DP-31
LASZLO GOROG
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AGE 36
PASSAGE ON "THE DEUTSCHLAND"

PHILLIPS: I'm Andrew Phillips, and I'm speaking with Mr. Laszlo gorog.

GOROG: Yes.

PHILLIPS: G-O-R-O-G.

GOROG: G-O-R-O-G.

MRS. GOROG: Since this is my being invisible day, I'm going to put it here and you fetch it.

GOROG: Thank you. And it is the 24th of May, 1989. We're beginning this interview, it's about half past four

in the afternoon. Mr. Gorog is from Hungary, and what year did you immigrate?

GOROG: What year?

PHILLIPS: Oh, let me ask you first, what year were you born?

GOROG: 1903.

PHILLIPS: And what year did you immigrate from Hungary to the United States?

GOROG: '39. (break in tape)

PHILLIPS: Mr. Gorog, could you start by telling us where you were born and could you spell some of the names which may be difficult for our transcriber.

GOROG: Okay. (he laughs)

GOROG: Okay. I was born in 1903 in a small Hungarian town called Nyrregyhaza, N-Y-R-R-E-G-Y-H-A-Z-A. I, uh, and that's where I grew up, that's where I went to school and had my high school diploma. Then I moved to Budapest, as most kids did.

PHILLIPS: Could you tell me a little bit about your parents,

what they did and what your house was like? A little bit of the atmosphere at that time?

GOROG: Okay. My father was married into a coffee house. This wasn't his profession. He was sort of agricultural or something, you know, as a young man, but he married my mother, whose father had a little coffee house. When I was seven, they bought a new coffee house in a new building. It was a three-story very new building and very large coffee house with four pool tables and marble-top tables and many, many, uh, mirrors where as a kid I used to wonder when I looked at the image and it reflected over and over again and somebody told me its infinite. And I looked into infinite. It was a nice place for kids. We, that's where we did our studying, you know, watching the billiard players and reading our books and so on and so on. And, uh, it was a happy childhood until 1910 when my mother suddenly acquired a hernia and there was nobody in town who could operate and she got general sepsis before somebody arrived from Budapest, and she died at an early age. I think she was thirty-two or thirty-four. My father remarried two years later and then we moved to

another town, a similar small town where I had to change school. I went to a (Hungarian) Gymnasium. And in 1918 my second mother died of flu. After the First World War we called it Spanish flu which decimated the whole world, really. This was such an unhappy place for us that, and for my father, that my father sold the business and we moved back to this Nyrregyhaza again, and finished high school there. By the time I finished high school and wanted to go to the university to become an engineer, there came the first anti-Jew law in Europe which, according to which I couldn't go to a university because they took only a very few Jewish boys.

PHILLIPS: Before you tell me about that experience, could you tell me about, uh, your life at home as a child, what it was like for you, what your house looked like and felt like.

GOROG: Yes. Well, as I said, our house was a new, modern building. We liked it very much. The coffee house had a summer place with a, uh, outside tables and overhead whatever you call this, awning, you know. And we liked it because we liked to watch people, and

that's where we had our four o'clock tea or coffee, you know. And we lived off the main building, in a very small apartment, three room apartment. I had a sister, older and a younger brother. Our room was so small that it could accommodate only one bed, and all our young life my little brother and I slept in the same bed. By the way, just as an insert, he also became a well-known writer in Hungary later. So, uh, besides these tragic events, our childhood was a normal and fairly happy one. I was a good student. My brother was a good student. My father was a strict man and we better had been good students, you know. (he laughs) He told us that, "You are Jewish. You have to be better than anybody else, otherwise you won't make it." And he was right. We couldn't even make it very much. In other words, I was, I never could go to the university although I had somebody who had connection, very big connection, with the government. But when I asked him to get me into this technical university, he came back saying that there were going to be two Jewish boys accepted. One by the regent of Hungary and the other one with the Archduke of the Hapsburg House. So he couldn't do anything for me. And this is decided, I had a

chance to go to a bank and be a banker which I had no talent for, I never studied, because gymnasium was not commercial. I could understand Latin better than accounting. And, uh, in 1923 there was the big Hungarian economic collapse and I lost my job.

PHILLIPS: Could you perhaps build up to that time, take us through what it was like in Hungary during the first World War, the atmosphere?

GOROG: Yes. Uh, it was, of course, as everyone knew, 1914, I was in the street when there was a big bang and people looked up and said that there was a flaming sword across the sky. And there will be a war. Later on it turned out that a meteor dropped and went through the air, making this very fiery track. But the war came anyway. It was against Serbia and we were totally for the war. We felt, stupidly, most likely, that our crown prince was assassinated by them and, of course, later we found out that our crown prince . . .

PHILLIPS: I must ask you to be careful of the microphone. I'm sorry.

GOROG: That our crown prince was a very anti-Hungarian, very arrogant Hapsburg, and I think it was Hungary's luck, except for the war. And the war came and it hit our town, which is on the northeast end of old greater Hungary, close to, today Russia, but it was Czechoslovakia that (?), that was close to. And the Russians blow through and the, uh, Polish refugees came, you know. And the war was very prevalent, and we kids, we made cigarettes and went to the radio station to meet the soldiers going to the front and give them cigarettes, you know, and so on. So it was an exciting time, but we did not feel the problem, except when the trains started coming back from the front with the amputated soldiers and the half dead and so on. Then, you know. And then my father was drafted at the age of forty-two, I think. He wasn't sent to the front, but he had to leave our home town and went to another town to serve as an auxiliary. The big shock came in 1918 when suddenly, according to reading in the newspapers there, we were reading all over the place, suddenly we were told that we lost the war. You know, because it was true that when the first World War was lost, Germany did not have one enemy soldier on German soil, and the

Germans were in enemy soil in Serbia, in France, and so on and so on. But the war was lost anyway because . . .

PHILLIPS: Could you tell me some of the things you actually saw when you saw those soldiers returning from the front? Can you remember any specific images or stories about those experiences?

GOROG: Well, let me see. I remember one, when they went to the front they were very tipsy and singing very gaily and had flowers in their hats and so on. When they came back, of course, the train came very quietly, pulled in without a word, and there we could see, through the windows and so on, and some of the soldiers were taken off on stretchers, you know, bloody and dirty. And the main impression was that war was dirty and stinking, you know. The soldiers' clothes had a certain smell, you know, which most likely it was dirt and sweat and blood and unwashed. And I found out later, for instance, that there was, there was a statement that it was easy to get used to the danger in the trenches, but what wasn't easy was to get used to the rain, standing in rain, in snow,

being hungry, and mostly lice. So a cousin of mine who later became a newspaperman said that the Bosnian soldiers, Bosnian soldiers were with Hungary because Bosnia happened to be part of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy.

PHILLIPS: What was that word? Which soldiers?

GOROG: Bosnian.

PHILLIPS: Bosnian.

GOROG: It's, today it's Yugoslavia. And they, uh, they had a way to deal with the lice. They were simple peasants and so on. They put a string around their wrist and lice, sometimes when the sun was up try to go out to the warm, but they couldn't because it was the string. So they went around the string, and they just walked around more and more and more. After an hour they took off the string and put it through their teeth and spit out, chewed on the lice and spit it out. That's the way he, uh, and the Russian soldiers, of course, did the same thing. So we had a theory that the part, the side that can handle lice faster and better will be the winning, will win the

war. So this was a . . .

PHILLIPS: Was that theory a joke, or was it real?

GOROG: I beg your pardon?

PHILLIPS: Was that theory a joke? Was that said as a joke, or was it said as something . . .

GOROG: As a joke. As a joke, yes, that's right. Of course. And, uh, I had relatives, my best cousin was captured by the Russians, you know, and we didn't hear from him for decades until he showed up way after the war from Shanghai. He was captured and somehow married a Russian woman and moved to Shanghai, and had no money to come back. So finally he made a deal with a German shipping company as a stoker, he came back. And we (?). He had been a wrestler, a very strong man, and his forearm was tremendously huge from stoking for half a year. What's the name of the boat? But, as I said, we didn't, as I said, for us kids, I was a Boy Scout and worked, like I made rope out of straw so they can, and the rope they made to make boots, because the first year in the war on the Russian front, which was cold, a very cold winter, and they turned out that the Hungarian, Austrian-

Hungarian industry, made paper soled boots. And many, many thousands of soldiers had frozen feet and had to be sent home, and that's why the Boy Scouts made this rope thing over the boots that kept it a little warm. But this was not a tragic time for us. It was an interesting time. Our life went on, our school was every day, and we had to work at school, etcetera, etcetera. Not, it isn't all I could say. I wrote a book about it, and it hasn't been printed yet, but when it will, then you will find more about it. (he laughs)

PHILLIPS: Tell me about, at what age did you move to Budapest?

GOROG: At the age of eighteen.

PHILLIPS: At the age of eighteen. So you were living out on the country until that time.

GOROG: Until that time, yes.

PHILLIPS: Did your family have a garden?

GOROG: No, we didn't have a garden. This was a big commercial building, and we had potted plants in the coffee house, and in the terrace of the coffee house,

so it was pleasant what we did. But we had a forest nearby where we kids used to walk, you know. My little brother and I got some silkworm eggs and we raised silkworm, and we had to go to the forest to collect, uh, what's the name of the berry, the most common, anyway, some berry leaves which the silkworms liked, and in an empty room in our house we set up this thing. And just as an interesting little anecdote, we heard that the silk factory paid, I don't know, like a dollar for a pound of the cocoons, you know, and we collected it, put it in a cigar box, and we had to walk way out of town. And I carried the box for a while, and then my brothers, I told them, "You carry it." And then he carried it, and at a certain point we argued who should carry, and we quarreled, and we put the box down and went home and never collected the dollar for this half a year of work, just because I said, "You have to carry it now." And it was a couple of pounds, you know, so it was really a, anyway, this is just a little anecdote. So at eighteen I went to Budapest without any hope of getting into the university, but with good hope that I'd get a job in a big bank where a relative of mine was the manager of a branch office, and I did get the

job and I worked there and I, at the age of twenty I was promoted. I went to the stock exchange and I worked. At a very early age, it was, for a kid to work on the stock exchange, meaning that I was allowed to sell and buy. I was authorized, you know. And in '23 it collapsed. It collapsed again, a little anecdote, one day the rumor came that the most important private banker of Hungary committed suicide because he lost everything, and the prices came down tumbling. At eleven o'clock the man appeared. It was a rumor. And he walked around, and the prices went up and, of course, all the short-sellers, if you know what it means, got broke because they sold and sold and sold and couldn't buy it back at the cheap price any more. So, but I lost my job when the stock exchange totally collapsed and . . . (break in tape) So, uh, in '23 I lost my job and I didn't get another one till about '27. But in the meantime a, I knew from way back in high school that I had talent for writing, and I started to write. First I wrote poetry, which they, at eighteen one of the leading newspapers published one of my poems, you know. And later on I tried my hand at, one act plays, and I was successful. I, it seems I could do it, but it took

me long years to be, to really learn that it shouldn't be just a fluke that I happened to write a clever little play. To learn what it takes. You know, that took me, I don't know, five, six years of constant trying and trying and trying and failing and failing, you know. And I remember, when I submitted my first play to a theater, the man who was supposed to read it said to me, "Tomorrow evening come back." And I went back tomorrow evening, and for half a year every evening he told me, "Tomorrow evening." And I went back every day. It was my job. After dinner I walked to the theater and there he was, and, "I'm sorry. I couldn't." And so finally he read, and he said he liked it, and they produced it, and it was fairly successful. But, as I said, this was in '27, it took me about five years before I could rely on it as a source of income.

PHILLIPS: What was it called? What was the play called?

GOROG: It's difficult to translate because it is a "Love Correspondence" was the verbatim title. It was a, sort of a, not well-known. You know, Hungary, there were many illiterate peasants, you know. And the

Budapest little maids and the little soldiers, peasant soldiers, couldn't write. So there was this little, a, uh, bar, where there was a young man who was clever with his pen, and for a buck he wrote a love letter to your lover, you know. And that was the background, and so on and so on. The first play, how a soldier and a peasant may come, each asking to write a letter to their perspective lover, sat down, started talking, and they went back, they said, "We don't need the letter any more." You know? (he laughs) And they fall in love with each other, and this was one of the lines, when the letter write said, "But how come this fast?" They said, "We got used to each other." Which is a peasant expression, you know, that, "What can we do?" Anyway, this was my first play. And the second, the third, the fourth was all rejected. Finally I established myself, and then I started getting good and getting a name. Until, toward the end of the '30s, came the anti-Jewish sentiment. Hitler was on already, and the Hungarians followed suit, one anti-Jewish law after the other. Finally I had to write under a pseudo name, or in a real non-Jewish writer's name, and I had to give him half of my royalties, and so on. And

then it looked to me that this was going, I was going to lose even this.

PHILLIPS: What pseudo name did you write under?

GOROG: I beg your pardon?

PHILLIPS: What pseudo name did you write under?

GOROG: Oh, all kinds. I don't even remember. I just invented. The theater knew it, you know, because we had to go to the theater, and they told us yes, we like it, what name, and we agreed on a good Hungarian name which didn't sound Jewish. You see, the, in Hungary, well, again, this is history, I don't know whether you are interested in it, Joseph II was the enlightened monarch. He was the first who ordered the Jews given names, because before that the Jews had only their Hebrew names and so and so, son of so and so. And every Jew was given a name. And because he was an Austrian monarch, all Jews got German names. That's why we have so many Gross and Schwartz and Klein and Finkelstein and so on and so on all over Europe. And, but in the end of the last century, Hungary celebrated its thousand years

anniversary as a Christian kingdom, and there was an outburst of patriotism. And people, even the non-Jews with German names, started changing their names. And by the time I arrived on the scene, my original name was Gutmann. You couldn't write under such a name. That's why I translated it, Gorog, which is nothing, but it means "Greek." But it's a nice Hungarian-sounding name. So, and everybody, the great Hungarian writer, playwright Ferrence Bonard was Neiman originally. You know, he had to change it also, and so on. So that was the background, but I was a newspaperman also. I worked on a newspaper who had a Jewish owner and in '38, because he was a Jew, the license was taken away from him. So he lost the paper, I lost my job. So then I started inquiring how to get to a. And it went to the consulate, and on the door there was a sign "Hungarian quota filled for forty years." So I knew I couldn't get to America because for forty years I would be dead. So I decided to visit, to go as a visitor, and somehow, while I'm there, you know, I will be out in the West, anyway, so Hitler cannot reach me.

PHILLIPS: Can you say that line again, the Hungarian quota

filled for how many years?

GOROG: Forty years.

PHILLIPS: Could you tell me that little part again?

GOROG: Forty, four-o years. Because the yearly number of Hungarians that were allowed admitted to the United States was eight hundred, compared to twenty-five thousand English, only the English didn't come then yet, you know. But anyway, Hungary, and it was when the anti-Jewish laws came the, one million Jews were in Hungary. They, of course, went to the consulate. Everybody wanted to go, so forty years was filled in a week, and it was hopeless. So finally I wrote to my second mother's son, my second mother's brother, who lived in New York, to send me an affidavit. He didn't know me, I didn't know him. But he sent it. And then I went to the consulate and that was '39, they were there in New York, and I was still, when I applied for a visitor's visa, still had a job as a newspaperman. I said I was going to report the World's Fair, and they gave me a visitor's visa. And when I came out in '39, July, the, or June, I don't remember. It doesn't matter. Anyway, in three

months the war came and I couldn't go back. So they couldn't kick me out. They extended it every six months until '41, America and Hungary entered the war, and no more Hungarians could come out, so they took the eight hundred quota numbers and gave it to the Hungarians who lived already out of Hungary, so I had to go to Mexico and come back as a legal immigrant.

PHILLIPS: I'm going to stop the tape and turn it over.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

PHILLIPS: Continuing tape number 405 [DP-31]. Could you tell me a little bit about the atmosphere before you, in fact, applied to leave for the United States? The atmosphere in Hungary as anti-Semitism began to reveal itself.

GOROG: Yes. Well, again, I can tell you my own emotion. I was, I was very fearful. There were demonstrations, you know, most likely organized by the fifth column which already existed in Hungary, you know, of people running around in the main boulevards yelling "death

to the Jews" and throwing bricks into the Jewish store windows and so on. So I knew that sooner or later there will be big trouble. And we, I did never dream about what really happened later. I just thought that the individual life was going to be uncertain, that we'll be slaves and we'll be beaten, and so on and so on. And that was the general atmosphere among Jews. And I had very many non-Jewish friends, colleagues, you know, who said that I was crazy, that I should stay, they would protect me, and so on. Of course, nobody protected anybody there because it was a, uh, the Budapest Jews, they, Jews of the country in Hungary, were all taken to Germany and killed. All of them. When I say one hundred percent, I don't mean there were a few survivors. You know, Budapest was protected by the regent, who had friends amongst the ex-Jewish Hungarian aristocrats. And allegedly his wife had some Jewish blood. Anyway, or he didn't have. And he protected them, made deals with Hitler that the Jews can stay in Budapest, and he will give the country Jews. So the Jews were safe until '43, '44 when finally even Horthy realized that Hitler lost the war and made a speech on the radio asking the Hungarian Army to

return back home. And the next day the German Army arrived from the sky, and Horthy was taken a prisoner and taken to Germany and the Nazi Hungary (?), was his name, became the head of the country. And that day it was free hunting for Jews. In other words, there was no law. Jews could be killed on the street without any consequence. And they were, these kids, they were sometimes fourteen, fifteen-year-old kids with machine guns. They rounded up the Jewish people, tenants in buildings, and they took them to the Danube and machine-gunned them into the river. You know, by the hundreds and by the thousands. But this was sort of not law. Nobody told them to do it, but it was allowed, not only tolerated, but encouraged. And my family still lived there. We didn't, here in America we didn't know for a long while about the real situation, you know. And then when I found out my sister lived there, my brother lived there, my nephew, my father, and so on. They survived. They survived. My brother was a clever man and he used friends' papers, non-Jewish friends' papers, and moved into the non-Jewish part of Budapest and pretended to be an old Hungarian, peasant stock. Young man, and so on. And the rest

of it, my sister got a passport from Switzerland and one from even, even Franco in Spain gave protective letters to Hungarian Jews, and the Vatican also. So they, my sister and her son, survived with these papers. Twice they were taken by the Young Nazis, and somehow they could talk the Hungarian old policemen into letting them go back, you know. And somehow they survived, living in the cellars, you know. Because by that time, you know, even the Nazi youngsters had to live in cellars because we were bombing and the Russians were, used artillery they were so close.

PHILLIPS: What actual incidence did you personally experience in this period just before the war, before you left, regarding anti-Semitism?

GOROG: I did not, except losing jobs. I did not. I never looked Jewish. Nobody on the street would immediately spot that I was Jewish, so I never had any first-hand experience. But it was, even in the mid-'30s, a friend of mine who was Jewish-looking, a very powerful young man on the street. Of course, he, by accident he stepped on somebody's foot and he

says, "I'm sorry." And the man said, "You are sorry? If you were in Berlin you wouldn't survive this." And he said, "If I were in Tel Aviv you wouldn't survive this." And, see, so this kind of a thing that would . . . (an airplane flies overhead) I think I cannot talk louder than this airplane. (he laughs) Anyway, there was one saying that on the street corner somebody said economic situation is very bad because of the Jews and somebody remarked, "And the bicyclists." And somebody said, "Why the bicyclists?" And this one said, "Why the Jews?" It was just as, of course, it still exists, even in the United States, you know. People think, believe, that American money is in Jewish hands. Ford is not a Jew. Manhattan Bank is not in Jewish hands. Even the movie industry people think it's Jewish because the producers are Jewish. They are paid by New York big banks, non-Jewish banks, etc. Anyway, so, as I said, I didn't have any, except that I read their papers, and the papers were openly.

PHILLIPS: So tell me about actually departing for the United States.

GOROG: Yeah. Okay. Finally I got the visa. I was lucky. I was married, and I couldn't take my wife. This was the hostage for my return. And the consul, the American consul, when he talked to me about going, and I had all kinds of letters that I had jobs yet and I worked this and that and so on. And he said that he knew my name because he used to go to the little theater I worked for. And I said, "Why did you go there? You can't speak Hungarian." He said, "Yes, but I like." Everybody was laughing and I was laughing. And he gave me the visa. That was sheer luck, you know? And when, I could not take any money out of the country. I was given fourteen dollars by the state, and I could buy a ticket for a German boat, Deutschland, and I was given a fifty mark voucher to spend on the boat, not to take to the Nazis. So this was my fortune. I couldn't speak English. I wanted to be an American writer, I had fourteen dollars and fifty francs to be spent on the boat. So when I went to the railroad station with y family and friends and the theatrical people, you know, I used to work for, you know. And I remember that the train was there, and on the steps was an elegant young man with an elegant lady. And the man

said to the woman, when he saw these goodbyes and crying and so on, "One Jew less, it's good." You know? So this was the message, the goodbye message from Hungarian, a Hungarian person, "It's good, one Jew less." So, of course, my passport said I was Jewish, and I had misgivings in Germany. You know, in Hungary I had to rent a room in a hotel, but they didn't say anything, you know. They rented the room. And I boarded the Deutschland, which had the swastika up there. You know, the image was a strange situation, because most of the Tourist Class, I was Tourist Class, were Jewish. And you know that there was a swastika flag and they got kosher food if they wanted? Because it wasn't Germany, it was the Hamburg American Line. It was business. So, but when I arrived, it turned out that any visitor who wasn't in first class was not allowed to land. That was my first introduction to democracy. Because I was a tourist class only, I couldn't go to New York. They told me I had to stay. And when the immigration official, he came on the boat before we landed, as you know, and one of the old waiters who, I could speak German but not English, he interpreted me, and the guy asked, "What is your nationality?" I said,

"Hungarian." And he says, "What is your religion?" I didn't know that this was not in the questionnaire. They couldn't ask your religion, but he asked, and I said, "Jewish." "Then you are Hebrew," he said, and crossed out Hungarian. This was a second message. Later on I inquired. I know the name of this man. I found out that this man was Jewish, a Zionist. But anyway, he wouldn't let me go. And they didn't send me that evening to Ellis Island because when the boat, the ship company would have to pay my dinner, my room, my breakfast, and so on, and it was cheaper for them to keep me on the boat overnight, and they just hired an American Customs guard. I was the only one. All the other Jews were allowed, but I was a visitor, and they were immigrants. And this old soldiers was sitting in front of my room. And again another thing, you see. During the trip on this boat, even tourist class, the most delicious food. You know, fruit and everything, you know. But when we landed I got a big plate of potatoes, a piece of meat, gravy, you know. The sailor's dinner. I wasn't a customer any more. Next morning, two Customs officers came and took me to a car. And I was sitting with the two. They had guns and I was

told I was going to Ellis Island. I had no idea about my fate, but I just, but I didn't know what to think. And we arrived in Ellis Island and took me to this huge room, which I knew. Because a few months before there was a very important American, Hollywood picture released about Ellis Island, and I saw, and I recognized every place, and the set was so well known to me from the picture.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember the name of the picture?

GOROG: Yeah. And I was told to go to a little elevation platform and sit there. And I was, of course, sweating. I didn't want to be sent back. So . . .

PHILLIPS: Do you remember the name of that picture?

GOROG: Beg pardon?

PHILLIPS: Do you remember the name of that picture?

GOROG: No, I don't. I can't remember the name of it any more. Anyway, so then a woman came and gave me a piece of paper, and I looked at it. It was in Hungarian, and it said, "Greetings from the American government. Don't be afraid. You are not a

prisoner. You are going to be heard." And very, beautiful, reassuring piece of paper, you know. And I sat there until my name was called and I went into a room with a judge and an interpreter. That was the other relief, that there was a Hungarian interpreter, you know. And he just asked questions and I answered. I didn't lie anything, you know. And then my uncle's wife came in. She was somehow notified. They gave me the affidavit, you know. And she said that she was willing to put down the five hundred dollars bond for me, and I was free. And I was taken to, the first time to New York a free man. Still frightened totally because, you see, this, suddenly New York, you know what New York is the impression and the subway (?), the noise, the strangeness and everything, you know, and my future. I had no idea what will I do when, the fifty-mark boat money I bought a German camera which my step-uncle raffled off at his factory, and he gave me fifty dollars. So that was my basic, that's how I, but then I found out that the Jewish organization helps, and I went there.

PHILLIPS: What was it called?

GOROG: I think it was HIAS, Hebrew International, or something like that. And I went there with my aunt and, a, uh, they gave me ten dollars a week help until I can make money. From the ten dollars, I moved out from my aunt's home and for twenty dollars with a friend of mine rented a room. So that gave me thirty dollars for living, you know. So I didn't starve. That's how I learned to cook, because it wasn't enough for restaurants. You know, what I remember from my childhood I used to watch our cook.

PHILLIPS: What did you cook?

GOROG: I cooked the basic things. First I cooked the, it was called paprika potato. It's you fry potatoes, you know, in a little lard or butter or oil, you know, add paprika, then you add the potatoes with water and boil it. That's all. Now, if you have another ten cents and you buy a piece of sausage and put it in and boil it with that, and then it gets a nice smoky flavor, and its a total meal. Because the onion is vegetable, the potato is starch, and the sausage is meat. (he laughs) So, and that's how I lived, and we found out that at certain bars in New

York you could go buy a glass of beer for ten cents and they have a shelf with if you, you know, this and that, pretzel and peanuts and so on. So that used to be my lunch for ten cents. I filled up on these little things until they noticed it and they told us to go to a restaurant to eat. And, so, that is about the adventure of my getting here. And then I found a man who was of Hungarian origin. He was born there, but he could speak good Hungarian, and he had a flair for writing, and he said he would translate my stuff. And we started doing my old Hungarian little plays. He translated, and we put it on the air in New York. A non-sponsored station. In other words, we didn't get paid, you know.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what station it was?

GOROG: I beg your pardon? It's W, W, my wife knows. It's soft of a leftist station, I think it's . . .

PHILLIPS: WBAI?

GOROG: Who's name does it bear, do you know?

GOROG: Pacifica?

GOROG: I don't. But something W. I think my wife might know. Anyway, so, and, of course, this friend of mine who was, who knew New York, of course, he just told me, "We'll get our cast." Just go to the, such and such a drugstore, to the basement, there where all the little extras, the girls, the boys, who are waiting for, and they were happy to work for nothing. So I had worked about, uh, I don't know, six, eight weeks, one play a week, you know. But nothing, no sponsor applied. (he laughs) You know? And then I had a chance to come to Hollywood, because a former Hungarian collaborator of mine lived here and had a job, and he said I could, he would want me to come because he was a lazy man and he hoped that he would work with me, which he had done in Hungary, because he was lazy and I won't be lazy. So he said he couldn't give me any money, but if I get here I could live in his house. And that's what happened. I borrowed money, and came on a bus to Hollywood and lived in his house for three, four months.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember how long it took to travel across the country in those days?

GOROG: I think it was five days. I think it was four nights, you know. It was long, long, long. And, fortunately, I borrowed money not only for the fare, but I think I borrowed twenty dollars more so I could buy sandwiches, you know, on the road. And I couldn't sleep. I was so excited and worried and so on that I couldn't sleep and I had, for the third day, I heard people talk Hungarian around me. Absolute clearly I understood what they were saying. I just had this kind of a hallucination, you know. And finally, it was in November when I came, end of November and there was definitely, when the bus pulled into Pasadena and I got off for a moment for air, it was at night, but the balmy air, you know, the sudden warmness of air, you know. And so, again, it took me two years to establish myself as a Hollywood writer, and I was part of a big scheme. There was a producer, he wanted to be a produced called, I don't know. Do you know anything about Hollywood pictures? Do you know the name of Sam Spiegel? Well, he was an immigrant about my age, and he had an idea to make a picture about the story of a tailcoat. Different episodes how this coat goes from one person to the other. And he was looking for

stories, episodes. He had a tremendous idea that he would hire different stars for each episode. So for a little money he could have a, well, anyway, so somebody suggested Hungarians are good in one-act plays. So I went to see him, you know. And I told two ideas, which he immediately said, "Good. Sit down and write it." No money, just sit down and write it. I didn't know that I wasn't allowed to write without money, you know, but I did it. Anyway, this picture became known as,m the title was "The Tales of Manhattan." It had on the marquee the following: Charles Laughton, Else Lanchester, Charles Boyer, Henry Fonda, Rita Hayworth, Ginger Rogers, Edward G. Robinson, George Sanders, Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters, W.C. Fields. And ten writers, because this man Spiegel put on our Hungarian, bad English, American rewrite men, so there were about ten writers. But today it's a museum piece, you know. It was an important, that made Spiegel, what he later became, you know, a (?).

PHILLIPS: You're saying that, in fact, you wrote the film, or just a section of it?

GOROG: What?

PHILLIPS: Did you say that you'd wrote that film, or just a section of it?

GOROG: Two sections, two episodes. I wrote the Charles Laughton episode and the Edward G. Robinson episode. And I helped with the ending with Paul Robeson. You see, I had the idea that the final scene, Paul Robeson is a poor, black farmer. Not a farmer, he has a little garden, but he was a beggar. And the birds ate up his little seeds, and he prayed for a tailcoat. H needed a, how do you call it, that frighten the birds.

PHILLIPS: A scarecrow.

GOROG: A scarecrow. And, according to the story, one man, the last to own the tailcoat, is flying above and somehow the cigarette caught fire and he takes his tailcoat off and throws it down, and it comes down to his field and the final shot of the picture is the tailcoat, the fabulous tailcoat of Boyer and Henry Fonda becomes a scarecrow. That as my idea to end it in a scarecrow. But, as I said, it doesn't matter

because I got for the two episodes I got two thousand dollars. And the re-write men who rewrote my story seven thousand a week. That was the . . .

PHILLIPS: So how long did your experience last with Hollywood?

GOROG: I beg your pardon?

PHILLIPS: How long did you last with Hollywood? How long did you last writing, working for Hollywood, for films?

GOROG: Oh, I, let me see. I wrote films to the '60s, and, but in the '50s I switched over to television. In the late '40s television came and the film started getting wobbly. And then I switched over, and somehow again by a strange fluke I wrote a story and my agent submitted it and came back and said, "They want my story." I said, "But I want to write the screenplay." And he said, "They don't want you to write the screenplay. They want to hire an American writer." And I said, "Then it's not sold." And I took it back and wrote the screenplay, and he submitted it and they bought it. That's how I got in. Not only that, but when they started rehearsing they called me up frantic. "We have to shoot Monday

and your screenplay is five minutes short." And I said, "All right." And the same day I went back and gave them five more minutes so that it can be used. At the beginning they didn't have to ruin the pages, you know. And then they said, "Good God, if you can do it." And I was in. They gave me stories to re-write and so on and so on. And now comes the interesting thing. They shot the picture. It was five minutes long. But it was so late. I was in.

PHILLIPS: Okay, I think that just about wraps it up as far as the Ellis Island end of it, so I'm going to call that a day. It's the end of interview number 405 [DP-31].