's dignity, and I love them for that. But not every child of that age thinks like that, not every child of the younger generation thinks like that and if I can make a little contribution towards um, better understanding among people I should. And that's why I am doing what I'm doing.

### **Natasha**

And now that you've seen the seriousness with which this is being treated, the fact that the Prime Minister has thrown his weight behind all of the recommendations that were given in that report that you've got with you.

### **Agnes**

I'm impressed.

### **Natasha**

And the amount of money that has been pledged by the government and the enormity of the project that is now um, around us, how do you feel about that?

### **Agnes**

Well um, my priorities are on the side of education, not on the side of ceremony. Ah, I don't go in for ceremonial um, events. Ah I don't for example grieve ah, after my daughter and my husband at any anniversary day. Anniversary days are there in the calendar and they mean nothing to me. I go and look at statues, but they are not primarily monuments for me. I do understand that some people feel differently, and there will be some people who would feel it very important that there should be a memorial, a physical body somewhere standing there where people can visit and, and remember. I don't need it, I can remember thank you very much without that. For me the recommendations are very important because of their educational dimension. I think this is fantastic that there should be a serious attempt to establish an

education programme which is on-going. And it will be on-going when all of the Holocaust survivors are, ah well gone and it should be on-going forever as long as people live in this, um, on this globe murdering each other.

**Natasha**

So now we're going to go and thank you for answering all of those questions Agnes. We are now going to go through the questions that um we um.

**Agnes**

I want to put one thing to you.

**Natasha**

Yes.

**Agnes**

Sometime, I don't know that I ever talked to you about food in the camps. If I hadn't, sometime...

**Natasha**

Remind me because you were in the wheat, you were doing wheat at one point, weren't you and, is that what you were talking about?

**Agnes**

No, no, no. I worked on wheat, um, we worked on ah, ah, sugar beet, we worked on various things. But the food that, that they gave us is something I want to tell you...

**Natasha**

Go on, talk to me about the food now then, tell me about it.

**Agnes**

Well, uh, my camp story is in two main parts as you have seen. The agricultural camp part and the factory, the ammunition, the armament factory part. Ah, the food was different in the two places. In the agricultural camp there was a kitchen, not very far from the place where we slept. We slept uh, in a hayloft above the pigsty. And in the same farmyard, in another part of the farmyard, was the kitchen. And the kitchen catered for ah, all the workmen, all the workers of the farm. Including the Austrian workers, there were Czech workers, there was a whole bunch of Ukrainians. These were volunteers when the Ukraine was being occupied by the German army there were some volunteers who came to the west and settled in, in Germany to um, to work. Um, and uh, they pay, played a big part in the transit camp of Strasshof guarding the Jews in a particularly brutal way. I have a personal story about a Ukrainian as well um who actually beat me at one point when we were in the same camp.

Anyhow so there were these different classes of workers, and then the Jews. And unfortunately, the smells of cooking wafted up to us, and we were given unspeakably bad food. What was interesting about this was that it was unnecessarily bad. I give you an example. Ah, on Sunday instead of just the slop the sort of soup that had nothing much in it, which was our usual diet, on Sunday there was usually something more solid. And um, it was quite often a kind of dumpling ah, which was the size of a

tennis ball, um and it was poured over with a red liquid which ah, pretended to be a jam. Now, in principle, this would have been a real treat. In practice, the outside of the dumpling was all soggy, and the inside was raw. The whole thing was unnecessarily bad. Had this woman, who did all the cooking, and she was a skilful cook, because she cooked for all the other people who ate better food. She could have made smaller dumplings so that the outside doesn't melt away and the inside doesn't stay raw. But we were only Jews, therefore it didn't matter. So, the food was scarce, it was bad, it was, we were starving like I told you, and my family starved particularly because there were six of us workers and there were eleven of us in all. Ah, we had two toddlers and three grannies who couldn't work, and therefore the six inadequate food portions were divided eleven ways.

What really pained me, was that even when we could have had better food, because of the attitude of the woman, that's what happened. Now, in uh, the factory, the food was dreadful. Um, the, most usual food was something called [durge muse?]. I tried to work this out what this was, in fact it is an understood term. I could spell it for you if you wish, it's dried vegetables. And the dried vegetables are presumably soaked and uh, cooked up, into something that resembled a soup. The smell of this was so revolting that quite often a starving bunch of people could not eat it. Quite often we had dysentery. There were about three hundred, four hundred of us in all in the, in that camp, in the, um, the armament factory. Um, there was a wash place and a toilet, but when dysentery got four hundred people, it was not adequate, and I don't really want to go into the details. Ah but, but really, was the, the cruel part of it, that the dried vegetables must have been kept in some way as it should, as it shouldn't have. Maybe in a damp place or I don't know, dried vegetables should keep. The idea to give a bunch of Jews dried vegetables in a soup was not a bad idea. The execution of this was so bad, that it was revolting, and it made us ill. So even when we were fed, we were not fed. And that's starvation for you.

**Natasha**

It added to the cruelty didn't it?

**Agnes**

Yes, yes.

**Natasha**

Um, you just talked about Strasshof, and that's where the questions start here. Um, we'd like to know, the fortunate event which, I'm sure you covered it before, but there was a group of people that were supposed to go to Auschwitz, and you escaped somehow.

**Agnes**

Yes.

**Natasha**

By clerical error, or, we don't really know do we. Could you give me your reflection on that?

**Agnes**

Well, I didn't know until quite recently. Until a few years ago when I came around in my trying to write for Tabby. I tried to research how it was that we survived. How it was that um, my well to do relative was taken to Auschwitz. I told you the story, ah they treated her, they cheated her out of some money, and they took her ah, ghetto, her transport it went to Auschwitz and the, uh, about half or maybe more than half of the ghetto where I was went to Auschwitz and we didn't. How come? Um, and I found some traces, ah of possible explanation um, and one possible explanation is, and I found, signs of this in two different places. A historian would tell you, you need two different sources um, and I found two places, but I don't know whether I should trust it or not.

Um, there was the concept of the exchange Jews. Um, this was to put a number of prominent Jews ah, into some relative place of safety, and negotiate, with the British in particular, an exchange of a number of Jews for some kind of equipment. In, as I understand it, it was the, the currency was to be three hundred Jews for a lorry. And they wanted to have prominent people, some of whom would be known in Britain, so they would know it was a musician or a professor or a, or a scientist or something whom they are exchanging, perhaps who is going to pave the way towards the exchange. In the end, this exchange Jew, uh, project, never materialised, but there was to be a transport from um, western town in Hungary called Győr, to take them to Strasshof. Uh, that was to be the prominent Jews, part of the exchange Jews. Um, there is ah, several ways of referring to them in the literature, Jews on ice, for example. These were Jews kept on ice pending the exchange program. And the um, the transport, which was to take ah, the prominent Jews, from Győr to Strasshof, um, mistakenly was sent [COUGHS], was sent to Auschwitz. And they then um had to try to somehow cover up, this was Eichmann's staff who made this error. And they, in order to cover it up, they sent another transport to be um, Jews on ice, and we were those. I can promise you, ours was a perfectly ordinary bunch of people, and we happened to have fetched up in Strasshof to make up the numbers. We were never exchanged though.

**Natasha**

What a stroke of luck. I'm just remembering that story, was it your aunty who, who ended up giving all of her money and she could only take...

**Agnes**

Yes.

**Natasha**

...two people and she ended up thinking she was going to Switzerland, and she ended up in Auschwitz?

**Agnes**

She was my mother's cousin's wife, and uh, whatever I have, leftover from those times, is an accident. Um, there's an interesting story of how certain things were kept. Most of our possessions were lost. But I have a beautiful, beautiful, ah, coffee service, which she made, ah, as a wedding present for my mother. She was an artist, I told you, who worked in China. And ah, she was the one. My mother's cousin's wife. She was the one who with her little boy was sent away. But I think it's worth noting that Strasshof itself, which is [CLEARS THROAT] which is a, an outskirt

town like ah, I think I can liken it, perhaps I mentioned this to Clapham Junction. It's a railway junction...

[PAUSE TO GIVE AGNES SOME WATER]

**Natasha**

Let's talk a bit about Strasshof then, because...

**Agnes**

I want to talk about, I want to tell you how it was established.

**Natasha**

There's one question here about how did you convince the Russian pilots that Strasshof was not a military base but a Jewish labour camp. So in talking about Strasshof can you mention that?

**Agnes**

Ok, I shall, but remind me. We were in Strasshof twice. Once on the way there, and once on the way back. Now this about the Russian pilots, was on the way back of course. So on the way there, are you ready?

**Natasha**

Yes, yes keep going.

**Agnes**

Strasshof was um, a railway junction, um, near Vienna. Ten kilometres from the centre, something, quite near Vienna. And ah, it was a large holding, lager, a transit langer, for different kinds of people. They were, it was in segments, and I don't know if I mentioned to you, there was a, ah, and area of it which was occupied, on our, um, on our way, that was when we first arrived in Austria. There was an area of the camp which was occupied by Italian prisoners of war. And then there was the Jewish area and there were others. Tens of thousands of people. And my father actually managed to converse with the Italian prisoners of war, my father speaking Latin and them speaking Italian and they understood each other with a lot of goodwill on both sides. But what is interesting about Strasshof is that originally, the whole of this camp was established to house the Ukrainian ah, guest workers. I told you about the Ukrainians who were volunteers, and they were working in the agricultural areas in and around Vienna. And they had to be housed somewhere, so they build barracks for them. And that is, that was the original purpose. Now as the, as the Austria, the Ukrainians were absorbed into the working life of the Austria, so this camp area became vacant. And that's when they started to utilise them, first for prisoners of war and then later they extended it. So the Ukrainians had a, if you like first call on the beautiful place of Strasshof. There were still some Ukrainians um, left there, presumably those who hadn't yet, or newcomers, I don't know. There were Ukrainians there still when we were there, and I met some people, ah, who wrote, survivors who wrote about the uh, brutality towards the Jews. Of these Ukrainians who were ah, used as ah, guards or whatever, of the Jews. Um, I don't recall them being brutal to us ah, then. Later on when we were working in the agriculture camp, in Magdalenenhof which is what I told you about, I, we had, we had encountered the Ukrainians and they were brutal, and I was beaten by one of them. And the background to this was, I don't know if I told you this before, um, when the field was



small, ah the wheat harvest, the harvester, couldn't go or it was not feasible. So the small fields, the wheat was cut by hand, and the Ukrainian went ahead, and the Jewish woman was tying up the wheat sheaf. And I was having this uh, enormous Ukrainian going ahead of me, and I was eleven, and I was trying to tie up the wheat sheaf and uh, I wasn't fast enough. So he got his belt down and beat me. I don't think it made me any faster, but it would have made him feel better. They were known for their brutality towards the Jews.

Now Strasshof, you asked me, um, came to my experience twice, once because this is where we arrived, that is where our train first uh, downloaded us from Hungary, and then when our work camps became totally untenable because they were bombed apart. Um, they put us back again into Strasshof and from Strasshof daily they had transport to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. Um, day by day they cleared more and more of the barracks of the Jews. And I don't know if I mentioned to you at the time that we last spoke, um, when it came to the turn of our particular barracks, ah, we were put into wagons. These were the wagons that was known to, to us because we travelled in similar ones before. Ah, and I thought how nice this was because there were fewer of us, there was enough place for everybody to sit down, and we made ourselves comfortable in these cattle wagons. Ah, doors were locked and then came an air raid, and the railway line between Strasshof and Theresienstadt was bombed apart. And we were still in the wagons while the air raid was, and the target was that railway line. Um, they let us out of it, but they couldn't continue with any more transports, so we were let, lead back again to our barracks. And thereafter, after that day we never saw any um, German guards. They just disappeared. Ah, it took us a little while to begin to comprehend what this meant. Ah at first we just noticed that we were not being fed, um, and ah, father of one my, my friends who had been a judge, he died in fact the next barrack to us, star, of starvation. My father almost did I told you he was down to thirty-five kilogram of weight. Um, it took us a while to understand that perhaps we might be free. Before they told us that in the barbed wire there was high voltage electricity and somebody threw themselves at the wire and ah, it turned out there was no electricity. Um, we also found that ah, it's so unlikely that um, a trainload of foodstuff was also stranded in Strasshof just the same as we were, and um, in that wagon there were soya beans, sugar, and that red liquid which masqueraded as jam, ah, that was the food. And it was um, my grandmother's skill um, somehow to put together a kind of um, stove on the ground to cook the soybeans and to make a sweet soup for us. That was the, the food.

Um, now, ah, the came the next phase. Up until then, I told you, we were constantly bombed by the Allies, and these were um, um British or American planes. You could see which is which, the British planes looked black from below and the Americans were little shiny spots. But they were all very high up. Um, that bombing had finished. Ah, but we were still in our factories. Um, then we were in Strasshof, then came the attack from the Russian planes. Now they flew low and they, so low that you could almost take note of the facial features of the pilots. And they shot their machine guns into these barracks. They must have thought that these were, they looked like, they had been, ah, barracks for ah, for army personnel. Um, and somehow we had to tell them that this was, that we were not their enemies. Ah, people got ah, bits of white cloth which they spread across the roofs of the barracks, um, as it were as a white flag. Somebody found something yellow, and they tried to put something yellow to

show that there are Jews in here, I don't know. Ah, but this whole period of them attacking our, um, our camp, can't have lasted for many days, because by then the progress of the Russian army was really quite rapid. The problem came when the Russian army personnel turned up. In the daytime they were wonderful. They gave children pieces of bread and so on, but at night they came and took away young women. And those young women came back in a state you wouldn't want to see. So there was a, a whole, and from then on, until the time when we finally, well you have to understand what happened. We, when we came to, and we realised that this was the end of our excursion to Austria, we thought we are going now back to Hungary because we thought that we should meet up with the men who had been taken into the forced labour camps, the husbands of my aunt. So we started on this journey on foot from Strasshof back to Budapest. And so we were crossing the path of the Russian army, and they came in waves. And the, there were various incidents, some amusing, some sad, some helpful, but always, always the fear at night of what happens to women. That's all really.

There was one other thing I don't know if I mentioned to you, I had two large and one small illnesses during this period. The large illnesses both happened in Strasshof, one at the beginning and one at the end. I can't explain it, I don't know what the matter was, but I had in both cases such high fever that I was practically not conscious. Um it was difficult when we first arrived because that was the time when they ah, showered us, registered us and so on. Over a period of time about twenty-four hours. And I was so so feverish that I was being supported on either side, I could barely stand up. And um, I was alright the next day. I don't know. Ah, and when we were liberated by the Russians in these circumstances I just told you, again I had a bout of fever, and I don't even know. Again, very high fever. And it delayed the start time of my family to go back to Budapest, because I was in no state. And nobody was. We still had the babies and the grannies, and my father was, was um, barely able to stagger around. And then, I was before the strong person, one of the strong people, I was twelve by then, and now I fell by the wayside being ill. Ah, but again I recovered soon. So, that's the story. Maybe I'm hazier about this Strasshof period because during an important part of it I was so ill. And I lost, I had a daily diary. And during that time, while I was so feverish, I lost it. And when I, when I recovered I couldn't find it. Every day I wrote, and I lost it.

### **Natasha**

Oh, that is such a loss, what a record that would have been for all of us.

### **Agnes**

It would, it would. And I lost it, I couldn't even, look, they had other concerns didn't they, and I couldn't bother anybody for it and I, I lost it. So there you are, that's Strasshof.

### **Natasha**

Ok. Thank you very much for going over all of that. Um, I think that's pretty much ah, it for that bit. The next bit was about your husband but that's, when you met your husband. I'm sure we've covered this but just...

### **Agnes**

We might have done. I think I want to tell you something about John himself, um, his, I don't know if I had told you this. His family had a very different um, background um, history from mine. Um, his father, I have here a picture, um, in fact I brought you some material in case you want to use it. One is a memory stick on which there are slides, uh, with certain information you might want to use. And the other, I brought you the first part of my storybook which includes a picture of my father-in-law. Now my father-in-law was a very handsome young man who was a hero of the first world war. Ah, he was an officer in the Austria-Hungarian army, and he was shot, um, and he became a, officially, um, a war veteran and ah, he lost the use of an arm, I don't know how many operations. It became just a, a, sort of he could use just this one with one ah, joint. Um, unluckily for him, he was, his left arm was shot away, and he was left-handed. But he was dextrous, ah I, I was very fond of him, um, and I have a picture of him, very dashing in his ah, uniform, ah, of the first world war. Now, as a war veteran, ah, he was exempt, and his family was exempt from the anti-Jewish laws for a long, long time. And that's why Újpest, which was the um, suburb of Budapest where they lived, ah when Újpest was cleared of its twenty thousand Jews, very very few, one or two families, were allowed to stay in their homes, and their family was one of them.

Ah, they didn't know that by then, um, John's brother, older brother, nine years his senior, was already dead. I mean it didn't, their exemption didn't go as far as shielding him from military service. So he was taken to the Ukraine, and he was lost together with most other young Hungarian men. Um, John was just on the right side of the, of the dividing line. It was a very narrow margin. He was sixteen. Ah, his cousin was seventeen. From seventeen onwards, they were taken away, and his cousin George was lost. John was allowed to stay with his parents, and for a long time they stayed in their beautiful home. And then when the, the arrow cross, this is the Hungarian Nazi party came to power, this was in the autumn of 1944, um, my father in law's bat man, that is the name isn't it, for an officer? He came, he was a well-known drunk, but he was still fond of his officer, and he came, and he said look here, it's not safe for you, ah come and we shall hide you. And they were hidden, with false papers. Um, my mother-in-law, my father-in-law and John. And so they survived, ah, with the help of uh, this uh, bat man. Ah, until recently I was still in touch with the family.

Um, and so they then would go back to their home, and it's an interesting part of the story if I hadn't told you, they were among the first Jews, and one of the very very small number of families who survived in Újpest, Jewish families. And then ah, people came back in ones and twos. From a big family that would be one member coming back from Mauthausen or Auschwitz or or the Ukraine or what. And because my father-in-law was a prominent and respected member of the community, it would be ah, these lost souls, they, they found their way to their house. And my mother-in-law took them in and whatever they had or hadn't, ah, they shared, and then these people found their way away. And this went on. They, they were a kind of um, transit camp, their home became. And then ah, one day the local health authority came and said is anybody ill here. And my mother-in-law said not really, my son has a cold but it's nothing important. That was taken very seriously, and it turned out that um, two of the people, there are brothers who came back as survivors from the Ukraine, ah were found to have typhoid fever, and they then tracked down the places where they had been, and that was in fact John's typhus. Ah, he also had and he um, his mother

insisted that ah, that he is not to go to the hospital, she will nurse him at home. Um, I think that it needed the weight of the family and the respect in which they were held that they allowed that to happen. And ah, John was delirious for a long time, between life and death but he finally survived. He lost about half a year of schooling or something because the illness is, the, very few, and in fact they were themselves I'm quite sure, not in peak condition by then but he finally recovered, um and like I said his ah, his brother was lost.

**Natasha**

But how did you meet him Agnes?

**Agnes**

Well, I don't know if I told you, when we, I have to go back to me and then I shall, I shall answer you.

**Natasha**

I'm worried because we've only got a third of the way through the questions.

**Agnes**

Ah, well we lost our home in the centre of Budapest. When we arrived back into Budapest people were living in it. Um, they had been bombed out. We could have insisted that we want our home back, we were not in a condition to insist on anything. And somebody said there are empty homes, and the council allocated to us a home in Budapest. There were empty homes because twenty thousand Jews had been killed. Um, and then I started to go to school there. Ah, this was now the autumn of 1945. And ah, there was a Jewish festival. There are not many Jewish festivals that are jolly, but there was one, ah, where the ah, school children are asked to perform something, and I must have read a poem or something. And there was this big boy who also from the local Jewish boy's grammar school, he was playing um, a Beethoven romance ah, on the violin. And when his performance was finished he came over to me and said do you like music? And that's how I met John.

**Natasha**

Wow.

**Agnes**

They were the first, they first words we spoke to each other.

**Natasha**

And isn't that amazing because music is such a big part of your life.

**Agnes**

Very big part of both our lives...

**Natasha**

So let's move on now, and let's talk about, um, communism, because that's the next section that I've been asked to ask you about.

**Agnes**

Ok.

**Natasha**

So between 1945 and 1956, Hungary essentially swapped a right-wing extremist government for communist rule, didn't it?

**Agnes**

Exactly right.

**Natasha**

So now we'd like to know how life under communism felt for Hungarian Jews, compared to life under the Nazis.

**Agnes**

Well, it was very different, um, the Hungarian Jews were not institutionally targeted. In other words, whatever antisemitism there was, endemic antisemitism under lied everything that happened. It remained so. But the communist rule itself was not antisemitic, um in fact the communist rule was of such a kind that it created antisemitism in the population. The leader of the, of the regime was somebody called Rakosi, he himself was a Jew. Many of his ah, most important um, collaborators, his ministers, many of them, a large important corpus was Jews. As the regime became more and more hateful, so Jews became more and more hated. Um, there were [COUGHS], there were difficulties in the, for the population. Look, I tried to look for understanding, ah I tried to see how I can explain to myself the way Jews are treated. And in the case of the Hungarian Jews being not very pleasantly treated in the communist regime, it is almost understandable. Because the regime was dreadful. We all suffered. And it was ah, imposed upon us by a cruel communist dictator who was a Jew.

**Natasha**

You'd already had enough!

**Agnes**

We had enough. Ah, there were difficult situations, um, for example in order to progress in your career, and I still, I was at school you understand. But to progress in your career you had to be a party member. If you were not a party member then ah you were blocked in your progress. Um, later, after we had escaped to Britain, ah one of John's very close friends, ah [?], not a Jew, um, quit his um, position as the chief engineer of one of the country's famous, main industrial, um, organisations. Why did he quit, and why did he become stoker of the boilers in the, in the block of flats instead? Because he had to choose between going to prison, ah by not promoting the communist candidate to a position of prominence, or going to prison because he did promote this person who was incompetent. And this was a, a chemical engineering organisation making pharmaceuticals, and if an incompetent chief engineer is in position, then he can kill a few people. So, sorry, John's ah, best friend is an example of the way in which the, the regime created dilemmas which were untenable. Um, it was um, the, the regime was also thorough. Ah, everybody was spy and everybody spied on everybody else. Ah, if you were not a, if you were a party member then of course the organisation was well known, and you know who

the secretary was and all that. Ah, but if you were not a party member, and if you wanted to exempt yourself from the regime, you still could not because the, ah, because you were party to being a member of society. Ah, in the case of John, my husband, he was a young engineer. Ah, I think last time I told you about how cleverly he manoeuvred between making sure that people understood that he was a, an engineer of some competence, but ah, but when it came to political matters, we found his ah, his cadre, sheet, after the, the regime, after 1956 when the revolution, I have got it at home, I think you should have a look at it, it's fantastic. And it says there he's a dilemma. Because on the one hand he's an astute engineer but on the other hand he's a political moron. Now, you, you, had to be, um, strong, ah, you had to be, um, dignified, you had to have a certain um, strength of character, ah which he had to be able to maintain a position such as this. I was at school; I don't think I would have been able to. I was forever targeted; I was forever challenged. There were terrible things that I had to do, and I didn't know how to defend myself because I didn't have the nous, the, the tact, the, that John, John had. But, it was not institutionalised, antisemitism. It was institute, institutionalised, brutal communism.

I'll give you an example of the things I had to do. I was by then at university. I was known to be um, politically, um, unreliable. Because my father had been a socialist it was all, it was well understood and socialists, um. And um, there was ah, at one point there was a movement to extract money from the population on government bonds. The government wanted money, and they issued government bonds. And you volunteered to pledge some of your income on these government bonds. And university students were sent out in pairs, house to house, um, talking to the population, saying please pledge some of your income. I mean people were so poor, and it was pensioners that you, the, freezing, starving pensioners. And the, ah, party secretary was my pair. And so he and I were going, and he said I am here to observe you at work. So there was I, in a position of having to persuade these pensioners to part with what they didn't have, while being observed by the, yeah? Um, now I wanted to go back to ah, John's contribution. Everybody knew that he loved all ma, manners of culture, but you didn't go to theatres because theatres were politically biased. That was one of the reasons why music became so important in our, it, it was more or less neutral. So he became the ah, music organiser. And so he had to ah, persuade people to buy tickets, to go to this and that and so and so. And he had a circle and about each member of that circle he had to write reports. Everybody had to write reports under one or another head about everybody else. Now I also was into music, and I had to um, we were volunteers you understand, these, these were all volunteer tasks. I volunteered, I was conducting the choir, ah, which was to sing party songs before the university day started. Now the day officially started at eight in the morning, so at seven o'clock we all assembled, and I had group, and you were all member of my group and I had to report on any of you who missed, or any of you who didn't sing heartily. We were all, the, everybody was reporting on everybody else. The regime was unspeakable, ah, there were millions actually, murdered, many of my friends were, ah, turned out of their homes. We were luckily so poor that nobody wanted our home. We still were poor, all my life there I was poor. But um I, several of my friends they were told one day to the next that they are now living in a village somewhere and their homes were taken over by party people.

It was a bad regime. But it as not worse for Jews than it was for anybody else, other than the population became, becoming more and more entrenched in their antisemitism because they hated the regime, and the regime was represented by the Jews.

**Natasha**

Thank you very much. Wow, that was amazingly said. There's one further question in this area, and then um, we've got just a few minutes to go through the rest of it. Um, so just, why did you, and what persuaded you to move to the UK?

**Agnes**

Ha. We wanted to escape always. Um, my father wanted to go to Israel, ah he started to ah teach a whole congregation at one point Hebrew because he spoke Hebrew like I told you um, because it was an ancient language. Um, my mother never wanted to go anywhere, because my mother was a member of her family, a mother, sisters and so on. But my father wanted, and I would have wanted to escape. Ah, after ah we married, John and I, I was nineteen, ah, we ah, wanted to have children but we knew that we shall never have children in that regime, in that country. Um, even if the regime had changed, we would never have wanted to live in that country. And how right we were if you look at what happens now in Hungary. Ah, you will see we were not wrong, that is a country where people should escape from. And we wanted children, and we tried every possibility and some of them were naïve, some of them ridiculous, and when the revolution came, ah there was no question we are going, the question was where. Um, trade unionism was the attraction here. Democracy and trade unionism was the attraction.

**Natasha**

Thank you very much. Um, could you briefly Agnes, because I know this could take us the rest of the day, um, just plot through your career and your family.

**Agnes**

Aha. Ah well, um I had just graduated in 1956, in the um, and I had a very very interesting, ah, very short ah, career in Hungary, only a few months. And I would really love to have the chance to tell you because it was amazing, it set me up, so it was such a good fortune. But, the revolution came and out I came of that country. Ah, the um, um, very briefly we lived in Paris, may I have a moment to tell you why?

**Natasha**

I'm just worried because the next bit is actually it, it, it's just very brief so we can just drop in about, I did this, I lived in Paris, I did this, just kind of one long sentence.

**Agnes**

Alright, alright. For a few weeks we lived in Paris, ah but this was a transit towards Britain. Um, Pye, Pye limited of Cambridge, gave us ah, a, job, so we arrived in Britain with a labour permit. I was never a refugee in Britain, I was a tax pater and still am. Ah, and I worked as an engineer ah, for a short while, for the, um, as an assistant to the ah, chief technologist of Pye. Thereafter um, we moved to ah, Ericsson telephones ah, in ah, Nottingham, um became a member of the Institution of Electrical Engineers, um, was a, we were supported there by the director of the laboratories by the name of John Pollard, ah to whom I shall forever be grateful. Um,

and I worked there as, in research, in industrial research for a few years, ah, but um, one had to move on to gain promotion. Um, there was a limited possibility of ah, progress. The next ah, job I had was at ICL in Stevenage, ah, again as industrial researcher. Um, very interesting job, ah, but um, the company was very badly managed. Um, and when the project on which we worked, the successful project, was not ah, taken into ah, manufacture, I thought this was disappointing and I thought I should move somewhere else. By then we had two babies, ah, Esther was at that time three, Ana was just a newborn, and um, I then went to work in Cambridge, ah the Cambridge College of Arts and Technology seeing whether my interest in education can be pursued.

Didn't understand about the British education system, I can tell you. Ah, but, ah I progressed through the ranks, um, the polytechnics were formed, and they appeared to be the socialist ah, university education medium. So I became a passionate supporter of the polytechnic ah, movement, and progressed through the ranks, became the head of a department of ah, um, electrical electronic engineering, and I made it to become the largest engineering department of the country. Um, I used my background in the computer industry in electrical engineering and that is why there was a possibility of such a growth. And while I was working ah, as head of an engineering department, I published because I was always a researcher. And so people came for, um, consultancy advice, and so I began to be a consultant to Siemens, to BT, to Phillips, and a number of other international organisations. And I had a family, and I ran a huge department, and I was a researcher, and when it came to be a fourteen-hour day, seven-day week, I thought enough was enough and I resigned from my job at, as head of department and I became a full-time consultant, and I worked um, with John, he was managing, and I was being the technologist mostly. Ah, for ten years and in ten years, this was the tail end of my career, I earned much more money as a consultant than all of the rest of my career before. But I enjoyed what I did. And I think I would still be active, I did all kinds of social work, ah, honorary, fellow of this, committee chairman of that, you can imagine, I became quite a well-known engineer. There was a little incident I might mention to you when I had to interview somebody anonymously. Um, so there was an interviewing panel, and we were not meant to be known and somebody said ah, well I know who you are, you are famous. No I wasn't famous; I was conspicuous because I was a prominent engineer woman. Ah, I would still be working except that John became very ill and I became his main carer. And since then I am still an engineer in heart and in spirit, and I still do things in engineering, but I am no longer active.

### **Natasha**

Thank you very much Agnes. [TO CREW] I told you she was amazing didn't I? Right um, the last bit of this interview and we've only got about ten minutes Agnes, so these are questions back about the Holocaust. Um, and the first one, and again I think we've addressed quite a lot of this before but let's just go over it again. Why you think your immediate family managed to survive the Holocaust. Was it down to luck do you think, or down to ability? Was it down to your chance of being adaptable, practical? What was your reason to survive?

### **Agnes**



I think that um, the main element is luck. Ah, I mean what else but luck that we were the, the ones who were taken to Strasshof instead of the prominent bunch and that was pure luck. I, I have here um, a memory stick on which I have something like seventy slides, I use that if I talk to schools. And I actually show them the points of miracle which occurred to me. Um, the um, um, there are other elements of luck. Why was it that um, the whole of the ah, the armament factory was bombed to shreds except for this old building, the only nineteenth century old building which never got a hit and that is where the Jewish lager was. Whereas all the modern underground camouflage factory was bombed apart. There were so many, I don't, why was it that the day before they were still taking them to Ausch, to, to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz from Strasshof and by the time it came to be, it was all luck. If I hadn't luck over and over again I wouldn't be here. Ah, you needed a sequence of miracles to have survived. But there were other elements. There was the incredible competence of my grandmother who from the moment when the situation got bad to the moment when we arrived back home, she thought of things. Did I mention to you about the rucksacks?

**Natasha**

The rucksacks, yeah.

**Agnes**

That is just an example. Without that we would not have been able to sustain the babies. And without the babies we would not have had such a motivation. Now the motivation to save the two toddlers, beautiful little children, that gave a great deal of strength. And the way we stood by each other, the whole family, I think that all of those were elements. Ah, we, there were certain other things, for example I had good German. Um, I had, I was very fluent. I don't think my German was much worse than an Austrian peasant child of eleven's German might have been. And I didn't look Jewish particularly. And therefore I could steal into the, the villages and they might have given me a piece of bread when they might have chased away a more Jewish looking child. Or a more Jewish looking child might not have had the nous. I, I was a pretty tough and determined little girl. Um, and I think that ah, all of these elements contributed. But mostly it was the luck, there's no way of, of minimising that. It was luck.

**Natasha**

Sequence of miracles as you said. I can't remember whether it was one of your daughters or granddaughters who know that everything that you've said is true because you have no imagination.

**Agnes**

That was Molly.

**Natasha**

Molly. And I don't know whether or not that feels like a compliment to you or not, but what I do know is that your academic prowess has given you somehow some sanity through um, real depravity that you've experienced. Do you feel that that has given you um, a resting point, your ability to understand things, your academia?

**Agnes**

Yes, um, I think that um, I am um, fundamentally a researcher and an educator. Ah, a researcher, um, distinguishes between knowing about things and knowing things. Ah, I think that it would be, there would be a lot of people who would either not want to know about what happened to them, or would be satisfied just to have some vague understanding of it. Now I was quite happy not to be interested for decades I told you, but once I became interested, I'm still a researcher, I need your help and I do everything I can to try to understand more what had happened. Ah, I became ah, a member of the British Library because that gives me access to, to material. I want to have contact with various people I mention to you, ah because ah, I need some more understanding. Part of what I want to understand is what made those people, the perpetrators, act as they did. And I think that being interested in it gives me a certain amount of strength. I'm not running away from it because I'm curious about it and I think that, that being a researcher, the mentality of a researcher helps me, yes.

### **Natasha**

And maybe if you'd had an imagination, or if you could imagine more now that would have sent you mad.

### **Agnes**

Oh well, um, I'm, I'm I think not being, not allowing myself to be an imaginative, I don't know whether I...alright, let me start again. Ah, a researcher has to be imaginative. It is wrong, what Molly said. It is wrong. I am not unimaginative when it comes to research in the fields that I am knowledgeable about. But in the areas where I am ignorant, like in history, I have to rely on the stre, on the facts. Um, so, um, I think that if I allowed myself to dwell on the emotional side of what had happened, that would have driven me away from history, away from the facts, I don't know how I would have coped. Being a researcher tells me, here are facts, here are interpretations, here are emotions. And I am working here when it comes to the Holocaust.

### **Natasha**

Which aspects of the Holocaust have you not come to terms with?

### **Agnes**

Oh I can't, I can't come to terms with what happened to the young men. And I need help. I need your help, ah the, the young men from the age of seventeen until about the age of I would say thirty-five, and here is a guess because I know it's seventeen. John was alive, George died I told you, it was seventeen when they started to be murdered. They were then the young men were taken to the Ukraine under circumstances which I think need to be explored and understood much better than I can. They were taken to the Ukraine, they were told, the army was told, put the Jewish young men, the, um, they were part of the Hungarian army. These Jewish battalions put them in the most exposed positions, and I know because I read everywhere that almost nobody survived. But that's not good enough. Where's the facts? Now when the war progressed, the um, the front shifted from the east towards the west. On the one hand and on the other hand, older men were conscripted into the army. Now these older men couldn't be pushed out to the Russian winter, because the front was no longer there. The front had moved to the west. Therefore my father's generation, he was in, in his late thirties, early forties, whatever, that generation, a larger proportion of them survived. It is the young who perished, almost

everyone. Now I can't find enough of the data of the way in which whole generation of young men were murdered. And those were the people who um, were so important in my childhood. Um, they were jobless you see, because Jewish professionals couldn't work. And there were doctors and lawyers and engineers, and bankers, and what, and I was apparently an interesting little girl. And they took me into their professions, showed me things about their professions because they had the time, and I was like a sponge. And they were all dead. I can't bring myself to understand what happened to that whole generation. And that is the aspect that really catches me, and I, and it is not explored. What happened to the civilian population is very well documented, but what happened to the forced labour camp, victims of these young men? That is not explored, and it needs to be. And I need help please, historians, please come and help.

### **Natasha**

One final question to you and again I'm sure we covered this last time, that Agnes this was your chance again to speak to Molly's grandchildren and their great great great grandchildren. And it would be a message of hope I guess from you, but what, what would you say um, has been the biggest lesson that you have learned from your experiences? What would you hope we would learn from them?

### **Agnes**

You have to have [CLEARS THROAT] some kind of moral stance, a kind of self-respect. You have to behave in a way that you are not ashamed of yourself. If you behave like that, part of that is re, respect for other people. I think that they should be thinkers, they should use whatever, um, facilities they happen to be born with. Explore them to the full, develop them diligently, and put them in the service of their own humanity and of mankind. I don't know whether that explains it for you. Ah, you see, I, I'm an educator. One of the reasons why I am an educator is because, and I am an engineer, and these two converge. Both the engineer and the educator deplores waste. Wasted opportunity, wasted money, wasted human potential, both these professions that I am a member of demand that you cherish what, what is, what is there, and you develop it to the full. Um, I was head of a department of a polytechnic, ah I mention to you. All the people, nearly all the people were second chancers. We didn't have people from public schools coming with shiny qualifications. They came from the bottom comprehensive, where the, the gym teacher and the geographer taught them a bit of physics and maths. And they barely, barely made the threshold of being admitted to engineering education and some of them flourished. Why? Because we cherished them, we gave them a second chance. On my staff, there were mathematicians who were unemployed, a biologist who was unemployed, a chemist who was unemployed. Graduate unemployment when I was head of the department was dreadful. And I gave them an opportunity, and I found them a place of how they can make a contribution because they were first-rate people. If I insisted on having well qualified electrical engineers to staff my head of, my engineering department, I would have lost out to Imperial College or wherever. But no, I looked for, for fellow talent. Talent that had been ah, unexplored, unexplored, undeveloped, and I gave them opportunities. And there was a philosopher in my staff teaching mathematics and logic to electrical engineer students. And then, do you know, people came to the department and then they looked around, and then they found the atmosphere worth experiencing. That is what

I stand for, opportunities, explore, exploration and exploitation of talent. Building people. Building their self-esteem and their self-respect.

**Natasha**

You've been as eloquent today as you were then of course. And my last question to you now, is, do you still cry?

**Agnes**

I cry very often, when I think of those young men. That is what makes me feel...do you know, I'm not afraid of coming to the end of my life, I really am not. Um, I'm not even crying for John, or Esther. I have a great emptiness where they had been. My, my family is a beautiful construction. My daughter, my, my son in law, my five, both my sons in law. And my five grandchildren, they are a fantastic, fantastic community. But there, there are great, two great holes in this community that place of John's and the place of Esther. But we are strong, and we don't cry. Very, very rarely do we cry. But I cry when I think of all those young men who were in their twenties and who didn't have any chance to live and any descendants which they might have had. I cry about them. Sometimes. [PAUSE] Are we done?

**Natasha**

We're done. Thank you Agnes.

**Agnes**

Thank you.

**Artefacts**

**Agnes**

This is a small and very in... inadequate photograph of one of the heroes of my childhood, my uncle Steven, who was a civil engineer. He was handsome, clever, musical, a good linguist, a great draftsman, err, he was young, and he was killed in the worst circumstances possible. He is one of the people whose death I have a good description of. He died in (?) where he, together with 800 others, were burnt to death.

[Photograph of an unknown gentleman – possibly Agnes' uncle Steven as a young man]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi's family]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi as a baby]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi's mother's family]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi with her mother and father, Magda and Imre Kristof, aunts, uncles and grandmother, September 1938]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi, 1942]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi, 1942]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi, 1942]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi's parents, Magda and Imre Kristof]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi's cousin George and Aunt Klara]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi's uncle [?]]

[Postcard from Agnes Kaposi to her father, Imre Klein, 29 August 1943]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi's father-in-law, Erno Kaposi-Klein, 9 November 1941]

[Photograph of Agnes Kaposi's parents, Magda and Imre Kristof, on their wedding day]

[Front cover and inside scans of Agnes Kaposi's husband's (Janos) workbook, 1955]

[Scans of Agnes Kaposi's study record - Budapest University of Technology and Economics – with a photo of Agnes, 1951]