

EI-533/BAKER

EI-533

STEPHEN (ISTVAN BACHER) BAKER

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HUNGARY via ITALY, 1940

AGE: 19

PASSAGE ON: VULCANIA

PORT OF EMBARKATION: GENOA, ITALY

RESIDENCES IN OLD COUNTRY: VIENNA, BUDAPEST

REISDENCES IN UNITED STATES: QUEENS, VARIOUS PLACES

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here

today at the home of Stephen Baker in New York City. Today is August 18th 1994. And Mr. Baker came through Ellis Island from Hungary in 1940 when he was nineteen years of age. I'm very happy to be here. And I think we could start right at the beginning. If you would say your birth date and where in Hungary you were born.

BAKER: I was born in April 1921 in Vienna. And left Vienna at age three, went to Budapest with my two brothers and lived there for nineteen years, that is seven, sixteen years.

LEVINE: Now was, was your family--? Were your grandparents Austrian or Hungarian or--?

BAKER: My mother, my mother was born in a town called Fiume, F-I-U-M-E. And that was the best thing she ever did. That is how, that had a lot to do with our ability to leave Hungary and get on the Italian quota, which was open and relatively free in the late thirties or early forties because Mussolini discouraged any immigrations. So that was an open quota while the Hungarian quota was closed for six or seven years. Plus the fact that the United States is known, as it has been well-publicized, has begun to discourage immigration to the United States because of the problems in Europe. They were afraid that they would be overwhelmed by refugees. So the Hungarian, the Hungarian quota was closed. And for quite a while it seemed hopeless for us to be able to leave Hungary simply because we couldn't get permission to enter the United States. We had permission to leave Hungary but we had no place to go. And we wanted to come to America. So it seemed hopeless. But then by some fluke what had happened is that this city, Fiume, which was on the borderline between Hungary and Italy and switched

loyalties, whichever seemed more experienced at the time in a typically Italian/Hungarian fashion. That's the way it works in Europe. Decided to join Italy to become an Italian citizen. Mussolini had a lot to do with that. And what has happened is that now my mother became Italian citizen legally.

LEVINE: Because she had been born there.

BAKER: Because she was born as a, in Italy all of a sudden. She was actually born in Hungary but now she was an Italian citizen. We were born in Austria but we were under twenty-one so we simply--. We were--. We, we became Italian citizens, too, on paper. And that's how we received our visa. And all this happened in, in, in the 1940s roughly about a month before Hungary entered the war. And, as a matter of fact, the, the, the liner, the ocean liner, the ship, that we, we crossed the Atlantic on was the last one that has left Italy because Italy also joined the war. It allied itself with Germany and it entered the war against France. So while we were crossing the Atlantic, as a matter of fact, our captain has received instructions from Italy, from the Italian government to return instantly so that it could be converted into a, a troop ship. And for, for about a day or so we were just floating in the ocean. The captain couldn't make up his mind. But then in typically Italian fashion he decided to do what was best for his crew and for himself

and for all the passengers and he continued to come to New York. And to the best of my knowledge he gave himself up as a prisoner, prisoner of war of some sort. In other words, he was held in custody, and then the ship, too, during the war.

LEVINE: Were you aware of any of this at the time?

BAKER: I got some--. I got some wind of it. Nobody knew exactly what was going on because the captain kept pretty much to himself for obvious reasons. He was a traitor by Italian law.

LEVINE: Because he continued?

BAKER: Because he continued. He, he, he received orders to turn back, to turn his ship back to Italy. Italians, I mean, it was wartime and the fact that we had about a thousand passengers aboard didn't concern the Italians to the point where they would just let a ship go. This was a big ocean liner, Italian line, called Vulcania, a luxury liner. Of course when we crossed the ocean it became less of a luxury liner. But still it was, it was, as far as I, as far as we were concerned, the three kids, this was a sort of vacation. Good food, swimming pool. And it was--. We, we looked at it as a vacation.

LEVINE: Well, there was also something that you mentioned about having discovered that your grandfather had been Jewish or was Jewish. How did that come about?

BAKER: Now my father could not leave Hungary. That has become obvious in the late thirties that he would have difficulties. In the first place, he was an outspoken person. He was-- He had political leanings. He was wealthy. He was articulate. He joined movements that were not too friendly. He, toward Germany, he did not approve of Hitler. He said so. He had a textile factory, a number of factories. He refused to manufacture German uniforms. He didn't-- He thought that Hungary should never be subservient to Germany, and particularly not to Hitler. Now this was not-- He didn't, he didn't take this position as a Jew. He was-- He felt, he felt he was a, that he was a Hungarian. He was quite the patriotic Hungarian. He served in World War I. He got tons of medals. He was very proud of his service. He thought he would be always safe in Hungary because he fought for Hungary. He just didn't like the idea of that Hungary would be a kind of a satellite to Germany, which it has become more and more so. He kind of-- He was ahead of his time. He knew that-- He understood Hitler. And he understood that eventually Hungary would be, would be, would almost become part of Germany, which has happened at the end of the war. Now in-- Hungarians were, because they were basically part of the alliance, the German alliance, was not,

was treated differently from, let's say, from Poland or from other countries that would be occupied by the Germans. Hungary was never, at least for a long time, was never legally occupied by Germans. There were plenty of Germans used Budapest for headquarters. The royal palace was an important headquarter in, for the Germans. But they felt that the Hungarians and Germans were fighting on the same side. So the Jewish question became less pressing in Hungary than, let's say, in Poland for a while. But then it, then it--. As Hitler rose to power and he began to change the German legal system, as far as the Jewish population was concerned, that had reflected itself in Hungary, too. And he, Hitler, tried to put pressure on Hungarian government to, to change the system to put pressure on the Jewish population. And in some, some ways Hungary went through the same kind of changes that Germany did only not to that extent. That is, it was, it has become more and more difficult for a Jewish professional to become, let's say, a doctor or a lawyer. The educational system has suffered. There were less Jewish people accepted in the universities. And anti-Semitism became a national policy up to a point. But the Hungarians were never a hundred percent anti-Semitic. And even if they were, they have a--. They had a history of anti-Semitism. But that was kind of balanced by their antagonism toward any occupation or, of any country that seemed to be more powerful and--. And they had a sense of independence.

And they didn't like interference from Germany. So it kind of--. This thing went back and forth. And what, what has happened basically is that the government, which is the parliament, the ministry, the prime minister, has changed a number of times, four or five times, before 1940, between 1937 and 1940. And every time it would change the laws would change. Now for--. And the laws were complex and arcane. Sometimes they followed the German pattern. Sometimes they were kind of improvised. And so my father was Jewish. And then he was non-Jewish. And then he was Jewish again. And my mother, of course, was Lutheran. So she was okay for a while. But there was a time when even she has become Jewish depending on the laws and the system of, of, of the, the family roots, the grandfather, the father. You know it was possible to be twenty percent Jewish, forty percent, seventy-five percent, a hundred percent depending on your parentage going way back. My father's--. He, himself, didn't exactly know. He couldn't trace back his heritage that far. He had some Polish parentage. He had some Swiss parentage. There was a mixed breed. We never practiced the Jewish religion. There was a--. I never thought of myself as Jewish. In school we were not considered Jewish. We didn't go through the rituals.

LEVINE: Did you practice Lutheran?

BAKER: We practiced Lutheran. But there was--. There came a time just before the forties when I found out that I was not only, not only--. That I was legally Jewish. And the way I found this out—and my brothers too—was simply going to school. And one evening they had a meeting of some sort with the Germans, some German speakers. And I was stopped at a door and not allowed to enter. And I was told that the reason for that is because I was Jewish. I was a Jew.

LEVINE: So your papers had been searched out to discover--?

BAKER: The paper--. The Germans went through all the documentation in school. Of course, documentation in Europe at that time and probably historically always, has been much more extensive than in the United States. I guess privacy's not hold as sacred in Europe. It's important where you came from. Your religion appears on the passport and everywhere else. It's one of the--. Even on the income tax return. So, you know, it's relatively easy to trace back somebody's roots.

LEVINE: Do you remember how you felt when you were told—

BAKER: Well I remember exactly because it was an evening and I was with my younger brother. And we were kind of, we were not exactly model boys. That is we--. Because our

family was falling apart obviously we were kind of--. And my mother had her hands full trying to make it possible for us to come to the United States very little attention was paid to the family. We didn't have a family as such. We didn't even live with our parents. We lived all over the place including a Catholic school for a little while just to get things straight.

LEVINE: Was this because of all the political things that were going on?

BAKER: It's because, because my, my mother particularly, and my father, knew, foresaw what was going to happen. And they, they were, they, they looked out for, for us, too. They wanted us to grow up, to come to America as quickly as possible. My father knew that he would stand in the way so he disappeared and, and hid for quite a while until, until about, well, until after the war more or less.

LEVINE: What is your father's name by the way?

BAKER: Oscar.

LEVINE: And your mother?

BAKER: Renee.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

BAKER: Levinsky. It sounds very Polish to me.

LEVINE: So your father went and hid.

BAKER: So he went into hiding. And for three or four years it was the mother who took care of us. I have no idea if she received any money from my father or not. I'm not even sure if they were, they kept in touch. We were told that he was drafted into the army, which was not quite the case. He was hiding. He just, he knew that he would be--. If he would be caught then we would be, we would take the brunt of it, too. So he kind of pulled away from the whole situation. And that is a decision that was made between my mother and my father for our sake. But as a practical matter, now my mother was left on her own, a very capable strong woman. She built up a, built up a little advertising agency kind of garage type of thing at home. And she earned some money, enough to take care of us. And then she met someone only a year or two before we came, a German refugee, who was running from, away from Germany, also hiding, who was a publisher of one of the German magazines and has spoken against Hitler. And they were chasing after him. He ended up in Budapest. He met my mother. And he went into hiding at her apartment, also, as an advertising man. And actually,

became a functional advertising agency except he has never left home except in the evenings. Because if he would have been caught that would have been the end. I remember little episodes where he would, we would walk, take a walk in the evening with him. One time the bicycle came by and almost accidentally hit him. And he fell. And the police appeared trying to help him because it was a traffic accident. And even though he was badly hurt he told the police, don't worry. I'm okay. And walked away as fast as he could. So he was--. It was a kind of a touch and go situation. We had--. We got to the point where we became, you know, we, we began to understand it.

LEVINE: You understood that he was hiding out?

BAKER: That we understood. And we also understood that probably--. In fact, we suspected that my mother has divorced my father first for the sake of, to make, to make it possible for us to leave. And then, then she fell in love with this other man and actually he and my mother and the three of us came over with the father left behind. Now that doesn't mean that, that we didn't, that we cut off our father or that we forgot about him. We just didn't know what had happened to him. And as far as we were concerned, to have a stepfather as intelligent and knowledgeable and speaking a half a dozen languages, and being a, a nice person, as far as we were concerned, was a, was a good

thing. This is basically what happened. We, we a thing that – when we left we considered ourselves Jewish by law but almost without religion or without any loyalties to any religion or even, at that point, even nationality. We were kind of people without religion and people without country, which in retrospect maybe was a good thing because when we came to America it was relatively easy for us to put the past behind us. We didn't want anything to do with it. It was also a blessing in disguise that we were kind of bounced about for three or four years on our own, all three of us—I'm talking about three boys—because we all have become relatively successful in our own professions. My younger brother had become a multi-millionaire in the real estate in Seattle. My older brother has become an executive in a manufacturing plant. I've had a reasonably successful career in advertising. I was able to write twenty-two books on the side. All this I think had a lot to do with our childhood, which was not too---. It certainly had no form or shape. We were people of our own.

LEVINE: What, what are your brothers' names?

BAKER: It's---. Peter is the older one and Tom is the younger one. And it's very interesting to me to see what happens when, even though you come from the same family, when in the early twenties you come to a new, you enter a new culture, and how you react to it and then what happens to people in

twenty or thirty years. And it's interesting to me how we all have become successful but how we went about it in such different ways. For example, my younger brother wouldn't dream of living in New York. He's an outdoor man. And he is an entrepreneur. And he is very much aware of the value of money. And he--. That's the way he developed. I've, I became--. And he--. The point is this that he has discovered that in America it was possible to make money. That was his--. That's a major thrust in his life. I'm not saying that's good or bad. But that's the way he thought. I discovered that in America you could, that creativity was paid for, which came to me as somewhat of a surprise. So I--. That is what I cultivated. First I became an art director. And then I became a writer. Then I had my own advertising agency and spent most of my life in the creative end of the business. My older brother, he discovered that he could do almost anything in America he wanted to and it didn't matter where he came from. And he probably was the type that would--. He probably--. He went back to Hungary and Germany a number of times. And he used that background to succeed in America. In other words, they used him as an expert on, on international business. But each of us discovered something about America that came, that kind of fell into our lap. And we were able to use whatever talent we had and probably develop it the way we probably wouldn't have done it in Hungary because we

wouldn't have had the opportunity. We probably would have ended up in some job and do what we were told.

LEVINE: Can you think of any experiences either you or your brothers had in Hungary that foreshadowed how you would lead your life once you got here?

BAKER: That's an interesting question. And I've thought about it. I have a feeling that there is such a thing as American psyche. There is a temperament. There are people who are almost destined to succeed in America even though they haven't grown up here. Just how that happens and why is, depends on the circumstances. But I think with my mother making it on her own as a woman, which was, which is quite an accomplishment, was quite an accomplishment in that time and place, seeing my father, overcoming disappearing and, and, and doing what was best. See that kind of, these kind of decision making, that kind of entrepreneurship—

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

BAKER: I think all three of us became very entrepreneurial. And I don't know how entrepreneurial, degrees, but we certainly weren't stuck in any mold. We had no intention of

becoming part of the Hungarian community. We never talked or had any feelings about going backwards or even looking back. We were all trying to look forward. And we just, we thought that this was a Pandora's box. I mean we could, that anything was possible. Even today I'm surprised of the opportunities that exist, and the idea, for example, in my case where I could go from doing art to advertising and to writing. And now I spend more and more time writing books successfully. And have, and having gone through building up my own business and seeing my younger brother buying and selling co-ops and homes. And seeing all that's going on, this is a, to me, even now I think of it as a land of opportunity. I think it's difficult to understand just how much that exists in America unless you come from somewhere else. And I think that the reason that some immigrants succeed in this country, that they're, they're able to forge ahead and pass and surpass sometimes natives is because they realize the opportunities and they, they latch onto them and make something out of it. Because they--. Some Americans if you live in the same culture all your life you may become disgruntled because your standards are different. But when you have no--. When you come from very low standards this is a, this is quite a change. And it's for the better, no question about it.

LEVINE: Well, let's talk about your actual leaving. Do you remember? Were you, you were examined in Hungary before you left?

BAKER: We were--. We, of course, had to go through the American consulate, which is basically getting a visa and getting permission to enter the country and getting some affidavits, getting some sponsorships so we wouldn't be a liability here, which we got almost by happenstance. My mother met someone who happened to be an American. And she said I'll take, I'll be your sponsor. She never--. We never used her resources. We didn't have to. But we had a sponsor. There were--. Of course there were--. We had to go through documentation in Hungary. And then, of course, in Italy it became a little difficult at that time because Italy was about to enter the war. But my feeling is that the Italian government—and certainly the population and the government, too—was kind of a, welcomed the opportunity to let Jews go as opposed to put them in concentration camps and kill them. I--. My feeling and—if you want to go back into history that bears it out—Italians are not, deep down, they're not anti-Semitic. They had--. They had Mussolini but he wasn't anti-Semitic either. He was playing the game to appease Hitler a number of times. But basically Italians were friendly. So it was relatively possible to cross Italy. Yugoslavia was a little bit of a problem because it was an enemy of Hungary. In Europe

you have friends and enemies. Every nationality has a very strong position, which goes back into history and the, the, it's important. But we had the papers. We had the passports. And we, to the best of my recollection, when we arrived in the United States in the evening, in the afternoon, Americans came aboard first to examine the ship to see if there were any problems. America has become careful not to let enemy aliens or spies enter the country. This was--. We weren't in war but we were close to it. Then the, to the best of my recollection, the ship went to New York, Manhattan, released the first class passengers. And then the ship turned back and went to Coney Island, I mean, Ellis Island. I'm sorry. Ellis Island. And we spent three or four hours there being examined.

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty? Could you describe that?

BAKER: Oh, of course. That's, that's a high point in everybody's arrival. And when we got near enough to the, to American shore--. I don't know how near you had to get, about twenty, thirty miles, everybody was on board in the open. The whole ship was loaded on one side. [Laughs] Everybody was looking for the Statue of Liberty. And I remember how it emerged from the horizon. First, of course, we saw the torch. And then it became larger and larger. And I think that was, you know, the reaction of the

passengers. Every time you saw more of the Statue of Liberty was predictably , they were excited. There were shouts and hurrahs. And it was quite a thing. Then, of course, we saw the whole statue. I was impressed by its size. I didn't know it was that big. I'd seen it on postcards but didn't ever really give, give the idea of that magnitude. And it was in the afternoon. The torch was already lit up. And we passed by it. It was a, an overwhelming experience. I mean it was--. Well, of course, we were in our twenties, young. It was just a great deal of excitement. It wasn't any great glee, now we're in America and this and that is going to happen. It--. We were just taking it one minute at a time. Then we saw American shoreline for the first time. Unfortunately, it was the Jersey shoreline [laughs] which was kind of a letdown. We didn't see any great monuments there. But then, then the ship pulled in the New York Harbor and we passed through Wall Street and the downtown Manhattan. It was lit up and it was absolutely fantastic, the impression. The tallest building that I've ever seen was four or five stories high. So now, now we have seen twenty, thirty, forty story high buildings. And it was incredible. The first thing that occurred to me, which office I'm going to work at. There was millions of windows lit up. And then the ship went to one of the piers, midtown. I think it was 59th Street, someplace, or 42nd Street, 42nd Street pier, I think. And we stopped there. To the best of my recollection we were not allowed to leave

the ship except first class passengers. And then we went to Coney Island sic. Ellis Island]. Now interestingly enough, just as an aside, about fifteen years after that, one of our accounts was Italian, has become Italian line. We were--. It was one of our clients in advertising. I was the creative director of an agency called Cunningham and Walsh, which is a fairly major agency. And the client decided that it would be a good idea to, to put me through the experience of, of traveling on one of his ships. And it so happened it was the Vulcania. So it was the same, the same ship--. He didn't know that and I wouldn't tell him. I didn't say anything. We, we caught the ship in Halifax, Canada, the Vulcania, which at that point became a cruise ship. Kind of a luxury cruise ship. We caught it there. We were, of course, traveling first class. We used the, we used that location to do some television commercials aboard. We had about a hundred actors and models aboard to make our television commercials look good. And I remember the moment when this same ship--. And I didn't say anything to anybody. But I knew that now the ship was going, coming to New York, getting in from Canada, getting into the New York Harbor, and taking basically the same route that we took when we came. And it was at night. And I remember leaving the bar, which we were, where we spent most of our, most of our time after hours, the ship, the ship bar, which was very luxurious. We

traveled first class. Leaving all these wonderful people. You can imagine. They were all models and I was young.

LEVINE: What year was it roughly?

BAKER: It was about 19, 1960 somewhere.

LEVINE: So about twenty years after.

BAKER: Twenty years after. Around 19, no it was 1955, someplace around there. I was still single. And this was, of course, to me I had a good time. And but I decided to leave, leave the festivities downstairs and go out by myself. And I found the same spot on the deck that, that was familiar to me. And I stood there and I watched the Statue of Liberty and I watched the skyline again standing at the same spot. And it was quite moving to me, you know, thinking of what has happened in such a short time. I have money. I have a position. I had a job. I have a future. I even had a past in America. And the people I was associating with and the difference between that. And only at age twenty, you know, standing in the midst of Polish, Rumanian, Hungarian and Czechoslovakian refugees, you know, somewhat desperate going third class. So that was a, that was kind of a moving experience. But coming back to Ellis Island, to the best of my recollection, we stopped there. I think they examined a number of, of arrivals at Ellis Island

in the forties kind of on a selected basis. I'm not sure exactly why we stopped there. But we were examined at Ellis Island. We passed. That was my recollection. We passed some officials upstairs in--. Well it was the same room that now is used as a--. Where the people would, where the benches are--. The Great Hall, I think they call it Great Hall. But we passed by there. There was a desk. And I was very much impressed by the reception. I think I mentioned this to you on the telephone. We came from a background where people in uniform, or anybody representing the government in any shape or form, was an ominous presence. Here we could--. And we were very scared. Because we had had the experience many times where our documentation seemed to be in order, and something would happen and we would have to turn back, or even go to jail, or even go to concentration camps, being shot. So we never knew. It was--. These were uncertain times. This was the feeling, the experience that we had going back two or three years in Hungary. I don't mean to say that we were living in fear. But we certainly were very much aware of this possibility. And we had enough experience, as now Jewish people--. Incidentally, I, I was thrown out of school and taken again and thrown out again depending on who sat in the ministry. But so we knew about the uncertainties. It was very surprising and gratifying to me to--. And it was the first experience to meet Americans in uniforms because these--. I guess they

were guards or some sort of officials, custom people sitting at desks. And they spent only less than two or three minutes going through the documents and asking very few questions, mostly looking at us. And having a cup of, having coffees in paper cups and just sitting there very comfortable. One had his jacket off, you know. I mean these are the impressions you get as a, as a kid, you know, sitting in his chair. And they were laughing. And they seemed to have a good time. And they were very friendly to everybody. And they spoke about six, seven languages. And they had translators. And he spoke to my mother in German. And my father was trying, my stepfather was trying to show off his English so they spoke English to him. And generally, they thought that--. They looked at us, the three kids. We were all tall and looked in good shape. And they said good luck to you. And we need more like you and go ahead. Good luck to you. And the first time in my life that an official would smile and say good luck to you. Because that wasn't the way, you know, in the military culture. That was a very--. It made an impression on me, an impression on us, I think, all of us. And then we passed--. And we got to New York in the evening. And we were picked up by an organization called HIAS, Hebrew Immigration something something.

LEVINE: Assistance Society, or something like that.

BAKER: Yeah. Which was--. Which incidentally had no--. Which picked up passengers of any religion. And we were given room and board for a couple of weeks, for about a month or so. My mother got a job ,with my stepfather, faster so they could leave. We were still there. But we just stayed there until each of us got a variety of jobs. My first job was in the World's Fair working in a Hungarian restaurant washing dishes. Then I became--. Then I got a promotion to be a night watchman in the same Hungarian pavilion. That was the first job. Believe it or not, I was so inexperienced that I knew that the World's Fair was in Queens, and having come from Budapest , which is relatively compact city and it's possible to walk from one end to another, I thought I could walk to Queens. I gave up after about, I don't know. I spent almost a day walking. And I finally took the subway. And got to World's Fair and just walked in and got a job immediately. Now this was the Hungarian pavilion. I didn't speak any English at all. So at least I could communicate. And I never left--. Then I didn't leave Queens for a month or so. I got an apartment right there. Never came back to HIAS. It was that kind of a life, you know. You kind of took one day at a time.

LEVINE: Would HIAS had, had referred you to the World's Fair?
Was that what—

BAKER: No, no, no. Some people told me that maybe I should, maybe there were opportunities there, job opportunities and, and maybe I should apply to, go to the Hungarian restaurant, the Hungarian pavilion, which had a restaurant. And the restaurateur was a Hungarian whose name was familiar to me. So I could--. It was a--. It was a famous restaurateur in Budapest. So I could approach him. I could talk to him. And he said, okay. We'll put you up in the kitchen. Now that wasn't the best job in the world in terms of learning American ways. But when you work in a restaurant you get time off after lunch, between lunch hours and dinner hours. And those three or four hours in the next two or three months became immensely valuable because I could walk around the World's Fair and look at the American movies and look at the General Motors building and look and get a feel of this whole thing. It was very exciting to me. That was the first job I had. After that I, we all, as I said, we all dispersed. I went to--. I tried to get a scholarship. I tried to get to college. But I didn't finish high school because I didn't have an opportunity. I found a small college in Missouri some place that was willing to take a chance. Put me through a quick high school course. Of course, on my test I was just below an idiot because I, I mean my IQ was about seventy because I couldn't understand the questions. But they kind of saw the light. They put me on the football team figuring that because I knew how to play football except they didn't know that

football in Europe means soccer. There was some confusion there. But they put me as a kicker. And I got a scholarship being on the football team. And held down about two jobs in college to pay for the tuition. And spent a lot of time in the summertime and after that out of sheer curiosity traveling in the United States and America to find out what kind of a place it was. Because of my background and interest in writing, which goes way back—kind of a journalistic type of temperament—

LEVINE: You were interested in that—

BAKER: I was interested in where I was. And I, I think that-- Well, I, I crisscrossed the United States a number of times. And I've been in almost every state except two or three. I haven't been in Alaska. I haven't been-- There are certain states I skipped. But the thing I learned, and probably understood, the United States as much as anybody. I hitchhiked. And we caught-- Once in a while I would join some hobos and travel on freight trains and, you know, do the best. And held down dozens of jobs anything from working from an oilfield to, of course, the restaurants. And loading trucks and driving trucks and picking apples. You name it, whatever was available I would take, no problem, because I was in good, I was in good health. And learned a lot about the United States. Now this is the kind of knowledge that came in handy later on because in

advertising--. As a matter of fact, I wrote a book on it. And later on I, I taught advertising. And one of the interest, one of the subjects that is very interesting to me is the regional differences in the United States. People think of the United States as one big happy family. But it's not quite so. And in marketing, of course, this becomes important, the regional differences. And it's something that I actually taught, which kind of strikes me curious because the first twenty years I spent somewhere else. And here I am teaching Americans about America. But these things happen.

LEVINE: Well why don't you give some of the highlights of your, of your career?

BAKER: Of my career?

LEVINE: We'll have--. We'll have some information in a separate file that people can look it. But what do you feel most proud of or grateful for having the opportunity to have done?

BAKER: I'll keep it very brief. I was trying to weave that in. I think that--. I found it--. I found my rootlessness, root, not route. R-O-O-T, rootlessness, an advantage because I never had any notions about belonging to any group or even belief

system. It was very easy for me to, to get a, a, a kind of an overall look at the whole situation. And that helped a lot. I drifted into advertising. But I think that because of the background in Europe and because my parents, and because my stepfather's experience as a publisher and my mother's talent as an artist, it didn't quite come as a total surprise. I was--. Luck had a lot to do with it. Although it was the first six or seven or eight years, or maybe even ten years, were pretty difficult in a, in a traditional way. That is, I didn't have any money. I didn't know--. I didn't know anybody. I had to learn the language, which was important to me because you can't be in the communications business and not know the language. You certainly cannot be in charge of promoting a product or influencing people and not speak their language. Understanding the culture was, I went about it consciously. I wrote a number of books about it eventually. I worked in many--. I don't even want to go through it because I had so many different jobs. And they were very different from one another. They were any, anywhere from manual labor to, you know, working on constructions to doing illustrations for magazines and making a fairly decent living out of it. I got a job in small agencies. I always wanted to get into a larger agency. I was able to do that age twenty, twenty-nine or something like that. I joined—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now. This is tape two. And I'm speaking with Stephen Baker. And it's August 18th 1994. Okay. So you, you were saying about all the different kinds of jobs that you have had.

BAKER: Right. And I ended, ended up in a major agency. And I've become a reasonably successful in a short time. I was the vice president during my early thirties. And got substantial amount of publicity on some of my work. Probably the one that was most important was "let your fingers do the walking" for the yellow pages, because of the support of AT&T, which is a large company. If you get into something like that you receive a great deal of exposure. But I think that what, what helped me a lot in my career was the variety of experiences in my background, the understanding of America, which, which sounds curious. But and, and it's probably different from the average person because nothing came naturally. I studied. I read. And I think I must have read the New York Times beginning at age thirty and I don't think I missed a day. So it's still even at this age to me it's a great--. I'm a kid in a toyshop. I mean it's all very exciting to me. In a way my life is very interesting to me. And I feel lucky that, that I get so much joy out of discovering things. That helped a lot

because in a, in a way it put me in the situation at the same time it never quite--. I was always able to because of the differences in cultures it was always remained somewhat this looking from the outside in type of approach, which, which you get if you, if you dropped into a new, totally new situation. And you go through that experience once. You never forget it and it kind of becomes part of your personality. I mean, when I crossed the United States on top of freight cars I had my camera with me. I was put in jail. I was taking notes. I was put in jail because I wasn't supposed to travel as a, as man and an alien, which I ignored. But and I kept a diary. I still have about twenty books of everything. This kind of an experience, which has become part of a personality, you know, helped a lot in advertising where you deal with so many different demographics and so many different people. Also, advertising is trying to keep ahead of trends. And when you become conscious of this society, which changes, you know, much faster than any other in, in the world. When you become conscious of it you, you develop a curiosity and the ability to predict trends as they come, and see them coming. And even now, if you would ask me about music or fashion or, or what the changes in our society I could probably write about it or talk about. It's, to me it's very interesting. I read a lot, too. And my friends are, come from all walks of life. This, this helped in advertising. Also, I'm not sure if this has much to do--. It has something

to do with the background. In Europe you find more renaissance people. That is, things are not quite as specialized because it's a smaller society. You can do a number of things at the same time and it's perfectly okay. I, I thought it was quite natural to be able to, to have artistic ability, to draw, which I learned in evening classes, learned and be artistically inclined. Work with pictures but at the same time be, work with words, too. In other words, a combination of art and writing to me became a natural marriage. I didn't see the difference. Now, of course, when you work in an advertising agency, you're either an art director or you're a copywriter. But it--. And I was an art director because I didn't master the language enough, at least in the opinions of my superiors, to be a copywriter. So they put me in the art department. So I became kind of an art director. This is how--. This was probably responsible for a fairly quick rise in the advertising business. As an art director I discovered quite soon that most art directors felt almost alienated from the word people. In other words, there were two camps. One was dealing with pictures, the other one was dealing with words. And they took it as a--. It became--. It was, it was obvious to both camps that one had nothing to do with the other. And they were at odds. To me it was the same thing with communications. So I became one of the, one of those art directors who could actually write. Now in the agency this wasn't that simple because of the, of the

tendency to put things and pigeon hole people and say this is what you are, and you know, put up or shut up. But under--. On the other hand, there was this drive on my part to verbally express myself, too. So what I, I began to do is to write articles for magazines. And write about advertising to advertising people, for advertising people. I would use--. I would write--. Of course, I would write for general magazines, too, but that's something else. But basically I spent a considerable amount of time explaining advertising to advertising people. And particularly, art direction. And this was in, in that time, at that time was quite a breakthrough because I was probably the first verbal art director that ever burst upon the scene. And I did it--. And it happened in a very obvious way because when you're in print people know who you are. I got my pictures there. And so I was writing articles. I was writing columns first for a magazine called "Art Direction". And then quickly a magazine called "Advertising Age", which is the bible in the industry, came about and asked me to do a monthly column, a bi-monthly column for them first in art direction and then in advertising. And I did that for many, many years, about fifteen years, sixteen years. But that kind of exposure became very helpful because of a number of, many thousand of clients would read "Advertising Age". So I became important for my own company as a spokesman, and somebody who was known for his creativity. Not because necessarily I was more creative

but I was the only one who could put it on paper. So we got accounts as a result of it. And I became an executive probably faster than most people. And eventually I was writing copy. And after my campaign for AT&T I decided to go into business on my own with the help of AT&T. And I have an agency for over twenty years. And developed, you know, we had some large accounts, seventy people. And that's my advertising background.

LEVINE: Can you think of any attitudes that, that you brought with you? I mean you've sort of mentioned some of them. I mean the rootlessness was a helpful thing. But any, any attitudes that came through your mother, father, stepfather that you would say that you—

BAKER: Well, yeah—

LEVINE: most of your lifetime you drew on, drew upon.

BAKER: Well, I think that this is pretty common. I think you develop certain attitudes when you change cultures and you accept the fact that you are going to live in a different culture. Now you mentioned before that some people get stuck in their own culture anyway. They're just going from one location to another. Chinatown is Chinatown. But if you, if you have that kind of experience, which is almost traumatic experience, it's a, it's a shock therapy. It's a culture shock.

Then I think your mind becomes a little more open and flexible. It's got to because you have to reject a whole lot of beliefs that you have before. And—

LEVINE: Can you think of some you rejected? Maybe that would be—

BAKER: Well, I rejected the kind of patriotism that I learned as a child in Hungary which was very militaristic and no nonsense and terribly important. It was the greatest thing that could ever happen to you was to be killed in war for your country. I don't mean I rejected it to the point. All three of us served in the army. But I changed--. I certainly took on a more, a different approach to war and fighting because Americans are quite pragmatic about wars. There's a relatively little emotionalism and a lot of practicality. And by and large we're a very peaceful nation. We're not inviting war. We're, as far as I can see, most of our wars are defensive. Some people will argue that but depending on the way you look at it. That's one of the, this militaristic attitude. Now that's Hungarian, you know, where the hussars comes from and all kind of nonsense that goes with the culture that is over a thousand years old and has been in wars after wars. I also became conscious of the fact that military power was not necessarily on the top of the list of success of--. It wasn't the, it wasn't the only thing that would predict a nation's success. And a

good example of this today, of course, is Japan and Germany, which has practically no military power and are among the most successful nations in the world. In other words, I became conscious of the fact that economy and your, and intelligence have a lot, has as much to do with success as tanks, the number of tanks or the military. That's one of the things. You asked what I rejected. Is that—

LEVINE: What you rejected. And then on the other hand, what did you embrace if you can think of it that way, in this country as a cultural attitude you might say.

BAKER: Well, talking about rejections. I also rejected-- I, I thought it wasn't that important to, to be, to, to be a, a Hungarian. When I came to America from day one I wanted to be an American to the point of absurdity. I mean as a young man, you know, I would go to movies. And around that time there were movies where you could walk in and stay as long as you want. And I thought, my god, for ten cents I can stay there for four hours. I would stay for four hours and see the same movie over and over again to get my money's worth. But basically I was very much intrigued by the movie heroes of, of those days that represented America. The Gary Coopers, the John Waynes, the Jimmy Stewarts and that kind of thing. That made a profound impression on me to the point where I began to, to swagger

and go to Texas and do all kind of things to, to be like them. Went through that phase. The--. I think the American system, that I embraced is a remarkable phenomenon in history. Looking at it in the larger sense, the way I see it now, and probably embraced it in, in small doses. The fact that it's possible, that it was possible only a short time ago, less than three hundred years ago, for a group of people to, to sit down at a desk and write a some sort of a platform for the way we want to function and then do it, and actually build a nation on a planned basis as opposed to, as opposed to piecemeal, which is what happens in Europe, has happened in Europe, is to me absolutely incredible. I can't believe it. I can't believe it now that, you know, that our forefathers in Philadelphia would sit down and write a constitution and say this is the way to go and then stick with that constitution for, for this long without any major problems. I mean, of course, we made amendments. We changed the constitution. It's supposed to be flexible. But to me it's amazing that, that this was possible. And I'm not sure if Americans or even the world realized this phenomenon. I mean this is fantastic. Now, of course, everybody's imitating success, which is America and everybody's trying to do the same thing. There are nations now that are trying to write constitutions, Russia for one, you know, following in our footsteps. But we were basically the first ones that did this in such a major way. And that--. I can't get over this. I still admire this. I also admire the fact

that we can accommodate so many different cultures and still live in relative peace. We have our problems but they're minimal compared to other nations in the world.

LEVINE: Are you talking about cultures of people from other countries or—

BAKER: From different, different nations. The regional, we don't have many regional differences. We have some, you know, the, the Southerners don't like the Yankees and so forth. But that's compared to other parts of Europe where you actually see, where you see parts of the country breaking off like in Yugoslavia, you know, that, or in other countries, that's, that's minimal. That's mostly the stuff that television is made of. I think it's remarkable. I, looking at, as, as, as somebody within the immigration experience I'm somewhat taken aback by some of the people who come over and so, are so adamant in keeping their ways and cultures at the expense of what I consider is an American culture. I do think that we have our own culture. We don't always realize just how strong it is until we go to Europe some place and listen to them talking about America. America does have a, at this point—and this is only about two hundred years—has developed its own ways and culture which is imitated all over the world. We probably are--. We have probably the, made the most profound culture differences in the world that any nation ever made

including Germany with all its, all its musicians and poets or France with all its wonderful culture. It, it--. I think it dwarfs. It's, it's--. What we have is so much more powerful.

LEVINE: Now could you--? Could you try to pinpoint what it is that makes American culture stand apart from other cultures, European cultures in particular, I guess.

BAKER: Well, it's a very open mind to changes. And you can see how fast our music changes, our heroes change. We have a very short attention span. It's not--. That's not necessarily a personality trait. The reason for that is because we have such powerful media. And if anything that happens gets an enormous amount of exposure, people get saturated by it and forget it. I'm amazed how quickly people forget. How quickly something comes to peoples' attention. The O. J. Simpson trial is an example. Things that happen in Africa is an example. Right now it's the Rwanda problem. Tomorrow it'll be something else. As a writer I'm, I'm very much aware of this because I watch the books come out on the Persian Gulf War. And I spoke to publishers and I said how many did you print? I mean this war will be over within a few months and you'd better sell out. They said we know it. And we just printed enough. Some people got stuck, some people didn't. As soon as the war, that war was over we forgot about it. As

soon as the, the African starvation problems were over we forgot about it. Now we have new ones. Yugoslavia was very much in the foreground a few months back. We forget it. The Olympics, the ice skating problem we had were on the cover of magazines and now it's all over. Nobody ever, nobody knows Kerrigan, nobody remembers.

LEVINE: Whereas in Europe—

BAKER: In Europe these things are much, they, they stay. They become part of culture. Less and less so but still compared to the American speed and the rapidity by which we change, it, it, it Europeans don't even. They still don't understand it. They don't understand how we can have two Woodstocks only twenty-five years apart. One is sponsored by--. One is, one that comes a mass market affair and the other one becomes an expression of a whole new set of idealism. We can't understand how that is possible but it's part of the American psyche. That's--. The language, of course, shows it, too. The language changes so fast. I did an article on that one time about the English language, which I'll be happy to give you. You know talking about the fact that in America you have a new dictionary is coming out every year. In Europe it's maybe every twenty years because things don't change that fast, that's, that's part of this culture. I'm not sure if it's good or bad but I know it is possible and I know it's working

because we do make, we're able to change more rapidly than anybody even Japan. So it's amazing to me although I foresaw it. And it's a good thing I did because I invested my money with that in mind. But we would be climbing out, climbing out of our recession quite quickly. I could see that the American corporations would respond by cutting their overhead, becoming more efficient. All that became--. That's very, that's very American. There isn't another country in the world--. Japan or Germany are still struggling to get back on their feet. And now we are--. I understand just the other day that we have become the number one automobile manufacturer in the world. Japan was, was all over us only five or ten years ago. And the way we did it was GM cut its force, made operations more efficient and just get their act together. Other countries don't do that. There's much more--. They're much more security conscious, security, personal security. In Japan up to the last few years when you got a job it was a lifetime job. In Germany, too, very socialistic. I cannot--. I don't know if that's good or bad depending on your own proclivities. But it's, it's part of our culture. I embrace that because I, I travel in it. I live in it. Good example is when I do books, the last four books I did--. I've got two more to go. Two more are going to be published. Books on cats. People ask me, why, why cats. They ask me if I have a cat. No, I don't have a--. I don't have a cat. I borrowed one. And so they're amazed by it but I'm not because I see

the marketplace. And right now for the last two or three or four years cats are in. So you know we did books and sold two or three hundred thousand copies on cats. I also know that two or three years from now this cats will not work. We got to find something else. It used to be dogs and I did books on dogs, too. But I could see dogs going downhill and cats coming into the foreground. So this is, of course, in a very superficial way of looking at things. But it's indicative of what the way we think. And understanding it and coming from another culture to be able to understand it more so I think is important. I think it helped me a lot because—

LEVINE: You could stand outside and see—

BAKER: I can stand--. I can look from outside in. And I see this and I have no great belief systems, you know, where I think that cats are the only pets to have, you know. I just--. I'm amused by it. I enjoy it. I learn about the subject, whichever way I can. It doesn't have to come from deep inside. It'll come from deep inside once I absorb it, once I learn about it. Then I write about it. So I think that, that kind of attitude, I think goes back to going through different cultures.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

LEVINE: By the way, did you ever have contact with your father after you left Hungary?

BAKER: Yes. We--. After the war we found him. And he lived another ten years, fifteen years.

LEVINE: In Europe?

BAKER: In Europe. We invited him to come to America. He didn't want to. He was in his sixties, fifties, sixties. But we visited him in Budapest. And we found out his story. And it was pretty much the way he predicted it would be. Eventually he became--. He was classified as a Jew. And the final solution in 1943 when it became obvious to Germany that they were losing the war and Hitler in his last hurrah, decided to kill all the Jews. He finally got to Hungary. He didn't--. At that time the relationship between Hungary and Germany had become somewhat difficult because Hungary was trying to end the war, and, of course, Germany would fight on. Hitler would fight on as long as he could. And finally the, the final solution, which was a

methodology has come to Hungary. At the end of the war--. It only lasted for about a year. But Hitler managed to do away with most of the Jews outside Budapest. He began to, to exterminate or export Jews first in, outside Budapest because he felt that this would be easier to deal with because people were less sophisticated. They were possibly more anti-Semitic. It was easier to find, to spot Jews, to find them and to transport them. And as long as the freight cars were moving he was happy. He thought this was some sort of an achievement. This was probably his only way, the only part of the war that he was winning. He was losing. And the more he was losing in, in the real sense the more he depended on this kind of a display of his power. That's my opinion. He finally got to Budapest. And he began to, to take Jews to Auschwitz on freight cars. There was no shortage of freight cars. The military needed it for its own transport but Hitler wouldn't let them have it. It was more important to him to take the Jews to concentration camps. And my father who was at that point was ghettoized. He lived in an apartment with a Star of David on the door in a certain part of Budapest. Was caught. He was taken to what is referred to as a brick factory which was a place where they'd gather up the Jews and take them to railway station and transport them out of Hungary. He was taken there but he escaped. A number of people did taking large groups of people at night, walking them on the streets is not an easy task. Plus the

fact that not all the guards were German. Many of them were Hungarians and they didn't quite approve of the whole thing to begin with. So he managed to hide, escape. They found him. At that point Hitler had pretty much stopped transporting Jews because the war was, the Russians were only fifty or a hundred miles away. There were other things to do. But the Hungarian party, the Arrow Shirts, took over continuing his program. And they rounded up all the Jews including my father. I think I told you. And they lined up all the Jews at a bank of the Danube—that's where my book comes in—and they just, you know, shoot them one by one. But some, some of, some people including my father managed to jump backwards into the river before the gun got to them. And this was--. Most of these people they drowned or froze or whatever. But my father managed to--. He was an excellent swimmer. That's what my book is about. You know he always teaches us to swim, swim or sink. And then he, he himself saved himself by following his own motto. And that's how he escaped. And he did okay. Remarried and went into business again. And he somehow managed to survive.

LEVINE: So what--? The book that you're writing, The Danube, what, what does that cover? I mean what—

BAKER: Well it just covers the Hungarian experience. Otherwise it would get too complicated. But basically, the point is that, you know, it's, it's a, it's a book on survival. And maybe it's not such a bad thing, bad experience to go through that for a young man. It's something that comes in handy.

LEVINE: Well it sounds like you've made the most of all the kinds of experiences that you have encountered in your life. I was curious, too. You said you had movie star heroes when you were learning English when you were first in this country. Did you have heroes after that, other heroes that you emulated in your life?

BAKER: No. Most of the heroes I had were in advertising, professional heroes, people who succeeded in advertising and I, I was very--. I admired their work, commercials, you know. I mean that to me was the ultimate. I became very, very much involved in my work.

LEVINE: Okay. Well I think we can close. This has been absolutely wonderful. Do you have anything—

BAKER: Well, I hope--. No, that's, that's about it.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay. I've been speaking with Stephen Baker. And it's August 18th 1994. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW