

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Agnes Grossman Aranyi
July 18, 1990
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PREFACE

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AGNES GROSSMAN ARANYI
July 18, 1990

Q: Will you tell me your full name please?

A: My name is Agnes Grossman Aranyi.

Q: Where and when were you born?

A: I was born in Budapest, Hungary, May 2nd, 1936.

Q: Will you tell us something about your family?

A: I actually had a large extended family, but the nuclear family only consisted of my mother, my father and myself.

Q: What did your father do?

A: My father...I uh...he was in the textile business. He was a merchant of sorts. He really didn't have a shop. He worked out of the house. I really never understood what he actually did, but he was selling uh cloth. He was...I guess in between a wholesaler and a retailer...a middle man, and he worked out of the home a lot. He was a salesman basically I think. And my mother, of course, those days she was a housewife when I was first born, but of course when my father uh was drafted in the forced labor camp, she had to take over my father's business and then after the war subsequently she had a jewelry store and uh after the communists took over she went to work for the government.

Q: What was your childhood, your early, very early childhood like before the Nazis?

A: I have a very very few recollections of my early childhood. Actually I uh just remember flashbacks of my father who was...uh started to go away in 1939 and kept being drafted in forced labor camps and uh he began...he began to disappear for three to six months and then it became longer and longer. When they would draft him, it would take eight, nine months before he would return and then one time he was away for ten months, and finally in 1942, that was the last time he was drafted and he never came back. And uh remembering my mother who was a very bright woman and was able to take over and be the head of the family...I don't mean just the nuclear family but head of the extended family. In fact she was instrumental saving my grandmother and myself and a lot of my cousins during uh the war and the Nazi occupation. I remember that the whole family used to gather at my house and we used to have Friday night and Saturday night dinners at my house and uh maybe because my grandmother was living with us, that so...we were the gathering place for the whole family, and that's what happened. That's what I remember. I have pretty good memories of trips. We used to have a lake, Lake _____. We used to go there in the summers and it was just a very...what I remember was a very

uncomplicated, very nice life before my father left in 1942.

Q: What do you remember about uh school, playmates, friends during that period?

A: Actually I don't remember an awful lot. I remember that about 1940 we used to have quite an elegant apartment in the middle of the city and I remember that the Nazi party decided to have their headquarters there, and uh we were evicted from the apartment and we had a hard time finding another apartment being Jews and finally we found a less elegant but an OK apartment uh in a in another part of the city and I remember asking my mother to take the walls with us because I really was very happy in that particular apartment, but we were evicted and we moved into a much smaller apartment and uh we were there until uh the Nazis occupied Hungary.

Q: OK. Tell us, if you would, you started talked about 1940. So let's go on. Let's...tell me, as the war broke out indeed, uh in addition to the move, what happened to you, to your family?

A: Well, in uh...as I remember and the dates may escape me...as I remember 1944 when all our troubles...

Q: Let's let's back up a bit. Let's stick with, if we could...I don't want to jump to 1944 just yet. Let's let's talk a little about 1940, '41, and '42...the the early years. What, what was your life like? What did you as a child do to _____?

A: I think the early years were comfortable years for me in spite of my father not being there. I uh remember uh good times with my extended family. I remember vacations. I remember having a German governess whom I couldn't stand, whom I had to go out uh walks with and the lady only spoke German to me and I had to answer her in German and I did not like her and I did not like the idea not being with my mother who had to work, but having some other people taking care of me. But I don't remember anything horrendous from these early years. I have to add that my mother had two brothers, and they were also taken to forced labor camps and they never returned, but the early years when uh my father kept coming back and we had the extended family around, they were fairly happy times.

Q: What did you for school? Let's talk a little about.....?

A: In uh...I was four years old in 1940. I remember going to nursery school - '40, '41, and then I started first grade in the Jewish school in Hungary in 1942 when I was six years old, and uh that was uh...I remember that being a good year. However the following year I remember in the second grade we only went to school for two, three months, and I thought that was terrific (laughter) because then the war broke out and we stopped going to school. But uh actually the early years in Hungary for the Hungarian Jews were fairly pleasant, uh if I remember correctly as a child. I was also thinking being an only child

and my cousins being only children, the families really could not, did not feel comfortable having more children because they could see the handwriting on the wall, and my mother herself decided to have an abortion. She told me that later, because she just couldn't bring another Jewish child to this world, our crazy mixed-up world as it was. But the early years as far as I was concerned were pleasant and they were alright. The difficulties started when we had to start wearing the yellow star. That really, my self-esteem just plummeted and that was a very difficult period when a big yellow star was on a young child with uh the inscription of Jude, which meant I guess in German, Jewish. And then that was already beginning of being marked as being different and less...oh what's the word I want to use...maybe not quite as competent as the other children were.

Q: Go on and tell us about that. Tell us more about those years as things now began to be very difficult.

A: Yeah. Things are begi...began to unfold at this point. We started to wear the Jewish star and we also had to be at the apartment at a certain time. There was a curfew, but we still were able to go out and go shopping and buy food with uh the Jewish star on. We had to wear the Jewish star all the time whenever we left the apartment. It was sewn on our clothing, and we were marked as being different from the mainstream and psychologically I'm sure I really suffered from this distinction. And then afterwards uh we were told we had to leave our second apartment because we had to move to a house which was designated for Jews, and of course we left all our furniture at the apartment and just took a few belongings and moved over to a house which was designated to be a Jewish house where Jews could live at that point. And uh we moved in with a sister of my father's, my paternal aunt. There was my grandfather, my aunt and her two children in one room, and my grandmother and my mother and I in another room. It was a two room apartment, and we had to...we were there for a few months. I really can't remember how many months it was, but we were there for a few months and that's when things were starting to really get bad for us. First of all, we had very little food. When uh there were a lot of air raids we had to rush down to the cellar. At times we just didn't even bother to go. My mother says if we have to go ____, we'll just go, and that's when things really started to go downhill. I remember a couple of episodes which are quite painful while we were living there. Well, my mother several times was rounded up and she had to march to different factories where the Jewish women were collected and were sent to Auschwitz, and for one reason or another she was always able to come back, but as a child the fear was just tremendous. If she's not going to come back, who's going to take care of me. I felt very very very lonely at those days and very isolated, and I remember also the whole family once was rounded up uh downstairs and then we were...something happened. We were able to go back to the apartment. Another painful episode was when my mother was rounded up and uh she decided that she's not going to go to the meeting place and she was all dressed in heavy winter suits. In Hungary the winters were quite severe, and heavy boots and heavy winter clothes. She was all dressed up and she decided just to go bed with her clothing on, and uh uh she said whatever happens, happens. She's just not going to go and what happened, a German soldier came up to the apartment looking

around, making sure that all the young women were downstairs and ready to go to camps, and my mother was covered up in the bed and I was with my mother and I lied to the soldier. I told the soldier that my mother was sick and she could not go anywhere and she couldn't move, and I told the soldier...as a child I learned survival skills very early on...I told the soldier I have a doctor's certificate. If you just wait a minute I will get the doctor's certificate for you. Six years old and uh...seven maybe. And uh what happened was that uh...there was no doctor's certificate of course...I kept looking and looking and opening drawers and started to really search for the doctor's certificate and the German soldier who could have been sixteen years as I was told, just left. He could have shot us. He could have forced my mother to go, but by the stroke of luck he just left so I was told that I saved my mother's life at that point, which was probably true. But I also lived with that the rest of my life...that I am able to save people. And uh after that there were more roundups of Jews and the janitor one time who was a Christian woman my mother befriended...befriended and of course she also kept happy with various pieces of jewelry, came up to the apartment to tell us that now you just have to go. This is it. Everybody's going to be taken to the camps, and you just have to disappear. Well, we didn't know what to do at this point and somehow or other...this is where Wallenberg comes into the picture. Somehow or other we got a _____ they called. Somehow that afternoon my mother paid somebody off or somebody was willing to help. We got a _____ to be able to go to a Swedish house, but of course by the time the _____ arrived, mysteriously arrived, we couldn't go out anymore with our Jewish stars because it was after the curfew and we knew the next morning everybody's going to be taken, rounded up and taken to the camps from this particular Jewish house, so somehow they got this Christian woman who after the war turned out to be Jewish herself, working at the underground...somehow they got this Christian woman to come and take us to the Swedish house. We had the _____ but that of course didn't mean very much, but we were able to...this woman came and uh we took, we tore our yellow stars off and uh pretended we were Christians, and I remember to this day, I never forget that, that this young woman who came to get us and my mother who was also fairly young at the time, and myself, without the Jewish star started walking. It seemed to me that we walked four or five hours. We we probably only walked a half an hour to forty-five minutes, and I remember these two young women started, when the soldiers would come up, these two young women started flirting with the German soldiers and I also remember them speaking German, not Hungarian, during this journey. Of course we didn't have any belongings. My mother had a pocketbook. I had nothing, and the trio was just walked while this the young women were flirt...flirting with the soldiers and somehow we got to the Swedish house. We had a hard time getting into the house, because the janitor did not want to get...let us in, but uh the women were able to convince the janitor in the Swedish house that we did have the documents and we belonged to the Swedish house and we're going to be...we are entitled to go in. So what happened they finally let us in. We arrived at the Swedish house and uh we went into an apartment. It was full of people. I remember it was a two bedroom, two room or two bedroom apartment...I can't remember that...but we...people on all on people...it was just a horribly busy place. I...if I remember correctly there were sixty people in this little apartment with _____ and of course they weren't very happy that three additional persons

arrived, but they did let us in and uh we made a little nitch in the corner somewhere and we went to sleep at that point. It was a very...it...I remem...I can't remember whether we were sleeping on mattresses or just on the floor but we were so tired and emotionally exhausted that it didn't matter. We had a safe, quote safe unquote place to put our heads down. Somehow my mother...we stayed there for could be a month to six weeks in this apartment, and it was pretty exciting because people were coming and going. We would listen to...play wegie (ph) boards of what's coming. We would listen to the the American broadcasts and uh somehow the rest of my family one by one found out that we were in the Swedish house, my mother and I, and my cousins kept coming and since my mother told them since she had the _____ it belonged to the whole family, so she managed to have all my cousins come and stay with us in the Swedish house and I think she paid somebody off because my grandmother appeared on the scene who was at that time in her late seventies, and somehow somebody brought my grandmother over. Since we had this uh ____ she could come with us as well and uh she had the prime place in the apartment. She would sleep in the bathtub because that was the only bed in this whole apartment, and since uh she was the oldest person, she was able to stay with us for a while. I need to take a glass of water now.

Q: We'll pause for a minute.

PAUSE - TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: We're talking about your grandmother and the....

A: Right. Right. We were in this...I was one of the Wallenberg kids. Because of Wallenberg, I was able to stay in this Swedish house. I was able to have the _____ as we all know today didn't mean anything, but in those days in Hungary it meant an awful lot because it did get uh a person into a protected environment, a seemingly protected environment where people could just stay for a while and I...really and truly I know more about Wallenberg since I've been in America. I had no idea who he was in Hungary, and uh but our happiness in the Swedish house did not last for an awful long time because uh finally the Germans decided that they're going to invade the Swedish houses, so they came in after a while and rounded us up and marched us to the ghetto. The march for me...

Q: What was that...excuse me...what was it like? Can you tell us what that scene was like when the Nazis came?

A: Very frightening, very...didn't understand what happened. Could not comprehend that we were in a protected house...how can they round us up and invade us. It was a very very frightening experience, but of course none of the Jews had any repence or probably even if they did have any they couldn't have fought off the German army, so we had to be obedient and do whatever we were told and survival depended on our obedience we felt at that point. So when they rounded us up to take us to the ghetto, they marched in and we had to leave again all our belongings. We had ten minutes to pack our stuff and leave.

I was uh...my mother and my grandmother, myself were getting ready to go on this march which again as a child it seemed to me was endless. I was in charge of the photo albums, to carry them to the ghetto and my mother carried of course whatever she could and my grandmother could never carry anything. She had heart problems and she hardly could walk. During this march they were shouting and shooting at Jews and we would just step over corpses like it was nothing. We just were psychologically numb and we were just walking around, walking along and did what we were supposed to do and I I dropped a photo albums and that's why I have very few photographs left before the war era and uh my mother yelled at me not to stop and bend over and pick them up. I can, in my mind's eye I can still see those pictures all over the street, and uh I just had to leave them and march on. We were marching on for a little while, and then my grandmother said during the march...and this was really my most frightening experience in the war...my grandmother said she couldn't walk anymore, so the whole transport, the whole group had to stop. It was about two hundred people in this march, so everybody had to stop and the German soldiers came and told us that they're going to shoot my grandmother. She's too old. She can't march. They're just going to shoot her to death, and we should all go on, and my mother said she's not going to go. If they're going to shoot my grandmother, let her let them shoot us all and we're just not going to leave an old lady. But I remember the guns pointing at my grandmother and subsequently the guns pointing at me and my mother and they were ready to shoot us, but then my mother saw a child in a stroller and we were so so...we we hardly have had any food at this point so we were all so thin that uh she picked up my grandmother and put her in the stroller and took the child out of the stroller, put my grandmother in the stroller and we marched on. And we got away with it. So what happened, when we had to go to the ghetto my grandmother was wheeled in a stroller into the ghetto, and we all made it. But I'll never forget that scene and I'm still very frightened of any kind of violence and any kinds of guns because of this experience. It's just...when a young child has a gun pointed at her...just something happens and one never gets over this experience. But anyway, we were able to march into the ghetto and everybody was able to...everybody survived at that point and uh we did march into the ghetto. Of course the circumstances were terrible. I had lice all over me, not just in my hair. Body lice. We couldn't bathe. We couldn't eat and we were in the ghetto for about two weeks before the Russians came in, and what I had heard about uh...the ghetto days are very hazy as far as I'm concerned because I kept fainting from the lack of food and my mother told me that I didn't have food for three, four days before the Russians came to liberate, so my recollection of the ghetto days are very hazy. I remember being in downstairs in a cellar sitting and not having any food and I remember other Jews eating chocolate while I was just starving and I had no food at all and nobody ever offered us some food, so it wasn't...it was survival of the fittest. It wasn't really let's all survive, at that point and again I think because of Wallenberg...the ghetto was undermined and we were going to be blown up at any minute, but I think because of Wallenberg we were saved and the Russians did...of course there were a lot of air raids and a lot of fighting, but we were so happy to hear the guns because we knew that liberation couldn't be too far off. And that's how I survived those years.

Q: Tell us, tell us what happened at liberation...what was it like and what did you and your family do?

A: What I remember of liberation...the Russian soldiers came into the bunker and uh somehow a few hours later there was some muddied soup which they gave to all the survivors. We got some food at last and little by little we were able to...I mean after being really singled out as Jews, able to be free and take our yellow stars off was just a very exhilarating, exciting and frightening moment at the same time. But little by little life got back. Of course we still didn't have food, but it was easier to obtain some foods later on and we were able to get back to our apartments and uh try to resume life, and life was very difficult after...between 1948...'45 and 1956. I lived under the Russian oppression for about ten years and again food was very scarce. It wasn't very fashionable to be Jews again and in fact I had to change...in order to obtain a job...college was out of the question for me because I came from a capitalistic society and uh it was really out of the question for me. I had to change my name. I did attend a Jewish high school, Jewish school and Jewish high school and uh I was singled out again as a Jew. I had to change my name from Grossman to _____, which was a Hungarian name so I wouldn't be singled out as a Jew and I remember having very little food in those years as well. Food was always a problem. (Laughter) And the survival...we really didn't have the...what we really needed. We had a very...we had an apartment. Sometimes we didn't have fuel. We didn't have food. I remember it was sin to have any napoleons (ph), uh gold coins, so we were so afraid of deportation that my mother flushed a couple gold coins down on the toilet because we were so afraid that if they, if we're going to be found out we're going to have to go outside of the city and...uh I'm struggling for the wor...word...I don't know what happened with capitalists during the communist uh regime. They were forced to leave their apartments and they got a sub-standard apartment in the country and they had to survive the best they could there. So we didn't want that to happen to us and that's why we flushed those gold coins down the toilet. I'll never forget that. And uh again life was very difficult, being singled out as Jews, so when the revolution came about in 1956, we were very happy to be able to leave Hungary.

PAUSE - TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: Tell us about that escape.

A: Since I uh lived with the idea that my father would have been alive if my mother did not want to stay with her family but left for America in 1938, I subconsciously knew that when the opportunity rises, I'd best leave Hungary. So in 1956 during the revolution, I was then twenty years old and I had a Hungarian fiance who was also a survivor. He was hidden during uh the war years. I uh...it was really my decision to leave the country and escape. Of course 1956...I experienced another war during the revolution and again we were sitting in the bunker. We were sitting in the cellar and uh the Russian tanks came in and there were a lot of shooting, a lot of killing. Again we would step over corpses. I mean it was psychologically numbing again. Survival was the main thing during those

revolutionary years. My husband then was a college student in Hungary so he partook in some of the demonstrations and uh we decided after, when the Russians came back, we were best to escape Hungary. Of course by then we both were survivors. We knew how to survive, so we took a train to as close to the border as possible when we decided to leave and uh we stayed with some peasants near the border until we found a guide who could led us over the border. The borders were watched by Hungarian and Russian soldiers and uh it was very difficult to escape. Again we had to...oh we found this...I'm getting a little fuzzy here. The memories are just rushing back into my head. We escaped with my cousin and her husband and two small children ages three and five. And uh what happened was that the kids were scared and crying, so before when we paid off the guards in order to get across the border, we had to get some rum and had to give it to the kids so the kids were drunk and fell asleep and my husband carried uh one kid and uh the kid's father carried another kid. We had to walk in the snow. The winter's are very difficult and heavy in Hungary and we dark winter clothing on and we had to walk in this dark clothing in the snow at night to be inconspicuous. When the Russian or the Hungarian soldiers were shooting at us, we had to lie down in the snow with our dark winter clothing in order not to be seen. We walked across...we had to walk a good twenty miles until we got to the border and the walk again was very very frightening. It was like deja vue. What happened as we were marching uh to escape...to go to the ghetto, because they were shooting us at us from watch towers and we had to know where to walk, where the border wasn't undermined. Finally we got to a creek which led us to Austria and this is where I just knew I'll never make it. I was just ready to give up and die. I was so tired after...and scared...after walking for several hours at night in the snow that I was just ready to give up. There was a log between uh Austria and Hungary and people walked across the log but I wasn't coordinated enough and I wasn't...I was so tired I knew I'll never make it. So finally people told me to sit on that log and I was able to just crawl over to Austria on that log, and I was very fortunate because we made it over. A lot of people were taken back to Budapest. They could not escape, but we were again very fortunate to be able to manage to get out.

Q: Indeed. What did you do when you got to Austria?

A: Well, in Austria we stayed in uh...subsequently we went to Salzburg and a Jewish organization was very good. They put us in a hotel, the Pathenon really, and we stayed in the Pathenon for two, three weeks, trying to come to America. We were planning to go to Australia, but there was a real iron curtain in Hungary. We had no news from the west at all, and we thought Australia would be wonderful because we would be as far from Europe as we could be, so we decided to go to Australia. But my husband had a relative who sent us a telegram from France...don't go to Australia. Go to America. Life is good there. So OK. We decided to go to America. This is how the decision was made. And uh however we were applying to come to America but the American Jews, the HIAS organization didn't want us because they didn't want to be responsible for us and they turned us down. Finally we were able to find an organization which brought over three thousand refugees regardless of religion, and this was the Tolstoy (ph), the granddaughter

of Leo Tolstoy had an organization bringing refugees over and uh by the Tolstoy organizations we were able to come to America. And again of course we felt very alienated and not belonging and it usually takes an immigrant five years to really get into the mainstream, to learn the language, to learn the culture, to learn the customs, so again we had to forget and relearn new ways of relating to people and new...uh how to live in a new land.

Q: What was your adjustment to America like?

A: I had a very difficult time. I didn't expect all this difficulty, but I...thinking back I think I was pretty depressed. I felt alienated. I didn't speak the language. I didn't have any skills then. I didn't have any education then. I used to...uh the early years were very difficult. I...after arriving...upon arriving to America we were sent to Camp Kilmer (ph), and at Camp Kilmer they were sending uh people all over the country and we were told that we should go to Norfolk, Virginia because they, the Jewish community wanted some refugees there and we spoke some English. It will be a good place for us. So we moved to No...so we said fine. We'll go anywhere. We didn't care. We didn't know anything about anything, so we went to Norfolk which is a southern town, not really wonderful for an immigrant, but uh the reason we went there because they told my husband that he could finish his schooling. He was an architectural student. We moved to Norfolk. There were no school of architecture. So we had to move on. We moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, where he did finally finish his schooling and I was working at Woolworth's in Raleigh, North Carolina, really not speaking English very well and not being able to...I really wasn't employable. And so the early years were very difficult for me, and uh learning a language, learning a culture...it takes a good five years for a person to really feel at home in a new country.

Q: Thank you. Is there anything you want to add?

A: I don't know. I think when I go home I'll remember a thousand other things to add, but right now I think this is my story.

Q: What do you think the effect of the Holocaust has been?

A: This is a difficult question to answer. I've been struggling with it for fifty years. (Laughter) My self-esteem was non-existent. I had to really work on developing some sense of worth. I think that sense of worth...I think that's what's the...I felt less than equal for years because of the Holocaust, because of escaping of Hungary. I had a very very...I think the biggest problem is that you just don't feel quite as good as the other guy. I think that was one of the major problems. Until you really feel good about yourself and who you are and you can accept who you are, it's just very difficult. Self-esteem is the name of the game I think. And that was really just can't and it just negated who I was, what I was all about. I was very ashamed of who I was. I didn't feel good about myself...for a long time.

Q: Tell us what you're doing now.

A: Well, I became...in order to help myself to feel worthwhile I became a psycho-therapist and working with other people, helping them to realize who they are, what they are all about and help them to develop a healthier self-esteem.

Q: OK. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW