Avigdor Niv (2013)
Interview 2

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

[Beginning of Interview 2.1]

Moriah Patashnik: Okay. Today is the, is September 20, 2013. We’re here to do our war part of the interview with Avi Niv, who we will ask to introduce himself, even though I just kind of did. You may introduce yourself.


MP: Okay, so as you remember last time, we talked a lot about before the war, so this time were going to discuss what happened to you and your family during the war. And I remember last time you started off talk—or you ended talking about your life in the ghetto briefly.

AN: Okay, so the stay in the ghetto was not so long, my memory is a little bit hazy about that, it might have been 3 to 4 weeks and then we were taken to the brick-laying factory. And that, in retrospect, I’ve learned that had 2 purposes. One is to render the Jews more amenable to transportation because the brick-laying factory had train lines on one hand. On the other hand, brick-laying factory used to be the most despicable location in any town. Only the gypsies were allowed to live there in misery. There was no place to be. There were shads that they would pile the brick, and it rained, it was muddy. It was clay mud that you would track in it.

And we were there, I don’t know anywhere between a few days to up to 2 weeks. I don’t remember exactly. But the conditions, the sanitary conditions were miserable. I witnessed couple of people that tried to commit suicide. They couldn’t put up with it. Somehow they put their hands on cyanide and they committed suicide, then and there. So I was very impressed as a small child from this event. Anyway, for me, it was one sunny day and they said that we are going now. So we had to take the little luggage that we, packages that we have to track them, to walk and we were given assignments where to walk, to which train. There were 3 trains lined up and we were assigned to the second train. And all our friends and acquaintances were on the third train. And my grandfather and my grandmother and my mother were walking up and down trying to speak with people and tried to convince them to allow us to go on the third train. That didn’t work. And my grandpa, we had our pile of belongings, told me, “Stay here.” And we were watched by the Hungarian border police, which were known to be very brutal. They were dressed in full regalia with funny hats and they all had their cockfeathers in their hats and he says, “I’ll show you what your grandfather can do.” And he kicked me and I flew a couple of, couple of yards in the air. And I was a very small child and he was a big man. So he told me what to do with what my grandfather told me to do. So I went back and grabbed our stuff and I moved wherever he wanted me to move.

And little time after they came back, I remember they picked me up and we were heralded and we were assigned to one particular cattle wagon and we were shoved into the cattle wagon. So we ended up being in the second train. That was significant because the first train went to Auschwitz and the third train went to Auschwitz. Our second train went, instead of Auschwitz, to a place that’s called Strasshof, near Vienna, and eventually we ended up being in Vienna. We were locked up in schools and the entire trainload of Jewish people that were transported originally to extermination camp in Auschwitz were dispersed in schools, in various parts in Vienna. We ended up being in a school that’s called—it’s in the tenth, tenth arrondissement of Vienna on the corner of Schönbrunn Palace. So, the school that I was
locked in was literally on the corner of Schönbrunn Palace. We could look into the Schönbrunn Palace, back of the Schönbrunn Palace garden and the long buildings of it. I did not see the Palace.

So the train ride is something that is memorable for me because it was a horrible situation. In a small train, in a cattle wagon, which is not even wide as to the curtain or maybe less than from the wall to the edge of the curtain and as long as probably that chair. We were some hundred and 10 people. 3 or 4 were insane by that time. [clears throat] They stripped themselves naked and behaved very bizarre fashion. And there was a, some kind of pot in the center for whoever needed to have their body functions and eventually some 3 people died during this 3-day train ride, and they were laid out there. I somehow got into a corner, and I was lucky, my mother was sitting on one side, my grandmother on the other side, and my grandpa was sitting probably in front of me or something. And that’s how we went through that period of time. I don’t remember, we were at one point given some water, but I don’t remember things. I had a pocketknife. I always have with me a pocketknife. And I managed to dig a hole into the, the plank of the, the train, wagon. And that I kept constantly enlarging, enlarging it and as we traveled that allowed for air to flow in and made ourselves a little bit more comfortable than the others. But, it was a miserable situation.

So, that’s uh, these are the beautiful memories. Finally, we, we were pushed back and forth and people who were familiar with the train lines were looking out, there was only one little window in that wagon, probably it was the size of a foot by a, a foot, by a foot. And it had, it has these gray bars and from outside there was a grate that you couldn’t even push your hand out. And the soldiers would remove it and at once I know they handed us some water. But anyway, those were really hard and they were saying that we are going this way or going that way and all of a sudden someone said that we are leaving the Hungarian border and we are in Austria. I remember that, but not much more. To my parents, we were told that—they told me afterwards—that what they were told that we are being relocated to a work camp. Well, in the two other trains’ case, it was their death and in our case, it was the truth because we were relocated, transformed, sent to the, to these schools, and we went through Strasshof. Strasshof evidently looked like—

MP: Could you spell that?


Yaffa Niv: [indistinct] should know. Strass and, and hof.

AN: Strass. Maybe it’s double S. Anyway.

YN: Double S. And H and O.

AN: And double F. O-F-F.

YN: O-U, isn’t it?

AN: No.

YN: No? Oh.

YN: Strasshof.

[mixed talking]
AN: So anyway, and it was a camp, a very large camp. And there we were, literally pushed out of the train because everyone wanted to get off and there was no patience for, for little. So I was thrown out of the, of the train from I don’t know how high it is. And we started walking and in front of me a little old Jew, very religious, with long beards and with a prayer shawl on the head and his wife next to him. And he had rickety knees and was waddling and with his tefillin, the prayer straps on his hands, on his hand and he was crying and, and moaning and all of a sudden he started saying that well, if God allows this, then there is no God. And he took his 2 prayer books and threw them away. And as a little child, I—they were fancy, they were, one was red which is called Merriam, a prayer Siddur, a prayer sequence for, for every day and for holy, for Shabbat and another Siddur which I picked it up. I have the Siddur. I still have today. The Merriam was lost. So, that kind of—I remember this as a very distinct memory. People have lost hope because we were treated at that point—we realized we were treated like animals. We were rounded into a large area, we had to dress up, women and men were separated. I went with my mother and we had to take shower. As it turns out, this was the trick that the Germans have used in other places. In retrospect, when I remember that, I have chills in my spine. We are told to take a shower, the dirty Jews have to take, have to take a shower, and we never saw our clothing, we were given some rags. And we went through an area where people registered and wrote our names down and from then on, we were heralded into barracks and, you know, 3, 4 beds, bunk beds, one on top of the other. I know we were there 3 days because my mother told me, but I became very ill, I had a very high temperature. I became bitten by so many bed bugs, my eyes got closed and I was sick. I don’t remember this period from then on. So when I remember the, have memories, or whatever happened later, we are in, in, in the school. I don’t remember getting into that school, how did it happen. And we were locked up in a school. This was a corner building on the corner of two streets, and the street was called Bishoff Gasse.

MP: Could you spell that? If you know.

AN: Bishoff. B-I-S-H-O-F-F. Gasse is the German name for the street. G-A-S-S-E, I believe. 12 Bishoff Gasse. And that’s where we were, and I was, we were allocated to one of the classrooms. It was filled with bunk beds, 3 or 4 stacked, and that’s where we were for the, for the entirety of time. My mother, grandma and grandpa, they were marched from there every morning. 5 o’clock, they had to get up and get going. They went to various parts [someone coughs] of Vienna and they were employed in physical labor, heavy physical labor to… the Allied forces by that time, it was ‘44, it was July, June, end of June, July ‘44, the Ally forces were bombing daily. Literally daily, and they have destroyed Vienna and brought it to, part of it to rubbles. Vienna is mostly a 3-story building city. There are some higher, but most of them. So the dwellings and the living quarters were all 3 stories. Well, they were all brought down to 1 story or 2 stories and my, my mother and grandparents, what they were doing, they are taking the bricks, breaking the houses down, and helping in the construction of the houses into 1 story living areas.

And I as a child have very unpleasant memories because I was bored to death. I did nothing. If we picked up papers and started writing, they would take them away from us. And I remember being hungry, I was hungry most of the time to the point that there were little children, there were, you know, 6 month, 7 month old, less than a year old, youngsters. For them, they brought into the, to the school every day, the Germans brought in something cooked in milk. It was white. How much milk was in it? Nobody knows. Anyway, whatever, we the older boys and we were some 15, 16 older boys. We stood up in the line and we waited after they gave it to the parents, whatever was left it was given to the children, the older children. But there was not enough for everybody so they alternated who stands, who’s allowed to stand first. So my favorite stories from that is, that it was not my turn to eat every day. Some people are impressed, some people are not, but when you’re not assured food every day, it’s tough for a child. You don’t understand why. I was 7 years old. You don’t know why it is happening. Those that worked were given on their way out to the, from the school were given a piece of a, a wurst. It’s some kind of a ground milk—eh, meat stuffed in a, in a holding. It’s sausage whatever they call it, sausage. Well, people say that these were mostly, what was mostly horse meat and…
AN: —back with somebody and they would give it to me. The problem was that I was still asleep. And many times by the time I would wake up, somebody would steal it and I wouldn’t have it. So the first couple of months were tough for me. We had a Nazi officer who was the führer, who was the, the leiter führer, the officer of the prisoners. And he would make rounds. And he figured out that we had one heating stove, which was a circular heating stove made out of circular pipes. But the pipes were sitting uneven, so you could put in a piece of wire and sneak on top of it a container with water. And sometimes we put our hands on a few potatoes and we were cooking them. And he knew that that’s what’s happening, so he would come by every morning and he would smell, is something cooking, if he would have, he would just kick the stove so that the waters full, fell off and the, the water would spill. It would put out the fire and it would spill the potatoes. So he had, this was his greatest satisfaction of the day. We hated him terribly for that.

