Avigdor Niv (2013)
Interview 1

Interviewers: Dana Ehrentreu, Sara Held, Nathaniel Cain, Moriah Patashnik
Also present: Yaffa Niv

[Beginning of Interview 1.1]

Avigdor Niv: Hi, my name is Avigdor Izsak Niv. Avigdor is my first name, Izsak middle, and Niv is our family name. Avigdor is spelled A-V-I-G-D-O-R. Izsak is spelled I-Z-S-K—I-Z-S-A-K. And Niv is spelled N-I-V. I was born in Gheorgheni, which is a township in Transylvania in the center of Romania today. I was born on February 22, 1937.

Dana Ehrentreu: Great. Thank you so much for that. So, what were you like as a kid, 4 to 5 years old?

AN: Sorry, I don’t unders—

DE: What were you like? Were you spunky, were you—

AN: A kid, 45 years old?

DE: 4 to 5. [laughs]

AN: Oh! [laughs] I don’t remember. I was very active, children are active, running around all day long. I loved to, to play in the yard. You know, we had a menagerie of, of domesticated—it’s not wildlife, it’s domesticated animals. Goose, chicken, but one of the chickens that used to lay eggs—hen—did not like me. She jumped on my head when I came to pick up the, pick up her eggs. I remember [indistinct] large area that we planted vegetables and we were picking up the pea pods and pulling out the carrots. And before preparing, going out to pick up the vegetables that you chopped up and prepared salad for dinner.

I remember a very nice place I liked to play, it was in the backyard of my grandparents, but I mostly was alone, was mostly solitary and lone child because as I kept growing, the environment kept being very anti-Semitic and against Jews and I got more and more isolated. So in the backyard, in the backyard of my parents was all fenced in with a very tall fence and it had 2 doors, one entrance from the front and one, the back, a gate in the backyard and an extension of the railway passed there, and almost daily steam locomotive with a couple of cars went by to the, to a factory near and it was loaded up and it was coming back, and they were carrying timber and all kind of products. They were, so, the distance between the loco—if you open the little porch and you stepped out from there, that was the distance [measures with hands] from the rail and where the locomotive was going. And I didn’t dare stand there because the locomotive was such a humongous, big engine, but I was very impressed and the thing going by and the, the ground was shaking tremendously.

So these kinds of memories, they created in me a love for the railways and I still have the traveling, and traveling of the locomotive, the steam locomotive still sounds very romantic for me. But, these are the kind of things that interested me. I was working and doing and building castles out of woods, pieces of wood and remnants of the, the timber that was brought home. This is what a boy does.

DE: Did you have any goals or dreams that you remember, though? Like, what did you want to be when you grew up?
AN: At one occasion, and I don’t remember how old I was, I must have been 3 or 4, there was a typhus epidemic—

[Camera angle switches]

DE: You were talking about the typhus epidemic.

AN: So, we had to line up in a long line and everybody was having a responsibility in the village, in the township. I knew that teachers were the one that helped and, but there was, the thing that there were only 2 doctors, and the doctors were giving the actual needles. You know, you have to undress to show something, an arm, they pinch you, and all the smells and sounds and events for a child were very, very impressive. And I remember that the man who stood at the head was a doctor. Subsequently, I met one of the doctors. It turned out that he was a family friend. And from then on I remember that I’ve decided when I grow up, I’ll be a doctor. And that was a dream that I kept alive. You asked me what did I want to be and, and there were times that it was an impossible even to consider that it was going to be ever a fact. But it turned out that I managed to realize the dream, the dream of my life, of my childhood.

DE: That’s incredible. So, you talked a little bit about the maid that you had in your house, and I know that was fairly common. Could you talk about her a little bit? What was her name? Were you close to her? No?

AN: [shakes head] I don’t remember. They came and went.

DE: Right, okay.

AN: They stayed with us for 3 months, 6 months, 2 years. I don’t remember. There were several of them. I have never had a strong bond with any one of them because they were not that close, although they would dress me and sometimes give me the breakfast, but I don’t remember ever having a close relationship with any one of them.

DE: Okay, well, can you talk a little bit about the kindergarten that you went to and your friends?

AN: From that period of time, I don’t remember anything. I remember only one, one place that I went to in kindergarten where my father picked me up. I remember later that was really, before we went and moved towards the center of Hungary, that came later, I was in the kindergarten which was run by the nuns, the Catholic nuns. The community in that area is mostly Roman Catholic. There were very few Russian Orthodox, very few Armenians, but mostly Roman Catholic. And there was a large Catholic Church and next to it, a Catholic convent. And I know that my mother went to elementary and high school there, and I was sent to the kindergarten. But, I was there for a very short time. Only several, only few months, and then we left Gheorgheni and moved to Debrecen. That came later.

DE: Right. Were your friends from kindergarten non-Jewish mostly?

AN: Yes.

DE: And do you remember feeling any anti-Semitism in the beginning from your friends?

AN: Not personally. I didn’t know that there was different. I remember only one in the beginning of the year, we had to go into the church with the nuns and line up and the priest were benedict-ing, providing the Benediction and what have you. All the children had to walk with the nuns and kneel in front of the
altar and I, I refused to kneel because I was told that I am Jewish, but—and this is not my religion. But I didn’t feel any way, any discrimination or any special attention at that time.

DE: All right. Do you have any stories that you can remember about your childhood? We always love those.

AN: Well, all the stories are connected with whatever happened, you know? All of the events in my grandfather had one of these early, early, early Ford cars. You know Ford said you could have whatever you have provided it’s black. So we had a black Ford something, I don’t remember what. But only after 2 or 3 trips with Grandfather to the neighboring villages where he went to purchase the, the timber and what have you sell, we had to have it put on blocks, remove the wheels because Jews were not allowed to have a car. So that came, so I remember with a friend and I—you could ask me to this very day what was his name and I do not remember—went and we played inside the car while it was on those blocks. At that time, I only understood we are Jews, we are discriminated against. I did not understand that we were discriminated against, we don’t have rights. My father would come home, close the curtains, and sit in semi-dark room, and pull out a newspaper from his, from his coat pocket. And I was surprised because he would usually read that early in the morning. So I was told that Jews are not allowed to read newspapers.

DE: What year was this?

AN: This was 1941 or so. So, it is very difficult to tell you about happy times. One morning it was, I remember in retrospect, I know it was the summer of 1942, it was probably the beginning of July. I was told that we were moving to live with my grandparents, with my mother’s father, in their room. And I asked why and then they tell me that my father along with his brothers, except I believe one or two, one was very, very old and the other was very young, they were being taken for forced labor, and they would leave tomorrow morning. And I remember the next morning my father kissing me and saying goodbye and my other uncles and they walked by me on the porch and out and I’ve never seen my father again since. That’s what happened and then one, one day I was playing in, in the yard of my grandfather’s house and I heard a loud shrieking, wailing sound. I recognized it was my mother’s and I didn’t know what happened.

And I went in and I saw a stranger who turns out was a priest who came by. This was some times in 1943. It could have been March or April or later. And the short of the story is that he, he told us that my father died. So ‘43 I was 5 and a half years old, 6 years old. I didn’t really understand what that meant. And I was told that I am an orphan. I thought that’s some kind of very prestigious designation and metal to, to carry around and wear on my chest because I did not comprehend the issue of death and somebody not coming back and going away and it was strange. My mother had a very hard time. And the priest told us that, and later on too from my uncles who came back that we spoke of them told that the Hungarians took all the, enticed by the German, more or less forced by the Germans, took all the young adults and enrolled them in forced labor. They took them with them to the German front. And they were supporting the Hungarian soldiers who were fighting along the Germans. And they were digging the ditches for them, carrying the guns and the heavy cannons instead of the horses that had yet to feed and the Jews who didn’t have to feed because [indistinct].

So, the tide of war changed and at Stalingrad, the Russians stood, and the Germans started to retreat. And with the retreat, the Hungarians retreated with them and they were marching one winter night in January of ‘43. And then my father collapsed and it turned out that he contracted pneumonia and he died in a little village that’s called Velvad, and the priest who was a priest, and administered last rite to all the people around. He realized that my father is Jewish, and he took his belongings and he brought them back to, to us. And he told us that he was buried in a, in a common graveyards with all the other soldiers, irrespective. There were Russian prisoners, and German soldiers, and Hungarian soldiers irrespective,
everyone was buried in a large, common grave. He brought back my father’s wedding ring, a watch, a pocket watch, a Doxa, flat pocket watch, and his cigarette holder. In those times people used to have these large, flat portable cigarette holders and that was his. And that’s how my mother recognized a cigarette holder although she said, “It’s impossible, cannot be, it’s not true,” but that’s the truth of the matter. That night, my grandfather told me something and he told me that from now on I have to be grown up and don’t bother the other grown-ups because they have enough trouble on their own. And from then on, I was very much alone in fighting my own little survivor war.

Well, I don’t know, do you have any secrets or what do you want me to switch? ‘Cause after that time, things got, got to be worse. In 1943, it turned out that my grandpa realized that he was the center of the household. My other grandfather who was a very kind, old gentleman and my father’s mother, the poor soul, she died, she died of a cerebral vascular hemorrhage when she realized that all her sons are taken. And so the grandpa stayed by himself, I remember this, and then we moved. My mother’s father realized that we are very near to the Romanian- Hungarian border. And that time they said the the Hungarians do not rely on Jews as being a solid element and they were picking them up and moving them to live not in frontier areas. The frontier was 50 kilometers from us. So we moved into Hungary itself, which is into the second largest city at that time, it’s called Debrecen. It’s not far from today’s Hungarian-Romanian border, but this was the second largest city. If you studied history, you would find that that was the center of the Calvinism, the Calvin University and center of the Calvinism in Europe. So, it was a famous city. It has all the tradition, had a lot of beautiful buildings. And my grandfather bought a house and my mother and I moved and lived in that house. For me, that was a very pleasant time because my mother did not have anybody else to be busy with, so she spent a lot of time with me. We adopted a little poodle dog, which I liked very much, and… but the winds of war were brewing and we constantly heard things, unpleasant things.

Well, this was sometimes in 1944, in ‘43, end of ‘43 I started going to school. I went to the first, first class in the, through the Jewish elementary school. And I was at school until March or February or March of ‘44 when the Jewish education had to stop. The Hungarian would not allow it. Sometimes beforehand, we were told that we have to wear the yellow star, and we couldn’t leave and couldn’t go out on the street without wearing the yellow star. And one night, my grandparents came to stay with us for a short time, but that short time became almost all the time because they couldn’t go back to, to Hungary. They were— Jews were not allowed anymore on trains. So that was… I enjoyed that time, that was a beautiful place, it had many rooms, I don’t recall exactly how many rooms it had, and the dog and I were roaming and playing. And the dog loved me very much. He was very protective of me. One day, Grandpa got very angry at me and flicked me with a newspaper. The dog jumped at his heels and bit his pants and wouldn’t let go. So I felt that I have a very strong ally. But, we had to, all of a sudden, Mother told me we have to get rid of him. We were not allowed to have dogs. She knew already that we had to move into a ghetto. So one day, a big truck with some 10 Germans appeared and they told us that we have to give them all our valuables. They either ripped my mother’s necklace and took off her wedding ring, and all the rings, took off some paintings from the wall and whatever jewelry we had. And we have to pack and everybody can carry something up on the truck and they took us into an area, which they designated a Jewish ghetto. In Debrecen, there was an area which was a more religious neighborhood and they were just, they were dropping us off, “Here, you live here.” At that time, the housing was more common in the form of yards, courtyards. You would have a courtyard, then there were houses, 2-story houses in a circle around. And each family would have a room or two. So we were shoved into a room and this is our place. I don’t remember, there were no bathrooms, there were, it was, it was a mess. And everybody had to go to work and do something because if you didn’t go to work, they would be angry at you and they would punish you. I didn’t remember what, I don’t remember my responsibility, I was a child of only 6, 6 and a half years old. I had to clean the courtyard. So that didn’t last too long either. After…
DE: I’m sorry, I think I’m going to stop you there cause we’re going to save going into the Holocaust for next interview.

AN: Okay.

DE: Do you guys have any questions?

Moriah Patashnik: Do you remember the dog’s name?

AN: I don’t. I don’t remember to, in order to immortalize. It was a black poodle. I think it was Rosie, but I don’t remember.

DE: I’m a little curious actually, how many languages do you know and what are they?

AN: Well, I told you that my native language, mother tongue, is Hungarian. Obviously, when we came back from the war, we came to Romania, I learned Romanian. So I speak Hungarian and Romanian. While we were in the concentration camp, I learned German. We were locked up in Vienna, that’s why I’m here. Otherwise I was too young to survive. So I learned German. Then I studied a little bit of French. I somehow managed to learn some English and to speak English. I understand and can babble a little bit of Yiddish. I learned a few words, or a little bit more than a few words in Russian. In Israel, I picked up a little bit from, from Arabic, but I do not speak. I can understand some common words. And as a physician you know, you work with people of all over the world and you pick up a few words. But mostly, 5 or 6 languages.

DE: Wow, that is amazing. Wow. Is there anything else that you would like to say about your pre-war?

AN: There’s not very much what I have to say as my impression and I’m—and the parentheses, my children—and my wife are very much on my case to write and put things down, and to tell the story, all the story for my grandchildren mostly, [coughs] because they want to know how things went and how things happened. And slowly as you are aware, people don’t live forever. Some of us pass away and there is nobody to tell the stories, so nowadays almost everybody from the generation has died. So they want me to start writing, so I started writing. As strange as it is only a couple of days ago I really started in a more serious fashion every day, putting down a page or two, of trying to put together thoughts. This period before, before the war, if I can summarize and remember what are most of my memories are my existence being so much alone and away from the grownups who were not free to play with me, to teach me, to educate me, to hug me because they were busy with their own lives. And obviously the winds of war were blowing very hard and they were busy with the thoughts of survival. And they didn’t have time to the capriciousness of a small child running in the house. I was a nuisance. And I realize that in retrospect and I miss today the kindness and the love that would have expected to be bestowed to me by my large family. But they were, they did not know anything because the Germans and the Hungarians made sure that no news and no facts are slipping out. I’ll talk to you about that later on about the concepts and things that they developed, the Nazis have developed and what did they believe in to keep everybody in the darkness about what they’re doing. But people felt and had the sense that something terrible is happening. And the way in which the Jews were oppressed and them slowly, slowly stripped of all citizens and all human rights as it evolved. I was alone. I had my own, whether that’s true or not my perceive view of the world, but that’s what I feel and that’s what I live with, that I had to do my own battles, fight my own battles alone. I think that if you want to talk about the rest next time, well then, we can stop here.

[The video stops and picks up in a different place.]
DE: —sorry about that.

AN: So he didn’t go to school from the Jewish environment at that time. He went to what’s called a Cheder. And he was taught the Hebrew word. Hebrew letters, and they didn’t teach him the Latin [indistinct] writing, reading, writing skills. And he acquired all those by himself. Eventually we went into a seminar for rabbis and he rose and before being commissioned, several months before being commissioned, he left and went into business on his own. He managed to put together, with the help of others, and eventually on his own to own a large factory which employed more than a hundred people and he was buying timber and the plant was processing it, making it planks and wood for building and furniture. And they lived in a very large house. It’s in that township, which we call Gheorgheni, or Gyergyó if you pronounce it in the Hungarian way.

DE: Can you spell that for us?


Gyergyószentmiklós. The full name of it is szen, you can shorten it with S-Z and miklós, M-I-K-L-Ó-S. So, I grew up in that environment. My mother and father lived in an a, an apartment which had just 3 rooms. One room was the living room and that’s where I made my bed, one room was their bedroom, and the third room was a large living area, which was the kitchen and the dining room, as it’s usual in a peasant house at those times, very large house, very comfortable short of the fact that there was no running water or plumbing. Those times, that was the norm. Across the street we had my father’s parents. They rented a small part of another peasant’s house. And my grandfather with my grandmother lived in a large house in the somewhat more well-to-do area of the town near the railroad and the railroad station. And beyond the railroad, several kilometers, was the plant, the factory which was like 10 acres of place where they would store the wood, the processed wood and the pre-processed wood, and all that stuff. As a child, I have very few memories of things that happened before the war. I recall several instances that the family got together and we— I had fun with the grandparents and all the uncles around. However, the environment turned very somber very fast. I remember one day I was called my, by everybody around, come, run, run! We went climbed on the fence to watch the Hungarians marching. They were marching in, they took possession of, of Hungary and they were carrying the different flag that they was used to seeing, now it was the Hungarian flag. Then—

DE: Can I stop you for a minute? I definitely want to hear about that, but we want to talk a little more about pre-war. So I want to hear all about your family and your neighborhood and who you played with and some good stories there.

AN: I don’t remember. I don’t remember. You want to hear about the things that were before the war and I don’t remember.

DE: Yeah.

AN: I don’t remember too much, I was a very small child.

DE: Well, could you talk a little bit about your mom and dad maybe? Tell us a little bit about them.

AN: Well, my father, although he was not the oldest of the brothers…

DE: And names please.
AN: His name was Miklos, M-I-K-L-O-S, Maximilan, and the Romanian pronunciation, M-A-X-I-M-I-L-AN, Maximilan. And my mother, her name was Bozsi, or Bertha. I remember he, my father was the senior guide in helping and assisting my grandfather and my mother’s brother, my uncle Sonny, S-O-N—

Yaffa Niv: Brother.

AN: Brother. I’m being corrected. [laughs] Sonny was my mother’s brother, so my mother’s brother and my father were helping grandpa run the business and they were the, the people who decided how and where things would happen and be. The office that managed this large factory was on a tiny hill inside those 10 acres. And I remember several times they took me over there and I could run around and I was impressed by how much and how important my father is and he is telling everybody everything how to do and why to do. He was the one that went and took trips in the mountains that surrounded the little township that we lived in Transylvania and purchased the timber from the people who owned the land. And I remember the nights that he and my uncle and my grandfather sat at the table and calculated. You know, when you own timber there is a concept of a cubic volume of the timber that is the money. That’s the most important thing. And the measurements come in length and width, but to square everything, you have to multiply, to cube everything you have to multiply again. So, it was a complicated, long task and they spent most of their time figuring out what is worth what and how to do things.

DE: No calculators? Come on. [laughs]

AN: In 1940s, there was no Hewlett-Packard and even Facet, who was the first mechanical calculator came somewhere after the fifties if my memory doesn’t fail me. So anyway, I remember the nights sitting at the dinner table, and they were busy, and there was not too much time to play with a little kid. I was, the playing time was delegated to the peasants and the children around, I don’t remember names, and I played with the maid that was always in our home. That time it was very common to have a house help in the house who did all the menial work, all the difficult stuff. And Mother and Grandmother were running the home. So there were many times, celebrations, in the grandparents’ house and everybody was invited and there were large dinners. And I remember Mother and Grandmother and several other people in the house cooking and doing the things in my grandparents’ home.

DE: What was your mom like and what was her name?

AN: Her name was Bozsi, B-O-Z-S-I, or Bertha, B-E-R-T-H-A. She was busy running our home, our family stuff. I don’t remember many, many things connected in particular with her. I remember once my father came to pick me up from the kindergarten where they send me to not to spend all day long in the yard, to be in a more structured environment. That time it was not uncommon, today every small child goes to, before school goes to kindergarten, Pre-K, what have you. But in those times, it was a privilege. Anyway, my father came to pick me up and we were riding with a, in a carriage and he showed me that he bought flowers. And we took it to Mother. It was her birthday. So I remember that. My father was a, for a small child, he was the tallest man in the world, obviously, and he would pick me up and it was a very strong event. As a child, you always remember and you remember, these memories are very, the pleasant memories. But very soon the environment changed when the Hungarians came into Gheorgheni. One morning, one noon, noon time, morning time, late morning time my father disconnected the radio and next time some people came and very somber faces, picked up the radio and walked away. I was told that we are Jewish and Jews are not supposed to listen to radio, and they don’t have to hear the news.

DE: Was your family religious?

AN: We were not religious, but we were observant.
DE: Do you have any traditions? For holidays or anything.

AN: No particular ones. We were very conforming to the, the Jewish community was largely reform, very few of them were devout religious people. There was a synagogue and the community was roughly a thousand Jewish people, and the township was all together was some twelve thousand inhabitants and a thousand of them were Jews. Come to think of it, I was the only one who came back from the Holocaust. I was the only child who survived out of those. And later, I will tell you the circumstances of how that happened because that was not meant to be according to the, to the people who organized the Holocaust.

Anyway, we had a synagogue, a rather nice synagogue, a rabbi, the cantor, the Shechita. The Shechita is the man who does the traditional slaughtering to make the meat kosher. And at every religious holiday, we would be in the synagogue and sitting and participating in the prayers. My grandfather, being one of the more prominent members, and honestly he donated, in retrospect I know that he donated money to maintain the community. He was seated up front. But the synagogue was in the form of that time a traditional form that everybody sat around and the stage, the bema, the place where they opened the Torah scrolls was in the center of the synagogue. So I remember I had a seat next to my father, and they always tried to keep me in the synagogue. But I did not like very much to be present as a child because the playing with other kids with the walnuts falling off the trees and the synagogue has a large yard and wooded. It was a nice place for the kids to play around. So these are the memories of the, of the holidays.

During the traditional holidays like Passover, I remember once everybody gathering in my grandmother’s big dining room and dining table and having the traditional Seder and I was chased to look for the Afikoman. The Afikoman is a piece of matzo bread. Are you familiar with that story? It’s a piece of matzo bread that is—the matzo is broken in half and is hidden to be eaten later. To keep the younger children interested and awake for the long Seder dinner and ceremony, you give them the, the enticement to go and look for that hidden piece of bread, matzo, and then they can negotiate and ask for a present. Some families you negotiate and ask, some families give you a preset present and then when there are more than, there is more than one child at the dinner then everybody gets a present, so anyway.

DE: Were you a negotiator?

AN: I don’t remember.

DE: [laughs]

AN: You know, I was 4 years old. This is the period of 4 and 5 years old. I don’t remember. The things that came afterwards were, had such a heavy cloud and impression on our lives that anything beautiful or anything enjoyable that might have happened, I don’t remember. I forgot. Maybe if I keep talking about it as I am speaking with you I will remember places and events, but there was so underwhelming, considering whatever happened afterwards that they were lost in the perspective of remembered memories.

DE: What you’re telling me is beautiful, though.

AN: Pardon me?

DE: What you’re telling me about your family and your neighborhood is beautiful.

AN: Thank you. When I kind of felt confident and proud in my little environment, but you know, things have changed and all that sense of security and confidence that the child needs or has—
[End of Interview 1.1]