

IMPORTANT

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Surname:	Garai
Forename:	Anna
Interviewee Sex:	Female
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Interviewee POB:	Budapest, Hungary

Date of Interview:	7 December 2021
Location of Interview:	London
Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Jana Buresova
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REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV260
NAME: Anna Garai
DATE: 7th December 2021
LOCATION: London, UK
INTERVIEWER: Dr Jana Buresova

[00:00:00] *This interview is with Anna Garai on 7th December 2021, in London. Okay.*

Thank you very much indeed for agreeing to this interview on behalf of the Association of Jewish Refugees. May we start please by your giving your name and some details of where you were born and when, and your family life.

Okay. My name is Anna Garai. I was born on the 10th September 1937. They called me Ponny, and I'm still Ponny, which is a nickname for Anna. And I had a very happy childhood, but I remember very, very little before the age of six, seven. My father had a shop, and my mother learnt to be a beautician. We lived in the centre of town, in a- not – in the edge of the Jewish area, not, not where the ghetto was, but there was a huge Jewish population in Budapest. Lots of – there were different types of Jews, like everywhere, I suppose. There were the very religious, the semi-religious, conservative, and those who weren't religious but thought themselves Jewish, and we belonged to that group. **[0:02:03]** All my parents' friends were Jewish, but not observant. We had a good life. My father was very active in the First World War. He was in his twenties during the First World War, so and he was called up, and he achieved great results, and he got silver medals and he was appreciated. So, when, in the late '30s, the Jewish rules started coming in and quotas, he was

always the last one to have to participate, because he was exempted from a lot of the, the rules, which was to our advantage. But things like – he had a dairy shop, then Jews weren't allowed to sell dairy. It was a particularly protected type of shop, and they closed him down, and then he specialised in more delicatessen and that sort of thing. We only lived – not even a block away, just sort of two houses away from the shop. And I don't remember anything to my disadvantage before the age of six. Of course, those days, parents didn't discuss things with their children, and lots of things happened which I didn't know about because they didn't tell me. [0:04:01] And I, I have now inherited my father's correspondence, and there are postcards and letters from his sister and nephew particularly, which they sent 194- in spring of 1944, when they were – started to be taken away, deported, put in ghetto and that sort of thing. My first recollection is in the spring of 1944. In the spring we – sorry – the winters were very harsh in Hungary and the spring was a great relief, but in March 1944 the Germans occupied Hungary and we- the rules have changed. And I had to wear a yellow star on my sum- spring coat. That's what I remember, I had a blue coat, which I was very happy with, for the spring, which was lighter than my winter coat and things, but I had to wear a yellow star. I, I was very naive and I didn't really know what it meant or how it was. There was a lot of – a lot of tension at home and everywhere all through the summer, and... I – I didn't know what it was. I had absolutely no idea. But my father had to – was called up in spite of all the recognition for his achievements in the First World War, and he was taken to labour camp in around September. [0:06:16] But before that, before that, there were houses nominated, around June/July, as yellow star houses. They didn't have a ghetto till November in Budapest. The con- rest of the country was different story, but in Budapest the ghetto only started in November, but they had these yellow starred houses, which was – for example, the house where our shop was, that was a yellow starred house. And my father was on good terms with the concierge, so when the – the rule came that all Jews had to leave their home, house, flat, wherever they were, and had to move in- into a yellow starred house, because the concierge and my father got on well, he said, 'Don't hurry, you can do it today or tomorrow or whenever it's suitable.' As I said, we only lived the beginning of the – it was a corner shop the beginning of the next street. And so, we didn't go, because there was, you know, things we would have had to pack and so on. And very, very, very sadly, but fortunate for us, on that night, they emptied the house. It was twenty-three- number twenty-three Sándor utca, where our shop was. All the residents were deported from there, and we escaped by- purely chance

that we didn't move in there the night before. **[0:08:10]** So, we knew that this can't go on and we must – we can't stay in the flat. So, my father arranged for our house – sort of housekeeper – she lived with us, a lovely woman – to take me to a Lutheran orphanage, and my mother moved to a – to a friend, a non-Jewish friend. This was around September. I can't remember my seventh birthday at all. I don't think it was ever celebrated as such. And it was terrible. It was unbelievable that I – as much as I loved her, Giselle, but she – she just took me on the train. She couldn't stay with me or anything like that. So, I was very sad and very lonely there. And I remember being there just a few months, because don't forget this autumn was coming of '44 and the war was raging. And I can't remember how I got home, but I got home. I was taken back home before February. I have no idea how and who. I suppose there are big chunks of things which happened, and memory works a very interesting way, because it was probably quite horrific and, you know, I just can't remember what was happening, especially, you know, going back to – the place she took me, it was about forty minutes on the train. **[0:10:07]** So, you know, it was a raging war and the bombs were falling nonstop, December, January, and I don't know how I – somebody took me home. Maybe she came for me. Anyway- my father was in labour camp when- my mother – when it was the worst of the bombing, she felt that they, they, you know, the Germans were escaping from Hungary as the Russians were coming, and she came home as well. So, I remember her and I hiding in a bunker back in our block of flats, and I remember in February when the first Russian soldier came in. And although it was guns and shouting and everything, we were very, very happy. We felt we were liberated. And then it was a very mixed year coming up, because, you know, we slowly found out who isn't alive, and my mother's father, who got deported, and my father's sisters and their husbands and children, they were all in Auschwitz or... And – and none of them came back. But my little family, my father, mother, and I – I had no siblings, were there and healthy and well. **[0:12:06]** And we didn't know what happened to my mother's two brothers and sister. Well, my aunt was in hiding, it turned out, and my two uncles were in Mauthausen, but they survived. And I remember them coming home in the summer of '45, after the war finished, and they weighed about five or six stones, and they were in terrible conditions, but they survived. One of them stayed in Hungary, 'cos he met a lady who didn't want to go on Aliyah, but my other uncle, he went and lived in Israel, where he, he died in his eighties. My mother, unfortunately, during all these things, wasn't very well, and she – he- she got cancer, and she suffered for years and years, and then she died

when I was sixteen. My father was very strong, and of course, he couldn't get his shop back because Communists then took away everything as well. Religion wise- they didn't take us to kill us in, in during communism, but everything was forbidden for all religions. And I remember my father being very, very, very scared when a daughter of his good friend, who was very courageous and very religious, got married under a chuppah. He didn't go to the wedding because he was so scared that he would be seen. [0:14:05] So just – I don't even remember of, of thinking what is religion or what religion am I. That came much, much later than the 1940s. And... I – I was growing up. I did my matriculation, and I wanted to be a doctor. I did very well in my exams. There were no entrance exams, but there were interviews, and they didn't take me. I got rejected. That was in 1955, summer of 1955. So, I... I thought, well, I'll try again next year, which I did. I worked during the year. I worked in travel agent. Of course, travel wasn't allowed, but within Hungary I was selling tickets and so on. And in '56- 1956, things started to become a bit more liberal. I knew people who were allowed to go to Austria. And then in the summer, it was allowed to go to neighbouring friendly countries. Before the summer of '56, you couldn't go and visit your relatives in Czechoslovakia or Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, nowhere, not even the Eastern Bloc. You couldn't go. And I happened to work in a travel agency when this was becoming easier and easier, and in September, late September 1956, I went to Czechoslovakia. [0:16:14] And the first time ever, I visited Jewish sites, because they were very interesting and old, and it was allowed. So, I, I visited beautiful Jewish synagogues in Prague. And that's how slowly I become aware of being Jewish. But of course, religion wasn't allowed, so even then you couldn't – you couldn't go and study Hebrew or the Bible or anything. And I wasn't the only one who suffered being Jewish, because the religious Catholics couldn't do anything either, and they couldn't be confirmed or whatever they should do - have done. And I really – although I was quite a happy little young pioneer during the '50s, everybody had to – slowly, by '56, I realised that this is – this is just not the life for me. So, when the uprising happened in September – in October 1956, I was on the – on the way back from Czechoslovakia on the train when people were talking about, you know, 'Did you hear what happened here and there?' And then of course, and towards the end of October, the uprising happened, and it didn't last very long. [0:18:06] It only lasted three weeks, and they were – and the Russians came in and, and showed how powerful they are, and they were not allowed – they wouldn't allow the Hungarians to establish their own system. And we were friends – as it happens, by

then I realised all of them were Jewish, every single one. That makes me tearful. And we decided that this is not the country for us and we should leave. So, in early November, we got a – we got – there were some boys, mostly boys – there were I think two or three of us girls – about eleven of us went on an open truck and wanted to escape. And with the truck, we went to nearer the Austrian border, and, and then we got – we didn't really have anything – I didn't have any money at all. I said goodbye to my father, who was even scared then, and who – who was so scared that I existed that, that he burnt all of my stuff, all my memories and my pictures and everything, from – I was nineteen by then. Anyway, I left and walked across with, with – some of them had jewellery and things, like valuable things, and they gave it to people, and they walked us through to Austria. [0:20:03] And that's when my life really began. And then – then the HIAS, as it was known then, the Jewish Welfare Agency, I think based in America, helped us and took us to Vienna, and paid for our rent. And we slept on the floor of the synagogue. And then the world became an open place for us, and we could choose where do we want to live the rest of our lives, and our group decided to go to Australia. Where I met my husband and lived happily ever after [laughs]. But I have to mention him really because he, he had a much more difficult escape. He was deported in the autumn of 1944 and taken to Mauthausen, and then he was part of the death march to Gunskirchen, which he survived as an eighteen-year-old. He was eleven years old [inaudible]. And got very, very ill after that, but eventually made it home. And similar journey to mine, got to Australia, except of course he had a pre-war life, a pre-war Jewish life. He loved theatre and performing, and directing plays. And there was a very strong Jewish quarter in Budapest, so they did their own Jewish theatre, and there was a place called the Goldmark Room. [0:22:04] And unfortunately, he lost his father, who was deported as well, but mother and sister arrived- survived, and they arrived back to the flat, the apartment. And George came home in August '45, and he... Oh, I forgot to say one very important thing, that when I was in Vienna already in '56, when I – when I escaped, I could actually – from the hotel, I could actually ring home and ring my father, and tell him how - that I'm well and everything is fine. And he said to me that I actually got a place at university to study medicine. This would have been the year later. But of course, I didn't want to go home, and he, he told me that person who lived in the – a professor who lived in our block of flats told him that, even the second interview I had, they would have offered me the place in person, but I looked very Jewish - this is in Communist led Hungary in 1956 – I looked very

Jewish, and they don't want really Jewish doctors. He- the professor wasn't Jewish, but he liked us very much and he wanted to tell the truth. So, antisemitism is – is there and it's here, and – and it's- quite strong in Hungary. [0:24:03] I visited a couple of times to visit graves and different for – to show my two daughters and grandchildren, and my husband, where he was bar mitzvahed and all sorts of memories, but, you know, the, the cantor who showed us in the synagogue where George had his bar mitzvah, he takes his yarmulke off when he walks on the street. You know, this was in the 1980s and '90s. And I would sit on a tram and people opposite me would point at me and say, 'Oh, how come she's alive?' And they – just unbelievably horrid, and we knew that. We always knew that. Anyway, my husband got ill, and he got very ill when he was eighty. And he was very, very, very diligent. He got a doctorate here about Israel's relations with Comm- Eastern European countries, and he was very interested in politics, and he worked for the Zionist Federation and- but we still weren't religious, but you can't be more Jewish than we are. He was starting to write an autobiography and he wouldn't show it to us, and he- he just wrote it. And then on his deathbed, he said that, would we- could we please read the pages sixty-four and sixty-five at his funeral. [0:26:07] And I said, 'Well, you know I haven't read it.' He said, 'Now you can.' And I read it, and I told him, 'There is no way I'm going to be- going to read that,' because that was his suffering in GunsKirchen and the death march before that, and it is just horrific. And, you know, we lived together for forty-odd years and he would never ever talk about it. And when I tried to become an educator, I just found it too difficult to talk about the situation as it was then and what we all went through, loose and not having – not having a cousin or a – nobody. None of my uncles had children- my mother's brothers, or her sister. Nobody had after the war. And...and it was – it was a very, very, very sad situation. I felt pretty lonely all my life. It really helped that we loved each other very much, and we had two gorgeous daughter, daughters, and two wonderful grandchildren. And my granddaughter really took up the cause. I don't really want to talk about her, she should, but she is wonderful, when- and I wish my husband would know that, that somebody is carrying on the, the thoughts and the – and the terrible story, and to teach the world that it just mustn't happen again. [Pause] [0:28:19] I'm basically very healthy and well and happy, and... I can't cry for all the dead. But I... I think of them all the time. That's my story.

It's a very moving one, Anna.

Would you like me to talk about something specific?

I would like, if I may – I did not want to interrupt you, but if you could please give the names of your parents and other close family members. I, I didn't want to interrupt the flow because it just flowed so beautifully.

Oh thank you. Well, my father was - father's name was Maria, Maria Berger, B-E-R-G-E-R.

That was your mum, sorry. You said your father.

My mum, didn't I say my mum? Did I? My father was Richard – originally Braun, B-R-A-U-N, but everybody made their names sound a bit more Hungarian than Jewish and German, so he changed it to B-A-L-A-J-T-I, Balajti, and I was born Anna Balajti, Anna.

[0:30:17] *And your grandparents?*

My grandparents they – my father's parents died before the war, and – Mr and Mrs Braun. He was called... Adolf and Katarina, they were. And my mother's parents – my mother's mother died when my mother was ten, but my grandpa married her cousin and they died in the, the Shoah. He was Denis, Denis Berger, and she was Jolanne. But I – I don't remember my – any of my grandparents. And my grandfather, who perished, my mother's father, he had a little shoe shop and shoe repairers, they weren't well off at all, in a, in a small village in Hungary. So, when my two uncles came back from camps, concentration camps, they both went and carried on there in 1945-end of 1945, and then one went on Aliyah and the other got married, yes.

What was the name of the village, do you recall?

Yes, Adony, A-D-O-N-Y.

[0:32:04] *And how did you cope when your mother died?*

Well –

'Cos you were still so very young.

I was young. It – it- it wasn't easy.

Especially in those circumstances.

Bec- yes, in the circumstances. I had my sixteenth birthday – I used to visit her – she was in hospital a lot, and we were good friends, very good friends, and she could always read my mind when- and we loved each other. And I remember my last visit to her in hospital, and she couldn't speak, but she wrote down things, and I still have that note. That was in January '54, maybe the 1st January, and she died two or three days later. And I respected my father and loved him, but we weren't, unfortunately, very good friends. He was very, very, very, very old-fashioned, real gentleman, real gentleman, but he kept everything secret from me, everything, so we didn't have a great friendship. He looked after me and- but times were very difficult, very difficult financially in '54, '55, the two years before I left Hungary, and it was difficult. But his friends helped me I, you know. They would – one was a tailor and he would remake an old winter coat for me, because you couldn't even buy things even if you could have afforded things. [0:34:00] You couldn't buy clothes and food. And my father by that time, he worked in an office actually, in those years, and he was doing quite well, but he was still secretive and very scared, and not only being found out - well, he was so obviously Jewish looking, that he was Jewish, but also that – you know, that he – we couldn't do anything which was not up to Communist standard, and every day he had to stay for – for talks by the Party- the Party, and we hardly saw each other. I went to school and of course, being that age, I was quite independent, but for the first year I, I didn't make really friends. Then, then the year before, the year when they didn't take me on at university and I started working, then my view got a- widened and, you know, I got to know people, and I – I missed her. I've missed her – I miss her now, my mother, yes. It's something – you know.

Of course, yes.

But- there wasn't all that much to do, you know. There wasn't. I could see what I did with my daughters when they were sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. That, that just wasn't available anyway in Hungary. So, we had one to one until she died, but after that we couldn't go shopping together or holiday together, or have fun together. And I loved the theatre. I started going to the theatre a lot. [0:36:02] I coped reasonably well. Occasionally, I just burst out crying [laughs].

In the Lutheran hiding place...

Yes-

...did other children –

I don't know.

- affect you, and did you experience any antisemitism there?

No, no. And they were Lutheran nuns. I remember that they were wearing uniforms and they were kind, but I- they were very –

Strict?

They were quite strict. And I remember one really strange episode, when – soon after I arrived, they had to clean– I had long hair, and I had to clean my hair, and, and sort of they made sure –

Oh, no nits.

Yes, exactly, lice. And had to bend down and – I don't think I did have, but they put newspapers out, and I had to bend down, and they combed my hair. That upset me, I

remember. But the children were – I only remember girls. And- everybody was kind. They were alright.

Did you have to attend religious services?

No, no, no.

And did they allow for kosher food?

No, but we didn't keep kosher anyway. We didn't – I didn't know what kosher was. You, you...

And in school later, did you experience antisemitism there?

Yes, I did. I did – and said once – I remember in – well, I was still to go onto primary school when I left and I was, I was back, and then when I went to high school, I went to a – I was good at languages, and I went to a Russian school, which was – you know, they had to – you had to be reasonably clever to get in. [0:38:16] They- we had to do entrance exams. And there, there were quite a few Jewish girls. It was – sexes weren't mixed in schools in Hungary. So, that was very interesting, and I made friends there, at fourteen. I must say, this was at fourteen. Up to fourteen, they were eight years of – six to fourteen, they were called elementary school and middle school, or that sort of thing. And at fourteen, when I went to this Russian high school – it was just that I had more Russian lessons than other lessons, but I, I did Latin as well, and didn't do any Western languages. We didn't do any French or English or German. And my- literature teacher wasn't very kind to me, and I know that he- she was antisemitic. It was – there is a – a Yiddish word, I think – I don't speak Yiddish – which is *punim*, and it's the face. My face and my nose, it just – just like later in university – which I didn't realise when I was fourteen – it just looked Jewish. And I think all sorts of things, which – they knew why I looked Jewish or seemed – but there were lots of us in the class, so it wasn't – and that's when I started having – started having Jewish friends, because they were there. [0:40:02] And I remember one of them, who didn't live very far from me, and I visited her just – I don't know, a Sunday when I was fourteen, fifteen, and they didn't

let me in when I knocked on the door. We didn't used to phone each other, you know, to make appointments. We would knock on the door, 'I'm here to see her,' and they wouldn't let me in. And it turned out, because she was having Hebrew lessons. They were a religious family, and – you know, this was in 1954, '55, they couldn't tell anybody that this girl was learning – and very interesting, I must say, that – this is a really small point. It turned out that they were distantly related to my later husband's family [laughs].

A coincidence.

Yes, who were also – well, the grandma was religious, very – or kept all the rules. So yeah.

If we could then move back to Vienna.

Yes.

Who helped you in Vienna, please, and how did you get from Vienna – what were the arrangements from Vienna to Australia?

Yes. From Vienna, as I said, the first few nights, the group slept on the synagogue's floor. And people on the West must have been – I don't know, charities and – it was particularly the Americans who helped, but I suppose – because all the West Europe, you know, the Austrian Jews and the German or Ho- or Dutch or French, they had bad experiences, you know. [0:42:11] Obviously, they had ten years to – from the-from the end of the war to '56 to start building their country, their life, and they were com- unbelievably better off than we were in Hungary. I mean, I didn't know what an orange was when I was eighteen or nineteen, when I left, you know. And everything was exported from Hungary, so I had to – I loved Hungarian salami and things. I could only eat it in Vienna. I couldn't get it in Hungary, and butter, because the Russians took everything from us. So anyway, in Vienna – and, and then the Jewish Welfare, the HIAS and – Joint and helped us. And there were – there was food. They were soup kitchens. They paid our rent. And we were completely free to choose where we wanted to live – well, I lived in a – everybody lived in B&Bs, in *Pensions* and – but we got pocket money. And then the group itself decided, we'll go to Australia, because it's far. We

want- it's very unlikely that there'll be a war. We were very, very anti -American. We were brought up, you know, between '45, '46, '47 and '56, very anti -American.

The Russian influence.

The Russian influence. So, we didn't want to go there [laughs]. [0:44:02] it must - it was a terrible place. And interestingly, out of the eleven of us, I think nine of them or eight of them ended up living in America [laughs].

They didn't settle in Australia.

Did anyone settle in Australia? Well, I, I was there for nine or ten years. I met my husband in – four years later – three- '57 – three years later, and we only came to England in 1966. It was free to go to Australia. Once you decided, you just went to the consulate or embassy. You filled out a form. We didn't have passports or any papers- from – we were homeless and country-less, but the world took us in, especially – we were the first lot in November '56, you know the- everything came after that. That was the first big East European escape.

So, how did you actually travel to –

By boat, and it was a horrific journey. Seven weeks in a dorm, and it was very bad, but we eventually got there. And. and then also, straight away, the Australian Jew– I went to Sydney, and the Australian Jewish care helped us, not – I don't remember that they helped financially, but it was easy to find job. I had a saddish few years because – you know, not speaking the language and, and working in factory, and very humdrum. [0:46:11] But I had my friends, and I met some nice people... and my husband [laughs], in 1960, so it wasn't –

Did you experience antisemitism in Canada – in Australia?

None whatsoever.

No.

No. I- people are not very knowledgeable. Non-Jewish people keep – Jewish people keep to themselves. There are fantastic setups, you know, organisations and – and, and gatherings, and schools and universities. Before I came to – before we came here, I worked for six months in '65 with an estate agent, because part of Sydney became very popular, which was just outside – or even in the centre of Sydney. And they were selling these tiny terraced houses, which had balconies. They really –

Crow's Nest.

In, in Paddington. And they have become like gold, so I could sell a house a day. And the secretary at the agency – I don't know what I said, 'I won't be coming in because it's Yom Kippur, it's a Jewish holiday,' and she was so surprised I was Jewish, she said, 'Where are your diamond rings?' Well, you know, if this is an attitude of an ordinary Australian Christian or a non-Jewish person – 'I can't believe it.' She said, 'You're not rich.' [0:48:12] I gave her a little lecture. But this sort of thing did happen, yes.

Yes. Canada came to mind because I have known people who experienced considerable antisemitism in Canada.

Yes, yes, yes.

And I wondered if it was the same in Australia, but...

I think there were – far more Germans went to Canada than to Australia – escaped from the war or before the war, you know. That probably is the basics of it. I'm pretty sure Australia was too far, as we then decided cleverly in...[laughs]. But we – but although we had – well, lots of friends had left by then to America, but it wasn't the place for us, for my husband and I, because we love Europe and European culture, and we just had to – and I adore England [laughs].

How did you manage to come from Australia to England? Had you saved up, or was there a Jewish organisation?

No. Well, my, my husband was – I didn't tell him- you much about him, but he was a journalist basically, and he went to – he did a journalism course still in Hungary, which was also a story, a bit of antisemitism. [0:50:04] They would only take him on a course of- to do Polish language. A friend – it was still friends – you know, sort of friendly countries – European countries. I'm talking about 50– when did he go, '53, maybe then, or '52, and then he managed to change to journalism in his last year. And he always saw the same sto– similar story, you know. You had to be working class and very Christian looking to do what you wanted to do, although religion was forbidden for Christians as well. And...so, he was a journalist, and he, he was very, very good and very diligent on learning English. He learnt English in Hungary and then in Australia, and he actually was a journalist for a Hungarian newspaper, but at the same time he worked for a Sydney radio station, 2UE, which is a well-known, I think they still exist, radio station. And he- slowly, his English – although with accent, but he – journalism was very good and he was very professional. So, he became a journalist then. And then somebody who owned a Jewish newspaper, *the Australian Jewish Times*, asked him if he would like to edit it and become the editor, and he did. So, we had a really good life, because as the editor of the *Jewish Times*, you know, we were given lots of good tickets for very good shows and important dinners, and Israeli models came and showed – and we were high up in the – in the- on that sort of field. [0:52:21] And we were starting to become restless. And then the same person, his brother passed away and he said, 'Would you like to become partner? You don't really have to put money in, just the responsibility.' And they had advertisements from big companies. Amongst them, Pan Am and Air India, I can't remember those – mainly those two. So, when we – two years, three years later, he, he owned some of that paper, and he was also able to get a free flight through Pan Am in 1964, and we came and had a look around here, and we liked it very much. And he went to visit the *Jewish Chronicle*, who straight away said, you know, 'Come, come to England and work for us. We need you.' And he put in a - they put in an advert – well, we said, 'We need a year or two,' and they put in an advert, looking for a Hungarian born Jewish journalist familiar with Australia [laughs]. So, he got a work permit, because there weren't very many of those. So,

we got a work permit and we came in 1966 to live, and he worked for the *Jewish Chronicle* for nine years.

[0:54:09] *And how did you feel, coming to Britain? Did you feel differently on arrival or did it take time to develop a feel?*

No, I felt very at home. We, we rented a flat in Hampstead and it was lovely- it was- we wanted to be – well, we weren't – we didn't really become Australians, you know. We liked the life, and we went to the beach, and our friends were Hungarian, Hungarians and Hungarian Jews mainly. I can't even think – you know, you were friendly with colleagues, maybe the odd Australian, but not so much, no. I would – and so when we came here, we had an Australian passport and we were Australians, but we didn't have any affiliation, really didn't. And we lived in, in Hampstead, in a lovely little flat, and my husband worked very hard. He worked for radio, BBC – Radio Free Europe a lot, and he had his job at the *Jewish Chronicle*, and I got a job in an office. So, we managed to save enough for a deposit for a house in two years, and then my daughter was born as well. But I felt very at home.

And did you find work easily?

I found work easily because – through the *Jewish Chronicle*, actually. It was a small advert.

[0:56:02] And I was learning something new all the time. I still was hoping to become a doctor, but then that became impossible, because although – oh, I should have said, I did three years in Sydney as- in medical school, but when we – it was more important to come to England than staying here and for me to finish that course. By then I felt differently about it.

Did you ever regret not –

I did for a while, but not, not very much. I did a – I did correspondence courses in accounts, bookkeeping, I did for two, three years, social work. I did – my last year, I did – for two years, I did psychology at Sydney University, so it was quite easy. For a year, I followed a social worker where we lived in London. So, I became a social worker in – I did that for twenty-five years, for local government in Brent, yes. And it was very satisfactory because I

could help people. It didn't have to be physical help it- you know, whether they were children or immigrants or old people. In the last few years, I worked mainly with elderly people, mentally frail.

You had that sympathy for people.

Yes, yes, yes. And I knew GPs weren't that happy really, so I didn't regret to become – it's difficult not having mother, mother-in-law, sister, anybody I could have – I would have had to choose between having children or my profession, and it wasn't a choice anyway.

[0:58:11] *And you had your children – what were the names of your children?*

My daughter Janine was born in 1968, and my daughter Anita was born in 1970. And Anita became a teacher and Janine a lawyer, but neither of them are working as such at the moment. They're free spirits [laughs].

Did you feel that it was difficult at times without your mother's help or advice in bringing up your daughters?

Oh yes. Not so much as – yes, or anybody –

In caring for them.

Or any help, you know. By that time, I didn't specifically think it would have been my mother, but – but a sister or, or an aunt or somebody, you know, oh yes, very much so. My father was lovely. He was a lovely grandfather, and he used to help me with babysitting and taking them to the park. He was – he was really delighted with me having two daughters. That was good. That was a good thing, yes.

Because often, without that family support as well, it –

It wasn't easy, yes. I hope we were able to do it for Janine. I definitely helped with my gorgeous grandchildren.

Oh, we haven't forgotten the grandchildren. We'll come to Ella. But before that, if I may take you back to your first visit to Hungary. [1:00:07] You touched upon it, but could you expand please on how you felt, what your reactions were, and those of our grandchildren who accompanied you?

Well, I don't think when we – no, the first time I went back, it was with our two daughters, and I – and I cried a lot. I cried a lot. But we showed them a little bit, not – we didn't show them everything. We went back the first time, Janine was – they were sixteen and eighteen, my daughters. And so, it was '86, before the – before the change in Hungary.

Before the fall of Communism.

Yes. So, we needed visas, and we – we went – we went to where I lived, where my husband lived. My aunt was still alive, so we visited her. She married a very religious Orthodox man in the country in the 1940s, who lost his first wife and children in, in the Holocaust, in Auschwitz, and he married my aunt. And, you know, I remember, while I was living there in the – up to '56, how – well, earlier, '53, '54 – how he slowly had to lose everything which he believed in. [1:02:04] He would never work on, on shabbat, on Saturdays, and he was made to work, and think – and not only having, you know, to lose his children. He was a very, very sad man, yes, very, very sad.

How- did your daughters respond to what you showed them and told them? Were they interested? Did they grow up asking you lots of questions about your background?

Yes, yes, they –

Or did they not express any interest?

No, but the real interest came later. The real – Janine, the older one, asked more. Anita's interest came more in her forties really, full of questions, full of questions. And she belonged – she had trauma counselling and she researched it, and she – she belonged to the second generation, and she – she inherited – she felt she inherited her father's – you know, in her genes, the being scared and the whole experience of the Holocaust.

What in particular made her feel scared?

I don't know, I don't know.

Because she grew up here.

Yes. I don't think she's scared. Just the pain, the pain, I think, rather than scared.

Or perhaps fear that it might happen to her.

I don't think so. I don't know. We haven't – we discuss it often, but not – not often enough. I think we have one day to get into – that's a good question. [1:04:08] I shall pinch that question from you [laughs].

You're very welcome.

Thank you. Yes, we have to finish. You have to go? [speaking to another person – not the interviewer]

And how did you feel answering those questions at that time?

You know, there is hardly a week goes by when we don't talk about it. Ella might – Ella has – well, she will tell you, but she did her dissertation on the theme. Since then, of course, the last year or two, we've been talking about it a lot, but before that – also recently we've been talking about it much more than we used to, yes. I was – you know, this is this wonderful thing from the, from the Claims Conference and AGR and everything, that survivors have to

be proud of what they went through, and I never thought of that before, so. And also, that we have to tell the world. And – and the fact that, you know, practically, his dying words were that people will have to know what he went through personally, my husband. Yes, but...

Is there anything else that you would like to add that perhaps you thought of earlier but – or didn't think of earlier that you'd like to say now?

[1:06:07] No, but I will – I can't add to this, can I, of such, if I – can I – tomorrow or the weeks to come? Probably not.

No, that would be difficult, I'm afraid. But is there anything else that you wanted to perhaps expand on or go back to?

Can you think of any of my stories or...?

[Male speaker] *Can I ask a question? You said that your aunt and uncles never had any children.*

Yes.

[Male speaker] *Was that a direct consequence of the wartime experience?*

I would think so. I never discussed it with them because, you know, they – I was... I'm trying to think how much older was my uncle- he was. Well, one uncle was born in – he would be 100 and something, so he would have been forty nearly, forty when he was – during the war. He did get married to a lady, not a Hungarian lady, in Israel, who already had a daughter, so he had a sort of family life. But it must have been, it must have been. And my other uncle, who was a lot younger, they didn't have children, and I think they tried and tried – because, you know, I was thirteen. He wouldn't have discussed it with me that his wife can't have children- it's-[1:08:12] But I – whether it was her not being able to or him – but none of the three had children, no. And of course, my father's sisters, they had children, but they all died. They all died. They perished.

You mentioned earlier about what your husband had said about remembering everything. Is there something more that you would like to say for your family who will watch the recording?

Well, it's just that- I find it amazing that he had so much pain and then he carried this pain for years and years and years. And maybe – you know, I don't – whether we were guilty of not asking him questions, or – but it was very, very, very, very lucky that his most painful memories, he wrote down, and we've got it, even if we didn't say it. And I only reali– and... And he – he died a happy man, and he said – you know, because he said, 'I didn't – you, you all love me so much and it was really appreciated,' you know. [1:10:05] He- so, we didn't feel – I didn't feel that guilty, because, you know, it was his choice. And because he wrote and he was a writer, you know, at least I can now say that – because he was able to write it all down, you know. And it was – and it wasn't quite the – the thing to do. I mean, I know I speak to so many – I don't mean socially, but – it wasn't the thing to do, but people kept their feelings and histories to themselves, so he wasn't unique in that.

But is there something that you would like to say now –

Well, read his, read his – yes, please read his autobiography, and carry on the good work, what Ella has started, because that's really the way to go. And that – that I'm basically very happy, and I – and I am not an unhappy person, and all the loneliness or changes or horrible events or whatever I went through, I've got the ability to partly forget, partly – you know, I look at the positives in things, which is pretty lucky. But I – un-unfortunately, I'm not one of those who can write things down or write autobiographies, but luckily Ella will carry on the message. And definitely, definitely, the message is that – whether you're religious or not religious, being Jewish is being Jewish, and we all should carry on this message. [1:12:18] Actually, I've got very strong views on that, but...

Then say.

Well, because to me, you know, it's in the blood and it's – it's in the experiences, and it's – it's in our history, and that's more important than other parts of being Jewish to me.

Are you proud of being Jewish?

Yes, proud of being Jewish, yes.

Perhaps that's a good point to break for a moment, so that your granddaughter can join you.

Yes please, yes. I'm very, very, very, very proud of her. I hope she'll tell you that she got a first [laughs].

[Pause]

We're now joined by Anna's granddaughter, Ella, who is very interested in the family history, as was mentioned. Would you like to introduce her fully?

Yes, this is Ella Garai-Ebner. Well, start at the end, as it is now, she graduated with a first from sociology and education, and she will talk about this, I suppose, a bit more. [1:14:09] She also went to a Jewish high school, JCoSS, and I think it's partly our Jewishness, as I explained before, and her parents' Jewishness which put her on the route, but she will explain about her grandpa.

[Ella] So, I did my dissertation on the role of third generation Holocaust descendants and their role in using survivor testimony as time moves on and the survivors themselves unfortunately won't be there to deliver it. And that research – I mean, I've always been – as Ponny said, I – whenever we're together, I always ask a million questions, and I always feel like I leave having learnt something new about her and my grandpa's history. So, I've always been really interested, but- doing my dissertation, it really sparked a new – a deepened interest, and I'm now working with a charity, Generation 2 Generation, to put together a presentation about my grandpa, Ponny's husband. And once that presentation's done, I'll be moving onto the next one [laughs]. And so, I'm using my grandpa George's words to – yeah,

in a presentation, to teach about his life and his experiences in the Holocaust. And I feel very grateful that he did write that all down. He died when I was seven, and I – so, I mean, I know how – I know from my mum and from Ponny how painful it was for him to talk about his experiences, and that he didn't talk about his experiences, so I do feel very lucky to have his written words, which are very powerful. [1:16:21] And I'm so in awe of his ability to remember such precise details, even writing over fifty years later, and I hope to one day be able to publish his, his autobiography for him, because – I mean, it also amazes me that he learnt English in his thirties. That's right, isn't it? He learnt English in his thirties?

Yes.

[Ella] And he was just an incredible writer. I mean, the way he's written everything is so powerful and so moving. So yeah, I – I'm happy that I'm able to use his words and do as he hoped could be done, and talk about what happened to him. And I'm very grateful to Ponny for doing this recording, which I know has been difficult and a long time coming, but it really does feel amazing to know we all have this. I'll be showing this to my grandkids. And yeah.

AG: Well, the difficulty was because of me. I – I just... I was sort of – not exactly scared to talk about it. Partly, I feel that my story – my story as a whole is quite adventurous and there are lots of bad bits in it, but it's not so bad compared to – to George's life and, and a lot of other people. [1:18:04] And I was always very conscious of that. I, I don't carry a guilt about it, but I – I am very, very grateful that I'm given the opportunity now to feel proud about my past, and – and proud that, you know, I managed to survive. The, the real trial was of course the first nineteen years, but I managed, and then it's been fine. And I was able to build on – on my husband and my father's and daughters' and grandchildren's love. But it – it hasn't been easy to – to think about the past.

But you have a very special relationship with your granddaughter.

I do, I do. Well, that's also because I – for two years or a bit more, I used to look after her three full days and a night [laughs].

[Ella] Yeah, the first couple of years of my life.

AG: Yes, when my daughter went out to work, two and a half years.

Do you go to synagogue together?

AG: Very rarely.

[Ella] You came last week [laughs].

AG: Well, when – I didn't used to go. After my husband died, I went, just for the being in the comfort of the community really, and I used to go Friday nights, and if I go, it's still just Friday night. And Ella was in the junior choir, so I had to, to go to hear her sing [laughs].

Of course.

[Ella] We sung every Friday night.

[1:20:13] AG: And now – you can probably tell your story.

[Ella] Yes, they haven't been able to get rid of me [laughs]. At my synagogue, I work now in the youth and education department, which I love. And I – this weekend actually, we're taking twenty teenagers away for a residential weekend, and I'm actually running a session on my family history and how – and kind of – with the hope of empowering the teenagers who are the *madrichim*, the leaders of our community, to share their own family histories, and why that's important.

AG: I didn't tell you in my story, but it, it connects with that, that my husband, after working for the *Jewish Chronicle*, worked for the Zionist Federation, and we took forty people in – no, I'm not quite sure which year, either '90 or '91 – to Hungary. And my husband and I conducted a specifically Jewish tour of Budapest, but mainly he had to speak because I was just crying, I remember [laughs]. Every, every- that wasn't my first time back. But people

were very taken – even Jewish people don't realise what it was like to go through the difficult years, both before the war and during and after.

When you say Jewish people, do you mean English Jewry?

[1:22:02] English Jewry, English Jewry, and English people just have no idea.

[Ella] In February, at synagogue, we're taking the year eights and nines, who are about to have their bar or bat mitzvahs, or have just had them, to Budapest. We're taking about forty of them, and Ponny's going to speak before we go to them about her experiences living there.

AG: Could play the video [laughs].

[Ella] About her life living there when she was their age, and I think that's going to be extremely powerful, for them to really have a person in front of them who's the person leading the trip's grandma. It's amazing. So, we're very grateful to you for doing that.

Did you yourself have a bat mitzvah?

[Ella] I did, yes, yeah.

And your grandmother attended?

[Ella] Yes.

AG: Oh wow, yes.

[Ella] You read a prayer, didn't you? I go to Alyth Synagogue, which is Reform, so we're very lucky that I read from the Torah, and Ponny came up to the *bimah*, and my brother's bar mitzvah as well.

AG: Yes, I read a bigger bit I think then, and – yes.

[Ella] Yeah.

You're obviously very closely involved with the Jewish community. Where do you plan to take your activities, or how would you like to?

[Ella] Big question [laughs]. I definitely want to stay involved. I want to have a role in Holocaust education in some form. I mean, I love my job now, being part of the education of the young people at the synagogue. I've only been there about four months at this point, but I really love it and I can see myself there for a while. [1:24:06] And yeah, I have considered becoming a rabbi, so I definitely see myself being part of the Jewish community for a while [laughs] – well, of course, for my whole life, but working wise. But yeah, it's really special to me, my community. I'm very lucky to be a part of Alyth and to have had such an amazing experience at JCoSS and with my family. And my brother Daniel and I are both very grateful to Ponny and our grandparents and parents for really bringing us up with such a love for Jewish traditions, but also being able to make our own choices. I think it really has had a big impact on us that we were never told, 'You have to be kosher. You have to go to synagogue.' We were always able to make our own choices, so we've been able to find the bits of Judaism that work for us and that feel right for us, and we're both now really involved, because we could kind of choose to be.

AG: It might be a strange thing to do this, but I'm also grateful to my in-laws, who unfortunately sadly, very sadly, both passed away, my son-in-law's parents, because they were Orthodox, especially my mother – Janine's mother-in-law.

[Ella] My grandma.

AG: And even before the wedding, she was – she was just so kind. And, and the way we arranged things – my husband was very, very, very anti-religious, you know. Some people turned, after going through what he went through, either very religious or the opposite, and he was very anti-religious. And - but we had a chuppah in the law society, and it was a beautiful wedding, and they always behaved wonderfully well. [1:26:07] And they- as Ella says, they

– I think they appreciated our past and our – very much so, especially since Ella’s other grandpa had a similar history to mine, yes.

Have you ever wished to go to Israel? Or would you like to go together when it’s possible, apart from covid?

[Ella] We have been together.

AG: We have been together several times, two or three times.

[Ella] Yeah, we went for Passover there once.

AG: As well. Soon after your grandpa died, yes.

[Ella] Something I find amazing about both sides of my family is how well they get on. Like it’s incredible, my mum’s side and my dad’s side are – it’s all one family. So, when we went for Passover, we went with my dad’s side of the family. And even last week, when Ponny was in shul, she was stood with my auntie on the other side, my dad’s sister Jo.

AG: Who basically belongs to a, a different synagogue.

[Ella] Yeah, who goes to a United synagogue. And my colleague said to me, ‘Who’s that standing with your grandma?’ And I said, ‘Oh, it’s my auntie, my dad’s sister.’ And he was like, ‘Oh wow.’ And it is just amazing how close our families are, and how we really – everyone accepts each other’s –

AG: Beliefs and past and history.

[Ella] Yeah.

AG: That, that auntie is particularly interested in Holocaust education. She really is. She understood, you know, her – her grandparents’ story and life, yes.

And the value and importance of it.

[1:28:01] [Ella] I think, yeah, exactly, as a family, all of us feel very strongly about the value and importance of it, and making sure these stories are talked about and aren't lost, yeah.

Because no two experiences are alike at all.

[Ella] Exactly.

And people's reactions to those experiences. Each story is important.

[Ella] Yeah, definitely.

AG: So, I send my love to your children [laughs].

[Ella] Oh, you'll make me cry [laughs]. But you're going to meet them, so it's fine.

AG: And Daniel's as well.

[Ella] Yeah, Daniel hasn't had enough mentions [laughs]. Daniel is my brother.

AG: Yes, and he's a wonderful grandson, really wonderful. So very clever, and we love each other, and he will no doubt carry the flag.

Well, I think you all are – and it's wonderful and uplifting to hear your experiences, your devotion to each other, but also the dedication to keeping the spirit alive of what people experienced.

AG: Yes, yes.

And looking to the future. It's heart-warming.

[Ella] Thank you.

Is there anything else that you would like to add or any particular message, either of you, now?

AG: I mean, it's – that I really appreciate that it has become a talking point, you know.

Where people feel able to.

AG: [1:30:02] People feel able to. Maybe this many years had to pass that – without huge pain – with little emotion, it's there, but who can talk about their own experience or their family's experience, yes. But we have to spread the words, yes, definitely, to everybody.

[Ella] And I just was thinking about what George's – my grandpa – we called him **Jury** – he wrote about three little miracles in his life.

AG: Oh yes.

[Ella] The first one was that his father, who – it was his back, wasn't it?

Yes.

[Ella] He was bedbound because of his- having an awfully bad back, but on the day of Jury's bar mitzvah, he was able to stand up and go, which was a miracle. And the second miracle was that he was able to survive the Holocaust after being in two labour camps and two concentration camps. And the third miracle was that, after everything he'd been through, he was able to raise a loving, happy family, and – yeah.

Well, I think that's a very positive and moving point to end this interview.

AG: Thank you so much.

[Ella] Thank you.

I really hope that your wish will be fulfilled to become a rabbi, and your grandmother will be extremely proud.

AG: I'm just as proud now, I am very proud.

[Ella] [Laughs] Thank you.

On behalf of the Association of Jewish Refugees, warmest and sincerest thanks to you both.

Thank you for doing this. It was really lovely and helpful, and supportive, the way you interviewed.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[1:32:01] *You've fulfilled your dream now.*

AG: I have finally. Yes, and it wasn't that difficult.

[Ella] Well done, proud of you.

AG: Thank you.

[Pause]

AG: Sort of serious face or smiling?

[Male speaker] Just a listening. You can just talk to her and she can just listen to you.

[Ella] Should we be saying something?

[Pause]

[Male speaker] As if she's talking and you're just listening to her.

[Pause]

Photo 1

That picture was taken in Budapest. I think I must have been back at home, because I was four weeks old, and my uncle took it.

[Pause]

Photo 2

This picture was taken on holiday. I was four years old. And it's my mother and father on the picture too.

Photo 3

[Pause]

This picture was taken in pioneer camp. I must have been thirteen.

Photo 4

[Pause]

I think this was taken in a photographer's studio. They were very keen to take photos of me around the age of two and three.

[1:34:01] *[Male speaker] Where was that?*

In Budapest.

[Pause]

Photo 5

This picture was taken at our wedding on 27th November 1965, we'd already been living together for five years, in Sydney, Australia, with my father being very tearful and happy.

[Pause]

Photo 6

This is a picture taken in Queen's Court, Wembley Park in London, when my daughters were sixteen and eighteen. So, that's in 1986.

[Pause]

Photo 7

This is my granddaughter Ella's bat mitzvah in December 2012, with her dad, Mark, mother, Janine, and brother, Daniel in the front.

[Pause]

Photo 8

This is a photograph taken on my daughter Janine's fifty-third birthday, in November 2021, and we all have birthdays around this time. Ella will be twenty-two in December. I was eighty-four in September. And Anita, on Mark's right – no, Mark's left, is going to be eighty-one in –

[Ella] Fifty-one.

AG: Fifty-one in December. I'll have to do this again, the last few words.

[End of transcript]