This kind of stories I remember. Then, I had 2 episodes in which I became sick. At one time, I had some kind of infectious disease and the other time I had scarlatina. I had a very high fever. So they took me, and this is surprising because there were no hospitals there, there was no medical care. Nevertheless, evidently somebody was afraid that I will become infectious and I’ll infect everybody, so they took me out and they took me to a hospital. The hospital was a children’s hospital in Vienna and it was run by the nuns. And it turns out that I was the only Jewish child in that hospital. And the hospital, 2 or 3 pavilions, and it was all lined along with beds. And at the beginning I was in isolation, in a room that nobody came in. They, through the bottom of the door, they pushed in some food to me, then after 3—and I was in absolute isolation, you know, a child I hardly have learned a few words in German. I started learning little German, hardly could communicate. You are locked up for a whole day, all day long. Medication, they would come and give it to me, force me to swallow. So, I have, I have very, very frightened memories from that period of time. And then one day, they took me out and they put me in the large population, and I had a bed and was sleeping there. But I learned very quickly that every morning around 10, 10:30, the Allied forces would fly over and start bombarding. The sirens would sound and everybody would run to the shelter. And when I wanted to go into the shelter, I was kicked out. “Nicht fuer Hunden; nicht fuer verfluchte.” That means, “Not dogs, and not bloody or verfluchte, cursed Jews.”

So [phone rings] the bombardment went on and I was upstairs and I was in the, in that hospital room and I was roaming around and walking around and I, I was very upset that I was excluded and I was looked at as a pariah. I didn’t understand that, but as a child, you have feelings and I was in solitude. So what I did, I went on and those times the little children who would wet themselves, their bed was lined with a rubber sheet. So I would take those rubber sheets and tear them just to get some revenge for the, for… so then they realized that it was me and I was, and there was one particular one very angry, very nasty nun and she would yell at me very bad language in, in German. I don’t remember exactly. And she would flick me couple of times. And that turned out to be the daily routine, every day. So it was bombardments, I was not allowed into the shelter, there was no food to grab because the food was brought in and was taken out. So I couldn’t take food, I couldn’t take anything. And I took my revenge by tearing up the rubber sheets. I am, I’m not proud of it, but I feel that I did my own, my own share of, I tried to get in another time, a couple of other times into the shelter, but every single time they would kick me out. So, when finally they released me, they gave me, they mixed up my name with somebody. They gave me some clothes and that was too small on me. I couldn’t get dressed. So I had only underpants and some shirt and I walked, I don’t know, 3, 4, 5 kilometers in, in Vienna. It was still very cold outside.

MP: Were you alone or were there, there was someone who took you?
AN: No, someone, a grownup that took me. And I, my mother who already, who never didn’t know where was, where I was and what’s happening with me, they were very happy that they saw me coming back one morning. So I don’t and this one, several other… I was another time sick and was taken to another hospital, which was… the second time, I was taken to a Jewish hospital. There was a Jewish hospital that was allowed to function in Vienna. And I don’t know who ran it, but the, one of the male nurses that was there, we met him afterwards when we were liberated and he told the story to my mother and that’s how I heard it from her because I really don’t remember. My memories are from there that I was very afraid and I was shaking and they gave me some injections in the vein. And I remember one night had to get up and go to the bathroom. I was afraid somebody’s coming in from the, from the window of the bathroom, and kill me with a big knife. You know, as a child you have nightmares and fever and you don’t really know what is, what is happening. But these kind of memories stick with you and you have it for… I dare say forever.

Anyway, one day, and this was in April ‘45 by now, a group of younger people are brought into our [indistinct]. And they are telling us that they were forced labor people who are taken directly from the Russian front, into a prisoner, into a forced labor camp inside Austria. And as the Russians were advancing, they were liberated. And they thought that they have it good, the Russians were beaten back by the Germans and they were again captured and had to march several very, very long distance, I don’t remember how long. And they locked up and brought into our [indistinct]. And they, we had to, I had to give up my bed, I had to sleep in the bed with my mother because we had to give them place in our camp, in our, in our room. They told us that the Russians are coming, we will be liberated that they felt that the strengths of the Russian is so enormous and the Germans are not holding up. So then they built up our hope, but they told us that the minute we are being liberated, we have to start running and running into the Russian occupied area, so that if they are beaten back we should not be recaptured because we would be taken to Auschwitz. And that was the first time that the parents heard about Auschwitz. I wasn’t told—I was told about these things later. They spared me the—and  probably would not have understood a 7-year-old child does not understand everything, and these are such atrocious things that it’s difficult to comprehend, even as an adult.

MP: Could I stop you there? We’re supposed to switch off interviewers. [indistinct]

AN: Of course.

MP: Next up, Nathan.

Nathaniel Cain: So after—we left off, what happened next from, after the camp?

AN: Well, so I told you about the forced labor, Jewish forced labor prisoners who came and we and they encouraged us, they provided, they gave us an injection of hope because they had some contact with the outside world. And they told us to really run towards the Russian occupied area. So we started hearing bombardments, the, the daily raids went on. And at one time, during one raid, a, one of the bombs fell. They were attacking the Schönbrunn Palace. And everybody was amazed. Why do they attack the Schönbrunn Palace? Because that really was not, not a military target, and what’s the purpose of attacking gardens and palaces? We found out later why. But anyway, one of the bombs fell on the street and we were in the shelter. The shelter was the, the basement of that school. It was not built for providing shelter. And the wall caved in and we really had it tough that day. But luckily nothing happened and we survived that event.

MP: As these, as these bombs kept falling, what were the Nazis like? How were they acting?

AN: There were, there were 2 or 3 people guarding us.
MP: Okay.

AN: There was the camp, the camp commander that we hated him, and there were two others. I don’t know where they were, I don’t know where... the others, the, the second in command was nicer person. He gave, he was the one that he did not let them take away the food what was left from the babies and gave it to the younger children. And he would come constantly and see that whatever food was left was distributed between all the children that were there. So we kind of, were very, very fond of him. But unfortunate towards the end one day, he didn’t come back anymore. They told us that he was killed in one of these bombardments.

NC: How many people were in your group total, or do you think?

AN: The total I think there was, there were a hundred and forty. The Germans had very accurate record keeping. And I have a book, which, which is in Hungarian. I’ll tell you afterwards why the Hungarians promoted putting it together. And it’s called Tracks from Hell. And they describe, there is a list of, next time when you come, I will show it to you. There is a list of the number of people that were in each of the schools, how many men, women and children.

NC: Why do you think they kept such a close record?

AN: Recently a... I don’t remember the city, a huge archive was discovered which was off limits and finally recently it was opened for people to come and visit.

YN: Excuse me, I think it was Dresden.

AN: Dresden. I don’t—I don’t dare name a city because I don’t remember the name of the city where this archive was found. But anyway, this archive contained the list of almost every single Jew that was deportated from any of the places the Germans could put their hands on Jews. And they recorded the history and the events of every single person. It was important for some obscure and weird reason to keep records. You know, when they would shoot people, you see the Second World War movies that they standing with a video camera and recording it. Otherwise, you would not have this documentation. Now people say, “Oh no, these are a production and it’s movie.” Many of these are documentaries, so it should look—and there are documentaries of these events. For their own weird... [German word] is a concept, a German concept that order has to be, and you have to be accurate and keep record of every, every atrocity that you, you commit, and they went on and did it. So we’ll get back to that book when we talk about the history afterwards.

NC: You mentioned earlier that they bombed the palace. You said you were going to explain why. Would you mind explaining why?

AN: Well, when we—I’ll get into that.

NC: Alright.

AN: So, the bombadments became more intense and more frequent and we had that incident in which the cave, one of the walls of the, of the basement that we were sheltered there caved in. And then, the air bombardments stopped and for one day it was very quiet and we became very discouraged because we were afraid, we thought that they gave up on, on, on conquering Vienna. And then we started hearing what afterwards we were told were cannons. And cannon bombardment and that got louder every hour. It
got louder and louder and more frequent until it was a horrible sound. We couldn’t put up with it anymore. And again, we went down to the shelters. And then one early afternoon, it stopped. 3 days. 3 days and night, we heard the bombardment. That’s horrible experience to have when you are so exposed and you know that one of the places targeted is next to you, adjacent to you, the buildings inside the Palace and the, the building along the Palace. I don’t know if you’ll ever get to go to visit Vienna and see the Schönbrunn Palace.

So, that afternoon, when we, when the bombardments stopped and the shelling stopped, all of a sudden, one of these forced laborers that were with us said, “Hey you see there, there, there, there is, there is a Russian, a Russian soldier.” And then I went and looked out through the window and I saw a little human, I—we were on the second floor—I see a small man running with a machine gun and puff puff puff shooting. And we became very happy. We were elated, we were yelling and screaming and shouting. And then we saw more soldiers coming and what have you. So within, within an hour or two, we were washed by the advancing Russian soldiers and then tanks, we saw them, cannons being pulled behind us and trucks [indistinct]. So these people the, the laborers went out to, to scavenge and to pick up whatever they could. And they realized that what’s happening in the Schönbrunn Palace, which was only to do with red crosses on top to indicate a hospital. They were ammunition and tank factories. If you look at the Schönbrunn Palace as you come and visit it, it stands sideways, a huge palace. And I would say for 2-football field length, it’s lined on the side with buildings. All those buildings are those factories.

NC: Did they have Germans working in there or did they have Jews?

AN: I don’t know. I don’t know. By that time, the day, the day, the last day that the bombardments stopped and it was very quiet and the 2 Germans that were still watching us disappeared. We didn’t see any more Germans. And we don’t know what happened to them. So these people who came and gave us some hope, they were as guides to us, they said, “Everybody, go out and grab a cart.” You know nowadays, we track everything, but in 1944, ’45, the way to transfer things was with a cart. You would pull a cart and you, you pull whatever you needed. So my grandpa went and he stole a cart from somewhere and we loaded everything that we had. And early next morning, we went on the road. I was—they seated me in the, in the middle of the cart and Grandma was walking and whenever she could—she was the scavenger. She picked up little bits of food, what was left. I remember she picked up a large jar of some kind of sweet marmalade that kept us for a couple of days. And my mother and my grandpa pulled the little cart that we had our stuff on. And we started walking. I don’t know how they found their way, but they found their way somehow. Through the streets, we decided to go back to Budapest [clears throat] because we found out that Budapest already has been conquered by, occupied by the, by the Russians. So we wanted to get to create a distance from Vienna from the German frontier, to be behind the front that even if they retreat somewhat, we are not recaptured again. So now if you look at the distance, I think the distance between Budapest and Vienna is some 150 to 180 kilometers. It’s like from here to New York.

NC: You walked the whole way?

AN: Sorry, it’s 100 to New York, it’s a hundred, 80, 80 miles and the kilometers is 1.6 so it’s like 100 miles. I walked very rarely. I rode like a king, little king on the, on the cart that my mother and grandfather pulled. Not long beforehand, several month beforehand, I was released from the hospital. And I was told that I had some kind of a heart inflammation and kidney problem and they told my mother that I’m not allowed to do any exercises. So thank god whatever it was, I am here at the age of 77 and I’m still surviving that period. So, and, and these facts were afterwards reinforced by that male nurse that I mentioned that was in the Jewish hospital that he told mother that I had a very rapid pulse rate and they had to inject digoxin in the vein that time. That was the way they treated it. So whatever, I told mother that were imaginary fears and events, this gentleman validate it and told me that actually I remember facts. So that’s what we know from that period of time.
During the time that we walked from, it took us almost a week to walk that distance from Vienna to Budapest. It was the issue of the shelter because you know, at nighttime, this was, we were liberated April 15. And the night in, in those areas is quite cold. And we wanted to go and stay in little farm villages. So at one time we found a little house that we crowded in a couple of, couple of girls that were marching on the road. And then all of a sudden, another night, we found a larger farm and many people gathered there. And all of a sudden, one of them comes running and saying, “You know you should go, they told my mother you should go, they are rounding up women.” The Russian were saying, you know, “They liberated, we liberated you, we gave you your lives, you give us your women.” And they would take women. They would put them in trucks and haul them away for whatever you expect they would do. So we were afraid, and my mother and my little [indistinct] grandpa and grandma and I, we ran into the fields and we hid in the rows of potatoes. I don’t know, have you ever seen how they grow potatoes?

NC: No.

AN: Those times, they create little longitudinal mounds that the distance between mounds is a foot and a half or so, and the potatoes are seeded into the mounds. And then a big foliage grows out of it, so the mound is a foot high and the foliage is another foot high. So we have this large a, a hiding area, and there is the rows that are almost a foot and a half wide, so we were hiding in the rows in the field. And if somebody would come by, wouldn’t see you. From then on, we constantly slept in potato fields. That, that’s the thing that I remember.

Then, when we neared Budapest, somehow somebody allowed us to get on their, Grandpa gave them the cart that we had, because that was a valuable item that he stole. And it was a mode of transportation, and they had a, a carriage driven by 2 horses. And they allowed us to ride for, for a day in the, in their horse drawn carriage into Budapest. In Budapest at that time, the Jewish agency was already active. And they would provide shelter. So I don’t remember, they gave us shelter in someplace and we were there for a couple of days. They gave us food and some clothing and all this stuff. And that I remember it was the time that I really stopped being hungry because you know, Grandma was, as we were moving and marching, she would go into these little peasants, and some would give some food and some would say they don’t have any, we don’t have any even for us. And she was not the only beggar, there were others.

So, but when we got to Budapest we finally were, I stopped being hungry. I don’t know what my parents had—

[video cuts]

AN: —help, with some financial help, we got to the point that we went back to Debrecen and that was a very bitter pill to swallow because we knew that we have a house in Debrecen and we looked forward seeing it. We got off the train and we went to our house and it turns out that this was the only house that was totally bombarded. Totally bombarded out, off. It was the only house in the entire street in Debrecen that was destroyed in this fashion. And in the basement, my mother had a large amount of coal for the winter that we purchased and constantly you keep the coal in the basement and you fed it up, and you, that’s what you heat your house with in these warm fireplaces. That kept burning after the bombardment and burned for days and then everything, everything was left from bombardments was burned down. So we have been left with literally nothing. And that was very difficult to, to swallow. Again, I remember that the Jewish charities and the, whatever the American organizations had housing apartment, and we got one room and the 4 of us were in one relatively clean room with shower and, and bathroom at the end of the corridor and we thought that we are in the 5-star hotel. So, that, that’s, that’s the liberation. Very quickly, the environment in Debrecen turned out to be not very pleasant. And evidently, my grandpa inquired and wrote and spoke some people from the village where we originally came from Gheorgheni
and the parents decided that we are going back. We joined another family and I don’t know where the money came from it, but we managed to this time rent a cattle wagon and put all our belongings and they were 3 or 4 and we were 4 and all of us, we attached that cattle wagon, you know, you tie it up and make arrangements, and it was drawn from Debrecen all the way to, back to Gheorgheni.

NC: Why did you decide to go back?

AN: Why?

NC: Mhmm.

AN: My grandpa realized that some of the factory is still existing. At least the, the grounds and that there’s some value. And he hoped to gain some financial advantage, either rebuild it or what have you. Well, we came back and the factory was in ruins. Everything that could be stolen and robbed was robbed and even the wood planks that were used to make fans around, around the, the 10 acres that was his field. You know, the dip off where you kept the wood, and everything was stolen, they stole everything. And for a short time, we rented an apartment with one of the peasants and we lived together. I remember that period of time as being not very, very pleasant. Nobody needed me. I was a nuisance. The parents were, were eager to find, my mother and grandpa, grandma means of, and ways of living, of organizing their lives. There was no income. And then [clears throat] my mother met again a friend of ours, they used to live in that village, township, Gheorgheni. And I remember him, too, because our families were friends. He had a wife and 2 children and they were killed in Auschwitz. And my mother and him remarried and I was de facto adopted by this man, and then I moved to live with him.

NC: Excuse me, how old were you at this time?

AN: I was 7, 8. So, in this village before the war, there were roughly a thousand Jews. I told you, there were 12,000 inhabitants and a thousand of them were Jews and there was a nice synagogue. When we came back, the synagogue was soiled, ravaged. It turns out that the Hungarians and the Germans and afterwards the Russians kept the horses in the synagogue, inside the synagogue and used the synagogue as a stable. And everybody was pointing at me when I was walking in the street ‘cause I was the only child that came back the town. None of the children that were taken to the concentration camps came back because they were all gassed. The minute they arrived, children and pregnant women and somewhat all the people beyond 50 were all sent to the gas chambers. And then we realized that 2 of my, my, my paternal grandfather and 2 of my uncles died in Auschwitz as well. And my mother’s brother and the youngest brother of my father, they were taken to Auschwitz as well and they came back. And they told us the stories and the things that have happened, what have you.

So slowly, my stepfather’s family had some land and they owned a alcohol production factory. They would manufacture alcohol from wheat and there was no wheat to buy after the, the Second World War, so they would buy potatoes and they, at the beginning, they made the alcohol from potatoes. And there was a house, a 2-story house, that moved in and we lived in 3 rooms of a 2-story house. There was the living room, the parents’ bedroom, and the kitchen. So, and my grandfather somehow managed to sell the land of the factory, and he received an enormous amount of money, which was 72 million Romanian money at that time. You know, Transylvania went to become Romania, which I forgot to mention it after the war. It became [noise disrupts] Romania. So at that time, the currency was lei. The lei which is the single was worth probably less than a tenth of a penny today.

NC: Could you please spell that, how do you spell the currency? Lei?

AN: Lei. L-E-I. [clears throat] Singular, L-E-U.
NC: Okay.

AN: Like Leon.

NC: Thank you.

AN: So it was literally worthless. So, that helped their existence and our subsistence and I was living with my mother and my stepfather. Well, the communist regime came into town. You know, Romania was conquered by the Russians and slowly ‘45, ‘46, the communism started to be organized, and I don’t know what you know about the values of the communism, but they have very strange values. So, landowners are called kulaks because people who owned the lands, they were the bad element. They supposedly exploited the peasants and they lived off of their sweat and toil and blood. So the kulaks had to be punished. Because my stepfather’s family owned lands, and which they were growing the wheat and the, the maize to make the alcohol, they were landowners. I was declared again, kulak. I, my mother, stepfather and I became a kulak’s family. Well, the privileges of the kulaks were to be nationalized. Everything that we had was nationalized. We were crowded into the kitchen, the house was taken away from us, somebody threw us through the kitchen door some clothing and 2 mattresses. At that time, we had a maid that was living with us and in a small room adjacent to the kitchen. So they left her with us for 2, 3 days to spy on us, to hear what mother and father are, stepfather are discussing between them, where we hid our wealth, which was nonexistent. So we are very bitter because we said that not only did we suffer the, the, the German and the Nazi deportation and all those atrocities, and we survived, and now we are again submitted to this ugly treatment. They became very upset with us that we are calling the communist Nazis and, and, and the same. It was a very tense situation. We were locked in that kitchen for 2 weeks. And then, we were chased away from there and my father and my mother found, we went to live somewhere and I know exactly where it is, in a long tenement house, one level and its end had 2 rooms and a bathroom in between. So that’s where we lived. I went to school, I went back to the same school that… oh no, I wasn’t there. This was the first class that I went, I went to the gymnasium, this was a beautiful gymnasium. There is a beautiful building. It’s a 3-story high school which—

[tape switches to cell phone video]

AN: —classrooms and I enjoyed the fact that I can, that I can… beforehand, I was sent to the 4th year of elementary into a Romanian classroom. So I spoke Hungarian. I didn’t know a word of Romanian. And by Christmas, I learned enough Romanian that I could talk with them and I could benefit from the education.

NC: How many kids were in your class?

AN: Oh, the classes were quite large, some 30 kids.

NC: How many Jews were in the class?

AN: I was the only Jew.

NC: You were the only one?

AN: I was the only Jew. I was the only Jew because I was the only Jew that came back and…

NC: What did you think of that?
AN: Pardon me?

NC: What did you think of that, of being the only Jew in the class?

AN: I didn’t think too much of it until one time somebody flicked me in the face and called me mister Jew. So, I was very upset and I cried. And one time, I remember walking on the street with my mother and then my stepfather, and I saw that kid and I ran and hit him because I felt very strong that my parents are next to me.

NC: What happened after you hit him?

AN: After I hit, my stepfather beat me because I was not supposed to do those things because they felt threatened that I am… another time, you know, we didn’t have too much clothing and some of them put their hands on a, on a longer winter coat of a soldier’s winter coat. This was the khaki colored felt, but it was felt. It was very thick. And out of that, they gave it to a tailor and he made me a suit, pants and a coat, a jacket, a, a better dressed up jacket. And I was walking in this from, I was, from where we lived to the school and the police officer stopped me and, “You know, you’re arrested. You’re not a soldier. You cannot walk in soldier’s clothing.” So they didn’t know, but they recognized that as a military uniform so they took me to the police station and they recognized me because I was the son of a kulak. I forgot to mention to you that the privilege of being a kulak is that every Sunday morning, you have to present yourself at the police station and you had to stand there at attention until they registered you and that you were there. You were not allowed to leave town, and you were not allowed to do this or not allowed to do that, again, the same things that we remember from the, the German era. So, they recognized me as the son, as a Jew kulak’s son and they took me home and they told my mother to take off that military uniform and I cannot parade anymore in military uniform.

So these kind of, these kind of—I remember in the history class, I wasn’t very good with history. And I would get very, very bad grades in history and there was a history teacher who was uttering constantly some slang anti-Semitic remarks like, the Jews should know, the Jews should this, the Jews should that. And I couldn’t say anything. And this guy literally had the pleasure of persecuting me as being a Jew. So one day, you know, you got your homework, you have to study. It was, I had to learn about Pericles. It’s one of the Greek fighters and the ancient history. So I spent all evening and almost learned by heart, and he says, “Who wants to come up front?” You had to go up to the podium where the teacher stands and you had to answer his questions and you had to tell the story that you were supposed to say. So I raised my hand, and I walked into the [indistinct], to the front of the class and I told a story and I was so proud. “So okay, to get a good grade, you have to tell me what was before.” And he start asking me past chapters and I knew nothing. I couldn’t know. “So you don’t know anything? You don’t know, the Jews don’t know anything.” And he gave me 4. 4 was the Romanian grade of failure. The grades went from 1 to 4. 1 was very good and 4, which we nicknamed the chair, was the failing grade. So I got a failing grade in history. So, I, you’re asking me what are my memories, these are my memories. So my, before we were nationalized and became kulaks, my stepfather managed to reorganize the house and the factory, rebuild it, get it running. And in the backyard there was a small brook going by, and we had fruit trees and tall, poplar trees. So it was a beautiful place for a child to roam and run around, and I enjoyed the place, but unfortunately it lasted only one year.

NC: Why did it only last one year?

AN: Because we were chased away from there. We were declared as kulaks. We were nationalized. We were taken, we were told to leave the place because that becomes the property of the Republic. The Popular Republic of Romania. And then somehow, the Israeli movements, youth movements, started to penetrate and we heard about the possibility of children being helped and taken to Israel. So that was in
'46 and '47. And somebody came and they gave us some short history lectures on, on Israel, but we had to do it in a clandestine fashion. We would go out in the woods and we would sit and we would talk and tell stories, and it was kind of hoping that next year by February, they would, I would join this group and we would go to Israel. Well, it never happened, and somewhere it’s good it never happened because many of these attempts to bring young children without parents to Israel ended up in tragedies. So in 1949, Ana Pauker—she was a Jewish Communist woman who was for a long period of time in prison for being a communist. She became the minister of foreign affairs in Romania. And she come back with some negotiations with the American Jewish agency that she would act in behest of the Jews in Romania would allow Jews to leave Romania and in exchange of every single Jew that leaves Romania to immigrate to Israel, they would get a certain amount of dollars and American military products. It reminds me of the same thing that Eijkman tried to organize and arrange with the Jews and that’s why he allowed us to be transported to Vienna because he was in negotiations at that time with the Jewish agency, the Jewish agency will give you trucks and in exchange of that we will show them how nicely we treat our Jews.

NC: What did your family think of that?

AN: Well, in retrospect, we didn’t know that, but what do you expect that we would think about? We thought it was a very, very another atrocity. But, at that time, when Ana Pauker arranged this exchange, we were very happy so, you know, we had to go to the police station every Sunday, we could not leave. But Grandma and Grandpa, they were not kulaks, so they were not, they applied for, they called it a document of travel. And they were allowed to leave in ‘49, they were allowed to leave Romania and immigrate to Israel. And we continued to live another year in Gheorgheni until somehow the authorities decided that they want some more money and they allowed us kulaks to apply for immigration and they gave us a document of travel. Well, the document of travel, the piece of paper, that’s not a passport, it’s a one-way ticket to the moon. One-way travel ticket with no rights to return with renouncing the Romanian citizenship. So the minute you opened the piece of paper and you step on the boat, then you become a nobody because you don’t have a country. You renounced the Romanian citizenship. Romania is no longer obligated to protect you. Well, and they allowed you to depart Romania. Well, the port to depart Romania at that time was Constanța. That’s the only maritime port that Romania has in the Black Sea.

NC: Could you spell that please?

AN: Constanța, C-O-N-S-T-A-N-T-A. The Romanians pronounce tsa with a curvy thing under, so the second T has a curvy apostrophe underneath. And that’s pronounced tsa. Constanța, in the Black Sea. So there was a boat, a, probably it could accommodate 1,000 travelers, and we boarded that boat. But the thing is that beforehand, you know they tortured us to no end. We could take with us 70 kilograms a person, you know, so 140 pounds per person, what can you take, there’s the clothing and some household items. We were immigrating to a new country that you knew that in 1950 is a poor country. You have nothing. You have to live in tents because Israel at that time was invaded by very large number of European refugees and the shelter in Israel was a tent. We lived in a tent and you had nothing and no money. You were not allowed to take with you currency, you were not allowed to take with you jewelry. You were—you had to deposit and leave behind gold, or silver, or any precious stones. They searched us. Anyway, so, my stepfather went to a carpenter who made one large case made of very, very thick wood because they figured out that if we can sell the wood in Israel, that’s going to be a very expensive and desirable item. And you fill it with clothing and household items. And it was weighted and it had to be less than 200 kilograms because it was nearing 210 kilograms then the Romanians would take things out and throw them away. And we boarded the, that ship and we traveled for 3 days to Israel.

NC: I think we’ll stop there and save Israel for next time, if that’s okay.

MP: Probably, ‘cause we still have a whole another interview to talk about Israel and—

[End of Interview 2.1]