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GUSTAV SZABO
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SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, December 15th, 1994. I'm in Manhattan at the apartment of Dr. Gustave Szabo, and I'm going to spell this: Gustav, G-U-S-T-A-V, and Szabo is S-Z-A-B-O. Dr. Szabo came from Hungary, arrived in the United States in 1949. He was twenty-seven when he arrived in America, and he was held at Ellis Island for a brief period. Also in the room is Kevin Daley, who's running the digital recording machine, and Susan Brenna, B-R-E-N-N-A, who is a journalist with New York Newsday newspaper. I will also say that a photographer, Erica Burger, B-U-R-G-E-R, also from New York Newsday, has just taken our pictures and left. Anyway, Dr. Szabo, thank you for letting us come over. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

SZABO: April 4, 1921.

SIGRIST: And where were you born in Hungary?

SZABO: I was born in Budapest, the capital of Hungary.

SIGRIST: Do you know any information or stories concerning your birth, when your mother was pregnant, or when she gave birth to you?

SZABO: No hair-raising that I can remember, or that she would have told me. I was the second son. My brother was two and a half years older. Those were difficult years in Hungary, after the war. My brother was born in 1918, which was still the height of the war. By the time I came around, in 1921, the situation improved considerably, although thousands of Hungarian children were taken in by the Dutch government, and spent years in Holland, because there just wasn't enough food in Hungary. And those relationships lasted then for decades, and the Hungarians still today are very grateful to the Dutch government that they extended their helping hands for thousands and thousands of Hungarian children.

SIGRIST: Was that the first time that Holland had aided Hungary in some way? Was there an established relationship?

SZABO: First that I know of. We had been, I think, friendly with Holland for many, many years. As a child, I went to Holland as a Boy Scout, and participated in the Jamboree, which is the international meeting of the Boy Scouts held every four years, and this happened to be, in 1937, in Holland. And I must say, they couldn't have been nicer.

SIGRIST: I want to say for the sake of the tape that we're probably picking up traffic noise, also. Can you relate to me any stories or information about hardships your family may have suffered during World War One in Hungary?

SZABO: I would not know too much about it, since I was born afterwards. Both my father and my mother came from a middle class family. My father was a stockbroker, and my mother was a teacher. We lived in the heart of the city, in a fair-sized apartment, fair-sized meaning two or three bedrooms. We were typical middle class, I would consider us.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

SZABO: His name was Charles, Dr. Charles Szabo.\

SIGRIST: In Hungarian?

SZABO: In Hungarian it would by Karoly.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

SZABO: K-A-R-O-L-Y.

SIGRIST: And tell me what you know about your father's family background.

SZABO: My father's family were also teachers. My grandfather was a high school teacher in an unpronounceable Hungarian city called [Hungarian], which means: the new city on the foot of the tenth mountain [laughs].

SIGRIST: And we're not sure how to spell that, correct? [Laughs]

SZABO: No, I wouldn't even attempt it.

SIGRIST: What about brothers and sisters, that sort of thing?

SZABO: I had a brother who was two and a half—my father, he had two sisters who I adored. They were my aunts, and they were present at every Christmas and birthdays and what not, and whenever my parents traveled, we were left with one or the other aunt, who took excellent care of us.

SIGRIST: Is there something that really sticks out in your mind about one of the two aunts when you were a child?

SZABO: Sisters—yes, Aunt Sara, who was my favorite, and she played the piano. My father played the piano, too. And I remember many Christmas parties or birthday parties where the two of them played the piano with two—I mean with four—hands, and improvised a lot. I wish I had inherited my father's perfect pitch, but I didn't. So my piano playing stopped after eight years of torture, both for the teacher and for me!

SIGRIST: So your father was musical?

SZABO: He was very musical, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your father's personality and his temperament.

SZABO: He was very outgoing, and maybe a couple of things would typify him. One of the things that sticks in my mind was: if he could afford to live as well as we do, everything would be okay. He never saved money; sometimes we were in debt. I remember the tax authorities coming, putting labels on the furniture as a collateral for the unpaid taxes. But then somehow, the stock exchange changed, and then we went to the French Riviera!

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about—you said you're father was musical. What else did he like to do when he wasn't working? Some of his hobbies, perhaps?

SZABO: His hobbies were travel. They traveled a lot with my mother or with his best friend. And in my opinion he had a talent for languages. He went to a Catholic high school called the Piarist School, which has a school in—either in Buffalo or in Pennsylvania, because the Piarist Fathers who founded that school about hundred fifty years ago in Hungary, after the Hungarian Revolution in 1957, escaped, the entire faculty, with many of the students, stayed in Austria for a couple of months, and then founded two schools in America, one near Philadelphia, the other one near Buffalo. And the one became a private school, and slowly the Hungarian students who came and were children in 1957, by now of course they are middle aged, if not advanced aged people, and as you well know with immigrants, they blend in. And most of the children of the original immigrants do not speak Hungarian anymore.

SIGRIST: You're saying, purists?

SZABO: No, no, what did I say? The immigrants who are—

SIGRIST: No, the name of the order.

SZABO No, P-I-A-R-I-S-T, Piarist Fathers. Originally, I think, they came from Italy, and founded an order in Hungary. And they were maybe the foremost teaching order, and had several schools around Hungary, one in Budapest, one in the unpronounceable city of [Hungarian], and so on.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you the same sorts of questions about your mother. First of all, what was her name?

SZABO: Her name was Katherine Liptay, L-I-P-T-A-Y. They were impoverished nobility. And again, because of her upbringing, she spoke German, French, Hungarian, and some Latin, because girls' schools also taught Latin. Strangely enough, the official language in Hungary, in Parliament, and in the courts, during the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, was neither Hungarian nor German. It was still Latin. Even I had eight years of Latin, six times a week, in my high school, which then of course helped me to learn any other language.

SIGRIST: May I ask you, for the sake of the tape, to define the term "impoverished royalty"? What exactly do you mean?

SZABO: Not royalty—nobility.

SIGRIST: Nobility.

SZABO: Nobility we expect that they had a big estate with some castles and whatnot. That was all gone by the time my mother was born, or I came around. However, her father, who was a manager of an agricultural machinery factory, was also a newspaperman, and he visited America in 1876 for the Centennial, and spent about a month in the United States, traveled around the States, and was even invited at--if I'm correct, Grant was then the President—was invited to the White House. He adored America, and wanted to stay here, but my grandmother said, "I will not go to a country where they are still killing Indians." And Custer's last stand, if you remember, was eight years later. However, he is buried in Budapest Cemetery, my grandfather Liptay, and in his will, he asked that his head rest on that little bag of American soil. He is covered with an American Flag, and there's an English inscription on his gravestone, which says, "Not lost, but gone before. The rest is silence," from Hamlet.

SIGRIST: I'm curious. In your growing up, did you know this grandfather? Was he alive?

SZABO: No, unfortunately he died before I was born.

SIGRIST: Do you know if he brought anything with him from America to Hungary that sort of became the cherished possessions of the family?

SZABO: Yes, I remember at their family home, there was an inlaid glass window over the entrance, which said, "Home, Sweet Home," which he brought from America, of course. Somewhere, I have a picture of him with several Indian chiefs, and he too with a feathered regalia, and he was called Bull Liptay [laughs]. There was "Bull" this and "Bull" that! [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Your grandfather was quite a character!

SZABO: He was quite a character!

SIGRIST: Getting back to your mother—

SZABO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Describe her personality for me, and her temperament.

SZABO: She was shy, quite a contrast with my father's temperament, who was very outgoing and ebullient. But she was a wonderful mother who really spent her life in raising her two sons.

SIGRIST: Can you describe her for me, in words, physically?

SZABO: Physically she was petite. She was blonde, frail. However, I had to leave her behind when I escaped in 1948, but I was able to bring her out in 1955, and about a year later—she'd been to Paris, where she had a brother. That was another story! But she arrived then to the States in 1956, and lived another thirty years here, and died at the age of ninety-six.

SIGRIST: Wow!

SZABO: In full command of her faculties, thank God.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about talents that your mother might have had. You said your father was musical—I mean, what--?

SZABO: She was an artist. She taught art as a teacher in art school. So she drew; she painted. And whatever I learned about drawing and painting, I learned it from her. And I loved to draw as a child, and loved to paint. I'm not very good at it, but I had a lot of fun with it. And she traveled a lot, too. As a young girl—she was born in 1888, so around the turn of the century she spent a year in France, where she learned French, and spent several months in Italy. And Austria being the country right next to Hungary, she spent many summers in Austria, so her German was good, too, because on her mother's side, the grandparents were Germans.

SIGRIST: So she shared your father's interest in traveling around?

SZABO: Absolutely, absolutely.

SIGRIST: Is there a story or an anecdote from your childhood about your mother, a story that you enjoy telling about maybe some interaction that you had with your mother, or something that you shared?

SZABO: I remember a discussion which we had before I escaped, and she encouraged me. This was 1948. Now by that time, of course, Hungary was occupied by the Russians. The Communists rigged the elections, so I felt that it's a hopeless case to stay in Hungary. And I told her, "I have to leave you alone here." My father died before the war. My brother was captured by the Russians on the front, and we know that he and his regiment reached Kiev, but then they were divided into the various gulags, and we never heard of him again. So I had to leave my mother behind alone. But she encouraged me. I said, "Look, you will not be able to help me here. However, if you leave now, I have enough faith in you: you will establish yourself in America." Because I always wanted to come to America as a small child. And I left her, knowing—I was absolutely sure I would be able to bring her out, and I did. And she never regretted it, that I left her alone, although she had a difficult five, six years.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

SZABO: They met through my Aunt Sara, whom I mentioned, because Sara and my mother were teaching at the same high school, and that's how they met and started to date. And I think relatively fast, maybe within a year, they got married.

SIGRIST: You mentioned you had an older brother who was born in 1918.

SZABO: Correct.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

SZABO: His name was Dennis, or Danys, in Hungarian.

SIGRIST: And this is the gentleman who went to Kiev, and then--?

SZABO: That's correct.

SIGRIST: And were there any other children?

SZABO: No, just the two of us.

SIGRIST: The two. Is there a story about your brother, your interaction with your brother?

SZABO: He was the intellectual in the family [laughs], and I was rather the black sheep. He also loved languages and was very good at languages. He, after high school, he spent a year in Vienna, and studied at the Economic Academy in Vienna. Then he spent a year in Paris at the Sorbonne, and he studied English, meanwhile, and Polish and Norwegian. He was really a linguist, I would consider him.

SIGRIST: What's your earliest memory in childhood? The first time--?

SZABO: The first time, when I got lost [laughs]. We went to a fair with my grandfather. And somehow, in the big crowd, I got lost. But of course, they found me. But whenever I misbehaved, my grandfather used to [laughs] say, "That's not my grandson! They must have found another child! My grandson was a very good kid! You are terrible!" [Laughs]

SIGRIST: How old were you--?

SZABO: I was, I think, three.

SIGRIST: Can you explain to me the house that you grew up in as a child, or the apartment?

SZABO: Yeah. It was an apartment house near the so-called central part of Budapest. It was a middle class apartment house. We had, I think, five rooms, and it was ideal, because it was within walking distance from the zoo where I grew up, strangely enough. And it was within walking distance to the skating rink, and later on it was in walking distance to my school.

SIGRIST: Are there any pieces of furniture that stick out in your mind, in your childhood?

SZABO: Yes, the dining room furniture, which was very dark, oak probably, very heavy dining room table with about six chairs, and a credenza with a mirror on top, and innumerable drawers, which were always locked. I had the sugar bowl there on the table, which as you will see, has even a key, that even the sugar was locked, so the maid will not steal the sugar! It's behind the compotes there [laughs]>

SIGRIST: So were there household domestics?

SZABO: Yes, we had a live-in maid, and we had a seamstress who came. We had two seamstresses, strangely: one repaired, I think, my mother's clothes, and the other one, the tablecloths and the bed sheets and the pillowcases. And then, I think once a week or once every ten days came the washer woman, who did the wash. But that was, I would say, in every household of the middle class. These were usually peasant girls who came up to Budapest, and stayed for several years, usually until they got married.

SIGRIST: Does one stick out in your mind, specifically?

SZABO: Yes, one who made excellent desserts. Unfortunately, I have a sweet tooth, and I adore desserts, which I shouldn't eat. My wife is after me to lost ten pounds, but it's very difficult with good Austrian restaurants, and good Hungarian restaurants in New York. And she made wonderful strudel, which is that very thin, leafy Austrian or Hungarian pastry!

SIGRIST: You, your sort of lit up when you mentioned the zoo, and I'm just wondering if you could explain to me: what was your attraction to the zoo, and what you did when you went there as a child?

SZABO: We also had a German governess, until I was about eight, and my brother ten. And she walked with us to the zoo. Usually they were Austrian or German girls, very nice, and we adored them. And there she let us loose, because within in the zoo you can't get lost. However, [laughs] one day we noticed that the caretaker was feeding the polar bear, and somehow left the door open a little bit while he went in to get some more fish! So we opened the door completely, and the polar bear walked out of the cage, and was walking on the street! They caught him; they caught us, and I never got as heavy a beating from the director of the zoo [laughs] than that day. So that sort of sticks out in my memory.

SIGRIST: Who was the disciplinarian in the house?

SZABO: My mother, but if it was anything serious, then it was my father.

SIGRIST: And what would be his method of punishment?

SZABO: Well, as a child I remember he took his belt off, and [laughs], and hit me! But nothing seriously. So corporal punishment was accepted, even at school, too. Some of the teachers hit us—not strongly. But, that was not a mistreatment of children, as it is of course a no-no nowadays in America. It didn't hurt us.

SIGRIST: You brought up school. How old were you when you started school?

SZABO: Six. I went to private elementary school for four years, and then to a Lutheran high school, which was a very strict boys' school. By that time, or during—now, I'm talking about the thirties—there were no co-educational high schools, or very few. So there were separate boys' schools, and separate girls' schools. And this was a very strict and difficult boys' school, thank God, close to us. And I'm showing off, because to the best of my knowledge, it's the only high school in the world that has three and a half Nobel Prize winners as its alumni. We just got two new ones this year, two Hungarians, got the Nobel Prize, one in economics, and the other one, I think, in chemistry. And one of them was above me by two years; I remember him. So, we are very proud of that.

SIGRIST: Was your family very much pro-education?

SZABO: Yes, absolutely. They insisted that we continue after high school, both my brother and I.

SIGRIST: Who was more inclined to enjoy school, you or your brother?

SZABO: As I told you, he was more serious about learning. He was an excellent student. Also, my grades were good, too, but due mainly because I sat in the same bench next to the brain of the class, and I copied everything! So he was the best student in class, and I was second!

SIGRIST: Tell me about the family's religious life. What denomination?

SZABO: We were Catholic, and my mother—my father did not go to church, but my mother did come with us to church. And although I went to a Lutheran school, where—by the way, that will interest you: the tuition depended on your religion. The Lutherans paid, let's say, ten dollars per month. The Calvinists, or the Presbyterians, twenty. The Catholics forty, and the Jews, eighty. And nobody thought anything about it, because the more well to do Jewish and Catholic families supported the poor Lutheran families, whose school it really was! So this was absolutely accepted.

SIGRIST: Was Budapest—was there a large Jewish population in Budapest?

SZABO: Yes. Hungary, which at that time was about maybe eight million, had about five hundred thousand Jews, out of which I would say maybe half of them lived in Budapest.

SIGRIST: And, but would you say that the government officials, the people who were making the rules in Budapest, were all Lutherans, or Catholics?

SZABO: No, not necessarily, because the business world, and I'm thinking of the banks, the stock exchange, the larger industrial complexes, were predominantly in Jewish hands, in the hands of aristocrats, or the new middle class. And we had a two-cameral Parliament like here, the Senate and the House of Representatives. But into the Senate, the members were appointed, similar to House of Lords in England. And there was a place reserved always for the chief rabbi for the Jews, a bishop for the two Lutheran churches—for the two Protestant churches, the Lutherans and the Calvinists—one for the Hungarian Archbishop. I think these four—these are reserved for them just as they were reserved seats, still, for members of the old Hapsburg family, some of the Archdukes and Arch—no, no, there were no women at that time in the Upper House. So, there were Secretaries, let's say of the Interior, could have been a Jew. So there was no discrimination until the late thirties, beginning of forties, [coughs] as Hungary became under the influence of Germany.

SIGRIST: Getting back to the holidays, can you describe how your family celebrated Christmas for me?

SZABO: We always had a family dinner. First of all, in Europe, as you may know, Christmas Eve is celebrated on the twenty-fourth of December. And we had a family dinner, with a big Christmas tree, so we were taken to our grandmother's, so we would not see the decoration of the Christmas tree. Because while we were younger, of course, we believed that Santa Clause brings the Christmas tree, or the angle, or who ever. And presents? They mysteriously appear in our apartment. And then we were taken home around six in the afternoon, and then there was the opening of the presents, and as children we usually had to recite a poem, or play something on the piano, which we had to practice weeks before! And then we were allowed to open our presents, and then there was a family supper.

SIGRIST: And what kinds of foods did you eat for this special celebration?

SZABO: It was usually fish, because according to Catholic tradition, you are not supposed to eat meat on Christmas Eve. So we usually had fish. We had the soup, we had the fish, and then some dessert.

SIGRIST: Would the food be prepared by the domestics, or did your mother do--?

SZABO: Yes. My mother helped, too.

SIGRIST: Is there some specialty that your mother made that she was very proud of?

SZABO: Yes, some of the desserts, which I still adore, that she prepared. And one is a very simple one which is similar to the French crepes suzettes, very thin crepes, but in Austria and in Hungary they usually fill it with apricot jam, and roll it up into sort of long pieces. You can get it at any Hungarian or Austrian restaurant.

SIGRIST: Were there other ways that you practiced your religion at home?

SZABO: Not much. Having gone to a Lutheran school, we had our religious education in the afternoon, twice a week, where a Catholic priest came, and we had our religious education there. And then, Catholic children are confirmed, which is similar to the Jewish bar mitzvah at the age of thirteen. And we also had to serve as altar boys, at the age of maybe ten, eleven, twelve, which was usually in the early morning mass. You had to go there before school, or Sundays at eight o'clock, in the wintry, snowy night. We were not enthused about it, I must say.

SIGRIST: Were there prayers that you were taught as a child that you were required to recite?

SZABO: At the religious hour, or during religious instructions, too. As a matter of fact, we had to learn by heart all the Latin parts that the altar boys say during mass, in Latin, which was not that difficult, because as I told you, we had Latin from fifth grade on, for eight more years.

[End of Tape One, Side A/Start of Tape One, Side B]

SIGRIST: So the language of the Catholic church was Latin?

SZABO: Was Latin.

SIGRIST: So if you said a prayer, you said it in Latin, as opposed to Hungarian?

SZABO: Usually, yes.

SIGRIST: I'd like to talk a little bit now about the approach of World War Two, and what was going on in Budapest as the thirties progressed, and what the political climate was like.

SZABO: After Hitler got in power in 1933, and annexed Austria in 1938, the influence grew tremendously. However, Hungary stayed out of the war, and was neutral, until 1941, when again, under German pressure, Hungary had to enter the war on the side of Germany, and send troops to the Russian front, where two hundred thousand Hungarians perished, at the Donne offensive, already in 1941-42, the winter of '42.

SIGRIST: Was there a growing [unclear] of Nazis in Budapest beginning in the thirties?

SZABO: No, that came much later. Yes, there were however National Socialists already in the late thirties. The government, however, had some pro-German members, and the German influence grew year after year, from 1938 on, through 1944 when the Germans occupied Hungary, which culminated.

SIGRIST: How did your parents feel about what was happening just prior to the war, what was actually going on?

SZABO: Until 1939, when my father died—he died early of cancer at the age of fifty—we did not see or feel anything. However, since World War Two started on September 1st, and we were that close to Germany, there was no doubt in our mind that if Hungary enters the war, it will have to enter it on the side of Germany, because of the proximity. So many well to do, usually Jewish, people, sent their children abroad, already in 1939, to continue their studies abroad. I had several schoolmates who left Hungary in 1939, and we are still in contact. Two of them came to America, one to Canada, one to Australia. And they all survived, of course.

SIGRIST: But your own family was somewhat--?

SZABO: We were—we were not affected until, let's say, 1944, when the German pressure increased so much that Hungary tried to establish a private peace treaty on their own, which they found out, of course. And Germany occupied Hungary, in March.

SIGRIST: Before we start talking about the war in depth, I'm just curious: when your father died, you said he was thirty-eight?

SZABO: In 1939, he was fifty years old.

SIGRIST: He was fifty. How did that affect your family? How did, if at all, how did your life, everyday life, change?

SZABO: It changed. It changed. My brother was already working, and studying, meanwhile, law. I just finished high school, and was somewhat undecided what to do—to go to the university or not—when my father died, early days of October. And he was a member of the stock exchange; he was a stockbroker. So I took over his business, and I was the youngest member of the Budapest stock exchange, at age eighteen, and I was very proud of that, of course! So, I took over his business, and I'm very grateful to several of his friends, who taught me the ropes, and helped me along, because I had no idea about the stock exchange. So that helped, but meanwhile, in January, I started to attend the University of Economics, where I got my doctorate, then, four years later. Because stock exchange was a marvelous place to earn your living, because it was open only for two hours, from ten 'til twelve. So I could go to university before I go, to the university afterwards, and if you had to sign in, I sent my secretary. She signed in for me, stayed there for the class—it was a big classroom, so a hundred people. Nobody knew who was really there. So thereby, I could finish my studies, even not being present at several of the classes, as long as I passed the exams. Which I did.

SIGRIST: What about, perhaps, economic changes within the family? For instance, when your father died, were servants let go, or did your mother--?

SZABO: Exactly, exactly. We had, I think, a live-in maid maybe through 1941, '42. Then we let her go, because of the economic situation, and it was hard to find domestic help. And I think we all learned to live in a more simpler way than we used to live before.

SIGRIST: Was your father's death difficult for your mother?

SZABO: Yes. She was the same age as my father, and it came quite suddenly. He had cancer which they did not diagnose until a couple of weeks before he went to hospital and never came back. By that time, the cancer has metastasized, and it was hopeless.

SIGRIST: To jump to the [unclear], and take this position. I mean, that's—

SZABO: Yeah. That was a great challenge, and I was very proud of myself. And I think that was the best schooling I ever got, was at the stock exchange.

SIGRIST: Why didn't your brother end up being the one?

SZABO: Because he was already gainfully employed at a bank, and was studying already at the university, so it was logical that I should take over. And I was probably more business-minded than he was. He was more the intellectual; I think he would have been an excellent lawyer, or a university professor, but not a businessman.

SIGRIST: All right, well why don't you explain for me what you and your family experienced during World War Two, after 1941, what was going on in Hungary, and how it affected you specifically?

SZABO: Yeah, as I told you, Hungary was neutral 'til '41. We had barely noticed the war. There were shortages, but nothing serious. From '41 on, when Hungary had to enter the war—and I'm using intentionally the words had to enter the war, and this is not Hungarian chauvinism of my mind, finding an excuse, that yes, Hungary did enter the war on the side of Germany. But a book was published maybe five, ten years ago by the then American Ambassador called Montgomery, who was the Ambassador to Hungary. And he wrote a book entitled *The Reluctant Ally*, and wrote very well the very difficult situation in which the Hungarian government was. They did not want to enter the war. Hungary's tragedy over the centuries was that they stopped where they stopped coming from behind the Ural Mountains—it's a Mongolian tribe—and they came to the present site of Hungary in the Ninth Century, and stayed there. It was an ideal place agriculturally; mining was there. Everything was there, really. However, it was always between the German and the Russian Empire, and we were occupied by the Mongols, by Genghis Khan, in 1241 through '43. Then he died, so they left. Then we were occupied by the Turks for a hundred fifty years, from 1526 through 1686. And then the Austrians occupied us for another three hundred years. So there were few years in between where Hungary, for a couple of years, was a world power. But then again, after the second part of the Nineteenth Century, there was an Austrian-Hungarian monarchy where we were equal partners with Austria. But having lost World War One, also on the side of Austria and Germany, Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and two-thirds of its populations, so suddenly it became a very small country. And life was difficult between the two world wars, but strangely enough, they pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps. So the economic situation wasn't that bad until 1942-'43, when more and more items were rationed, and we had to get tickets. We got, I think, two eggs per month, and X grams of butter, and X grams of lard--we still cooked with lard at that time in Hungary—and I don't know, twenty cigarettes or what not.

SIGRIST: What things weren't available to you at this time?

SZABO: We couldn't travel, of course, for obvious reasons. Oranges, bananas, grapefruit, fresh fruit only if and when it grew in Hungary.

SIGRIST: What about household items?

SZABO: Textiles, of course. Egyptian cotton was not available. Not enough wool was available, because most of it was imported from Scotland or New Zealand, or whatever. So imported items—could have been soaps, could have been colognes, could have been some desserts or luxury items, electrical appliances that were made in Germany or Austria or Italy. They were suddenly not available. Photographic equipment, tennis balls.

SIGRIST: So it sort of covered a broad spectrum of--?

SZABO: Yeah! I remember we repumped the tennis balls, and refuzzed them with a little machine that brushed them up so they became more fuzzy again.

SIGRIST: Did the Germans actually invade Budapest?

SZABO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did they come into the city?

SZABO: They invaded the whole Hungary. They invited Governor Horty to Germany; Hitler invited him for discussions. And while he was in Germany, they occupied Hungary.

SIGRIST: And tell me what life was like in Budapest when that happened. How did your life change?

SZABO: Well first we were shocked to look out of the windows and see the German tanks rattling in. And the Germans, the Gestapo, already had a list, so within the first forty-eight hours they arrested hundreds of people, many Jews, but many politicians who were not sympathetic to Germany. Hungary was more sympathetic to France or England, and the ideal thing would have been to stay out of the war like Switzerland or Spain, but it was impossible because of the proximity. And Germany needed the Hungarian agricultural grain, livestock. We had to supply it.

SIGRIST: Now, were you called up in any kind of a draft, to serve?

SZABO: No, I was lucky. I was exempted from draft until I got my doctorate, which was June 1944. And then when I was drafted, by that time the Hungarian National Socialists took over as puppets for the German regime. And then I got drafted, but by that time, all the Hungarian draftees were sent immediately to Germany for training. And I certainly did not want to be trained by the Nazi army, so I had in my pocket a letter to one of the surgeons, written by an uncle of mine who was a professor of the university and an internist, a well-known person, without a date, that I have acute appendicitis, and he must operate immediately. So my mother—and I instructed my mother, should my draft come, send it out to our summer house. And I immediately went to the hospital, got my operation. They gave me another six weeks. The war still was not over; the Russians were coming closer. Then, [unclear] in Budapest that everybody has to sign up, up to age thirty-eight, and I was then—1944, was twenty-three—except doctors, the firemen, and the members of the ambulance corps. Since I was not a doctor, a medical doctor, I'm afraid of fires, so I joined the ambulance corps through our house physician, and became an ambulance driver. That exempted your military service. Little did I know that I will go to the front to pick up the wounded, because the front came closer and closer to Budapest.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about that experience, of being an ambulance driver?

SZABO: It was—that was a very sad, and a very harrowing experience often, because by that time the Nazi government took over, the Jews were put into the ghetto, and kept there.

SIGRIST: This is a ghetto in Budapest?

SZABO: This is the ghetto in Budapest, where there were about two hundred thousand Jews. The Jews in the country were starting, from October or from the summer after the German occupation, were being deported to Germany, but not the Budapest Jews. They were kept in the ghetto, and as you probably know, a Swede diplomat called Wallenberg came to Budapest, who was a member of the wealthiest Swedish family, like the Rockefellers. The Wallenbergs are the equivalent of the Rockefellers in Sweden. He was not a diplomat, but he was sent to Budapest to save as many Jews as possible, financed by America, they claim the CIA. Whether it's the CIA or not, it's really not important. But indeed, he set up shop at the Swedish Embassy, and issued Letters of Safe Conduct, giving Swedish citizenship to many Jews, which the Germans respected. And similar activities were done at the Swedish Embassy, issuing Swedish passports, and by the Vatican, issuing Vatican passports to thousands of Jews, who were thereby entitled to stay outside of the ghetto, in specially protected houses, either by the Swedish government, by the Swiss government, or by the Vatican. But otherwise, we had a curfew from eight o'clock or nine o'clock at night. American bombers came usually at night, when they were decent and they came on the weekends, so the workers would not be killed in the factories or at the railroad yards. Life was tough.

SIGRIST: Were you witness to any kind of destruction, bombings, that sort of thing, personally?

SZABO: Yes, yes, because two-thirds of the buildings in Budapest got destroyed during the war, partly to bombing, and the six week long siege between the German garrison within the city, and the Russians who encircled Budapest, shooting at each other. We spent about six weeks in the basement of our building, going up to our apartments only if there was no air raid.

SIGRIST: When you say we, you're talking about your mother and you?

SZABO: My mother, my mother. And we were hiding a Jewish girl, and later on her mother came, too, so we had two other people in our apartment.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about the experience of, as you say, hiding the Jewish girl in your apartment?

SZABO: It was a risk, but we felt that it's our obligation to help as much as we can.

SIGRIST: And how did you do that? How—what kind of help did you offer?

SZABO: We secured for them false identification papers, off a girl of about a similar age, that she's a refugee from Romania, as thousands of Hungarians came from Romania to Hungary during World War Two. So that was accepted, that they had scant documents. And once you had one identification document, then you could get food tickets and you could get other documents of identification. And she was blonde and blue-eyed, so that helped. She did not have any typical "traits" so that the Nazis would recognize her.

SIGRIST: And the false documentation that was obtained—was it stating that she was a member of your family?

SZABO: No, she was a relatively distant relative, a refugee from Transylvania, who lost her parents and is staying now with us.

SIGRIST: Were lots of Hungarian Gentiles doing this sort of thing?

SZABO: I would say yes. Among my friends, I would say almost everybody was hiding somebody, either in their summer house, or in the basement, or somebody. I would say thousands were hidden, with false papers.

SIGRIST: Is there one incident when you were an ambulance driver that sticks out in your mind?

SZABO: Yes. We were called into the ghetto to assist a seriously ill person, and somebody asked us, could we take him with us, hiding under the stretcher, because he must get out. His family is hiding somewhere, and they are in—they have problems. And we did it, and it succeeded, and I'm glad that we helped at least one person.

SIGRIST: Tell me about when the end of the war came, and if you remember when it officially ended.

SZABO: Yeah, the end of the war came pretty fast. The Russians first encircled Hungary—encircled Budapest. There were about fifty thousand Germans fighting, but they broke through towards the western part of Budapest, and the Russians came in the next day. We knew that because our apartment was requisitioned by the German command of that section of Budapest, and they said, "We are leaving now, and the Russians should be here within twenty-four hours, so stay down in the basement; it's the safest place." Which we did. So the first Russians came; they were all Mongolians. And the first thing they wanted is your watches. Davai chassy means in Russian: give me your watch. That was the very first thing. The first troops, they were sort of elite troops—they were not that bad. The later on, the second wave, they were much worse. They raped many women, robbed us, whatever little things we had. We hid, of course, everything of value that we could think of. And I was lucky, because when I heard from the Germans that the Russians would be here the next day, I did not go in to the ambulance corps, but I wanted to stay with my mother and this girl whom we were hiding. I didn't want to leave them alone, so I stayed with them for four or five days, and then I went in to the headquarters of the ambulance corps. We wore a gray uniform with a cap with a red cross, and what not. And the house was empty. The Russians mistook them as some kind of military group, and deported them, and nobody came back. So it was sheer luck that I happened to stay at home those couple of days. Sheer luck. The next six months were tough, because we had no electricity, no gas, and no water, no running water, in our apartment house, so you had to go a couple of blocks to a fountain where there was water available. There was practically no food for weeks. That was tough. Whenever a horse died, people run out with long knives, and cut off the corpse of the horse, and made horse meat.

SIGRIST: Was your neighborhood relatively untouched by bombing?

SZABO: Relatively, yes. Practically every building got damaged. We lost two rooms in our apartment, which was then just boarded up for months. In many houses, smaller houses, which suffered a direct hit, they were completely demolished. The worst that happened to an apartment house where the Germans were storing ammunition in the basement got a direct hit, and the ammunition blew up, and hundreds of people died in the neighboring houses and in that house. That was one of the worst things. The other very bad accident was the Germans, in their retreat, they blew up all the bridges, and one accidentally—it was dynamited. The dynamite was set up while the traffic still moved on the bridge. So there again, dozens of cars and trams and buses fell into the water, with people in them.

SIGRIST: What was the prevailing atmosphere just after the war had ended? I mean, obviously things are pretty bad, but are people thankful?

SZABO: Relief. They were relieved. Relieved, whoever could stay alive, and whatever little belongings they could salvage, they were happy to be there.

SIGRIST: How long did this kind of deprivation last, until life got back to normal?

SZABO: I would say a year—1945. And then slowly they started to rebuild. We got back our electricity about six months later, the water maybe about four months later, gas maybe a year later. So normalization started.

SIGRIST: Now you mentioned earlier that the Communists were coming into Hungary at this time, am I correct?

SZABO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Is that at the beginning of this period?

SZABO: Beginning very soon after the Russians came in. The Hungarians set up already while the Nazis were still in Budapest, and on the western part of Hungary, they set up a so-called free government, part of which was Communist, because this was on the Russian-occupied side of Hungary. We had the first free elections in Hungary in 1947, when the Communists got only eleven percent of the vote. However, because Hungary was still occupied by the Russians, they forced a coalition government onto the Hungarians, where the key positions had to filled by Communists—the Secretary of State, Secretary of the Interior, Head of Police, Head of the Army. And from then on, every month the power of the non-Communist members of the government was curtailed, so by 1948 they even started a trial against a Prime Minister, who happened to be in Switzerland. And they warned him not to come back because he would be arrested, and they retained his young son as a hostage until he resigns. And he resigned on the Austrian-Hungarian border, and on the car, [unclear] car that he got from Stalin, he resigned. And he got back his son, and the car donated, given him by Stalin. And then the Communists named a Communist as Prime Minister.

SIGRIST: Were the Communists initially welcomed to Budapest, or was this, the people knew this was bad from the beginning?

SZABO: Look, Hungary was not an extreme country, neither National Socialistic, or Communistic. There were always National Socialists, and there were always Communists, going back to the thirties. So yes, there was an element that expected them with open arms, especially the workers, the miners—you know, they were promised the proletariat will now take over, and yours is the factory. You work for yourself. Yes, there were Communists; yes, there were National Socialists in Hungary. But the first Prime Minister was a Communist from the 1930's who was jailed for years, and then was exchanged for some Hungarians, and spent the next ten years in Russia. And the Russians brought him back, and forced him as Prime Minister on the government.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a moment, and Kevin will put another tape in the machine, and we'll get you to America!

SZABO: Good!

[End of Tape One, Side B/Start of Tape Two, Side A]

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist, and it's Thursday, December 15th, 1994, and we're beginning Tape Two with Dr. Gustav Szabo, who arrived in America from Hungary in 1949 when he was twenty-seven years old. Dr. Szabo, you were just telling us about Communists taking over in Hungary, and the changes that were happening when that did occur. Can you tell me about the average, ordinary citizen in Budapest, and how his or her life was changed by the Communist takeover?

SZABO: It depends on the profession. For the peasants—I'm sorry, the farmers—their land was taken away, either immediately or within the first couple of years, and they were forced into cooperatives. Slowly—slowly meaning within, again, the next three or four years, most industrial establishments were also nationalized, starting with the mines, then the banks, then the insurance companies, then the factories over a thousand workers, then five hundred workers, then hundred workers, then even small establishments like restaurants, pharmacies. Even grocery stores were nationalized. Therefore, the owners, if they were lucky, were kept as a bookkeeper, or as a manager, or whatever. The other thing that happened, which of course affected the life of the middle class and the upper middle class, that the Communists deported the middle class to the country, from the big cities, mostly from Budapest, by the thousands. I think about maybe twenty thousand middle class and upper middle class people were deported to various parts of the country, where they had to live with the farmers. They were allotted a room or two rooms, and they had to stay there and usually do menial work to support themselves. And they could not return to their apartments, which by that time were occupied, but had to stay with relatives until about three, four years later, until and after the so-called Rakosi regime, spelled R-A-K-O-S-I, who was the Communist Prime Minister.

SIGRIST: What about your own family, you or your mother? Can you talk about your specific experiences at this time?

SZABO: My life was not that badly affected, because from 1946-'47, a very rudimentary stock exchange was opened, and because of the inflation in Hungary, which by the way, was the highest inflation in world history—the Hungarian currency lost its value to a figure with nineteen zeros!

SIGRIST: And how did that manifest itself in everyday life?

SZABO: I had then a small banking house. I became again a stockbroker, and established a small banking house. People came in with gold chains, with family jewelry, or whatever. We snipped off maybe one inch. We weighed it, and that day, in the morning, it was worth two billion five hundred thousand pengos. Then, he went and bought the groceries, paid the rent or taxes, or whatever. Next day he came back with another inch, or left the chain there, sealed in an envelope, and we cut off another inch, from which he bought shoes, or what not, that time for five billion Hungarian currency, and so on.

SIGRIST: It gets to the point where it just doesn't mean anything anymore.

SZABO: Yeah. Then it was printed B-pengo was the Hungarian, P-E-N-G-O, the Hungarian currency, B standing for billion. So they eliminated immediately nine zeros. And even that started to inflate then. So larger companies, picked up at the Hungarian National Bank the currency, without serial numbers--there was no time to put serial numbers on the currency anymore—in truckloads, to take it to the workers, and give it to them, sometimes in big bundles, to pay their salaries. Then in 1947, a new Hungarian currency was introduced, the floren, from the Italian floren, at the rate of eleven point sixty-two florens per dollar. Most of the trade was done on a barter basis, or in hard currency, usually in dollars. Everything was one dollar. A kilogram of lard, a kilogram of sugar, a pair of nylon stockings, a pack of cigarettes, and a woman. It was all one dollar. That was the currency. A lot of barter took place on street corners. People sold their household items—could be coats, could be hats, could be smaller pieces of furniture, the family silverware, whatever, to augment their income, whatever the income was. So it took about three, three years until Hungary again started to get back on its feet.

SIGRIST: Now you had said earlier in the interview that as a child and growing up, you were always interested in America, that you had, of course, your mother's father who was particularly interested in America.

SZABO: Right.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about when you become serious about coming to America, and why?

SZABO: I saw that Hungary becoming—we lost the war, number one. Two: we were an occupied country, and occupied by the Russians. Three: we were under Communist government, which is taking over every segment of the economy. My future was hopeless. So I already had my doctorate from the University of Economics in Budapest, but I applied both at Harvard and Columbia for graduate studies. They both accepted me. So I knew that I would escape, so I left all my documentation with the American Consul in Budapest, saying, “I’m planning to escape. Would you please send it over to the Vienna American Consulate?”, which they did. So I had a distant aunt living in New Rochelle. So that helped, knowing that if worse comes to worse, they would not let me starve. And when I escaped in October, 1948, after adventures a couple of days, I arrived in Vienna, and indeed, I went to the Austrian Consul, where my documents were deposited. And he said, “I see, yes, you are accepted. I’d be happy to give you a student visa, but I need a valid passport.” And my passport, which I also sent over through diplomatic channels, has expired meanwhile. He said, “I can’t use this. Unless you have a valid passport, I can’t give you a student visa.” So I heard that Catholic Charities in Vienna had a very kind father, Monsignieur Adam. And I went to him, can he help me, I’m a recent Hungarian refugee? This is the problem: I have an expired passport. Could you have it somehow renewed or extended? Knowing that they stole somewhere the rubber stamp and were falsifying the signature, he said, “Well, we are not doing that here in Vienna,” because at that time Vienna was occupied by the Russians, French, British and Americans, a four-power occupation. “I’ll send it over to Salzburg,” which was in the British sector, “But come in a week, and we’ll have it extended.” And I did, beautiful rubber stamp, extended for two years, was marvelous service, very proud, went to the American Consul. I succeeded to extend my passport, could I have now my visa? Looks at it, smiles, and says, “Father Adam is getting better every day!” [laughs] and threw me out! So it took me another six months of haggling with the Austrians, who finally stamped a return visa into my stateless so-called [unclear] passport, that yes, I can return to Austria after I finish my studies. I promised them, “Don’t worry, I’ll never come back!” And I arrived with this passport and the student visa to America, where as I told you on the phone, they took me to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: We need to back up!

SZABO: Okay.

SIGRIST: We need to back you up to when you left Budapest. You said you had three adventurous days before you got to Vienna.

SZABO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me exactly what you packed to take with you?

SZABO: I took a backpack. A coat, a backpack in which I had a couple of shirts, underwear, socks, a warm pullover, and toilet articles, maybe a couple of books, and addresses of people I knew abroad. And I think—

SIGRIST: Was there one object that you brought with you for sentimental reasons?

SZABO: Yes, a St. Christopher medal, on a gold chain that my mother gave me, which I had for many, many years 'til I gave it to one of my sons.

SIGRIST: Was there some kind of family gathering, or gathering of friends, in honor of you leaving, or just prior to it?

SZABO: No, no. I didn't tell anybody, because I was afraid that somebody might not be discreet enough, and might mention it to somebody who should not know about it. My mother and my then girlfriend were the only ones who knew it, that I am escaping the next day.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about it?

SZABO: I told you about we had a long discussion about it. Of course she was frightened that she would be left alone, since by that time my brother did not come back; my father was dead. So I had to leave her alone. But she realized that she will be better off in the long run if I am safely in the West, because eventually I will send for her, which I was able to.

SIGRIST: Now tell us about the three adventures [unclear].

SZABO: The three adventures! [Laughs] I went by train to a town called Sopron, S-O-P-R-O-N, which is only about maybe fifteen miles from, or closer from, the Austrian border. And I had a Red Cross identification with me that proved that I was doing some research work for the Red Cross, Austrian Help or something, just in case they arrest me there prior to [coughs] crossing the border. We had made arrangements prior with a smuggler who did this professionally. We had to meet at his house around nine o'clock in the evening. We waited there for about an hour, a group of about four of us, unknown of each other. And then by foot we started walking towards the mountains, towards the Austrian border. I noticed that he carried a sack, and I wasn't quite sure what that sack was for, but I didn't dare to ask any questions. And we walked for about two hours, until about midnight. "There," he said, "Now lie down in the grass and be quiet. We are very close to the border, and within fifteen minutes the border guard will pass by. Then we will cross the border." And again, in about fifteen minutes, the border guard came with big dogs. We saw them in the distance, passing by. We waited another fifteen minutes quietly, until they are at a certain distance, and then to my utter amazement he opened his sack, and out jumps a big pussycat! And he dragged it with him for hours, on his back, in case the dogs had picked up our scent. He would have let the cat loose; the dogs would have run after the cat, and not seen us! So, we then walked about another mile. He said goodbye to us, "You are in Austria now. Go in this direction; you'll see a church steeple about a couple of miles. Go there." No, I'm sorry! He came with us to the first house in that little community, and gave us to the local farmer there, who set us up in a hayloft, which was just fine, and said—

SIGRIST: There's more than just you?

SZABO: There were four other people. There were five in the group.

SIGRIST: Did you know each other before the start?

SZABO: No, I didn't know them. I didn't know them. So next morning, at I think five o'clock, there was a workers' train going from that community towards Vienna, and he said, "Take the train, that will take you to Vienna. There might be some Russian or Austrian inspections. Try not to get caught in it." I never got to the train, because while we were waiting on the train, the Austrian gendarme or policeman saw this group's attire, with the backpacks, and asked for identification. It was obvious that we were recent Hungarian refugees, and at that time, that part of Austria was under Russian occupation. So he took us to the local jail, and kept us there for two days, until he made several phone calls: what to do with us? Two days later—oh, by the way, it was very good company. There was a murderer, there was a Nazi colonel, there were two thieves, a smuggler, and I can't remember. But they were all very nice, and when they heard my story, that all I want is to get to Vienna, they drew me a map, where to go by foot, get out of this community, go by foot, take there a truck. They gave me the name of a trucking company. Tell them that Joe sent you, or whatever his name was [laughs] and then he will take you to a small train station that's beyond the Russian checkpoint—while I was still in jail. Two days later the gendarme said, "Unfortunately the Russians insist that we take you back to Hungary." So we walked and walked towards the Hungarian border. I had a golden cigarette case sewed into the lining of my coat, and some gold pieces, French twenty francs. I told him, "Look, nobody will know whether you actually gave me back to the Hungarians or not. I happen to have a golden cigarette case, which I certainly will not need in Hungary. I'd like to offer it to you, but let me go." Which he did. And the one condition: I had to go parallel to the border about two miles to the next community, in case an Austrian policeman would catch me, at least it did not happen in his community. But I escaped somehow again. And then with the map supplied by my roommates in jail, I got safely to Vienna, where I had an old school friend of my brother while he was studying in Vienna, and they took me in. Unfortunately they lived in the Russian section, and said, “You have to get out of here. You can’t stay here, because the Russians come and do check who is staying in the apartments.” So the next day I went to Catholic Charities, and they were very nice and put me up somewhere.

SIGRIST: When you left your mother, did you promise to contact her along the way?

SZABO: Oh, absolutely, yes.

SIGRIST: And were you able to do that?

SZABO: Yeah, I was able to call her from Vienna, and about the second telephone call, she says, “Gustav, the guest whom you expected did come, and they were very disappointed that they couldn’t find you at home anymore.” And that was the police. So, the timing, in retrospect, happened to be ideal.

SIGRIST: And we’ve now picked up the story where you begin all the passport business.

SZABO: That’s where, exactly.

SIGRIST: What ship did you take to America?

SZABO: I came on the Queen Mary.

SIGRIST: And where did you pick up the Queen Mary?

SZABO: I picked the Queen Mary up in Cherbourg, and that was like stepping from a post-war Hungary, with the hunger and the lack of water and electricity, and what not, into a never-never land, the luxury of a big ocean liner. That was my first encounter, really, with the Western world, [unclear].

SIGRIST: Where along the way did you procure your passage tickets for the ship?

SZABO: Two ways. Number one, I met a young lady in Austria, and she was very adventurous. Being an Austrian citizen, she went to Budapest, and contacted my mother, to whom I wrote a note, to give her whatever pieces of jewelry I had, give it to her—absolutely trustworthy—she’ll bring it to me. She went by train and came back by train. And she gave the pieces of jewelry in a plastic bag to her friend who was the chef at the dining car, and the chef immersed the plastic bag in a jar, which had a screw-top, in the dishwashing water. So when the inspection came, they certainly didn’t go into the dishwashing water [laughs] to see what’s there, and that’s how certain jewelry pieces came out to Vienna, which she gave me. Those are sold, and I had enough money then to pay for my stay. By the way, the Catholic Charities, the International Refugee Organization, helped me and gave some pocket money, and fed me once a day. So that way, I could stay and the secretary of a friend of mine leased her apartment to me at a nominal rent, so I could stay there for six months, and wait until I finally get my exit permit.

SIGRIST: And do you know how much the ship cost at that time?

SZABO: It was two hundred sixty-five dollars. I remember that!

SIGRIST: And where did you travel on the ship, what class?

SZABO: Strangely enough, I was able, through again some friends, to pay for the ticket in Austrian shillings instead of English pounds, and thereby the only ticket available was in Cabin Class, which is the middle class between First Class, Cabin Class, and Steerage. So that was a tremendous luxury.

SIGRIST: Can you describe where you slept on the ship for me?

SZABO: Yes, it was an inside cabin. I had no window that I remember. It was the usual cabin size, which cannot be more than maybe ten feet by twenty feet, most. But it had a bed with a little sink in the corner, a shower—I'm not quite sure. I don't think it had a shower; probably the toilet and the shower were outside. But, a desk and a chair, so it was perfectly—for me, it was a luxury.

SIGRIST: And what time of year is this?

SZABO: That was February.

SIGRIST: February '49?

SZABO: February '49, correct. It arrived the first days of February.

SIGRIST: Tell me what sticks out in your mind about the voyage itself, the actual crossing?

SZABO: It was rough, and thank God my stomach is pretty strong, so there were days when maybe only a dozen people were in the dining room, out of hundreds. But I was so hungry, and all this luxury meant so much to me, I couldn't resist eating it! And we could play ping pong, and we could listen to music, and we could go dancing! It was like a dream!

SIGRIST: To the best of your knowledge, were there any other people, similar kinds of people to yourself? You know, people who were getting out of Europe, who particularly had to get out of Europe?

SZABO: There were. Yes, there were several Hungarians, but mostly French, because the ship came from Cherbourg—came from England, stopped in Cherbourg, and then came back. Many English, of course, some Americans, some Italians, and I got befriended with several American people, which I enjoyed because at least I got used to the American accent, which I was not used to before.

SIGRIST: Had you learned some English in Budapest?

SZABO: Yes, I learned English in high school, last four years. I learned English at home, and as a graduation present in June, 1939, I received a trip from my father, and I spent ten days on the Isle of Mann with the Boy Scout leader of the Northern Irish Boy Scout group, whom I met two years before in Holland. And then he invited me to his residence in Belfast. He was a linen manufacturer, a beautiful house in the outskirts of Belfast. A fascinating man. And this was 1939 when I spent the summer there. Then I lost contact with him; of course, World War Two came. However, when I arrived to New York in 1949, now ten years later, I remember he mentioned to me that he has an office in New York. So I looked up William Liddell and Company, and lo and behold, down on Wall Street or Lower Broadway, there was a William Liddell and Company! So I called up and I said, “I used to be a friend of Mr. Liddell. I lost contact. Would you know where he is, what happened to him?” Because he mentioned he was in the Royal Air Force before. They said, “Oh, Mr. Liddell! He is on the Queen Mary, arriving tomorrow.” So ten years later, I called him up. He was very kind. And we met every year he came to the hotel show, because he made the linen napkins, tablecloths, and towels for the Sheraton chain, for the Hilton chain, and so on.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you heard Americans speak English on the Queen Mary for the first time. What were the differences between how the Americans spoke English and how you had learned to speak English?

SZABO: Americans don’t move their lips! Which makes it very difficult for people whose English is limited, to understand them, and speak very fast. That was my first impression of American English. They speak a clipped English, and don’t open their mouth.

SIGRIST: Oh, that’s interesting. How long did the Queen Mary take to get from Cherbourg--?

SZABO: About a week, or eight days—no, maybe not quite. A week, I would say.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about what you remember about the ship actually approaching New York.

SZABO: That was an unforgettable sight, because they woke us up early in the morning, before we got into the harbor and see the Statue of Liberty. Indeed, there she was with the light in her hand. I think—I think everybody was crying [sobs]. And I saw, of course, Ellis Island!

SIGRIST: Well, tell me how you ended up at Ellis Island. What happened? You've gone by the Statue of Liberty—

SZABO: And we docked. And my aunt and her father, who was the brother of my grandfather, they were waiting for me at the pier. Everybody left, but I was nowhere. So they checked the list, and yes, he is here. He should be here. So finally they allowed them to board the ship, and they retained me because coming with a student visa, they asked her then that my uncle deposit a five hundred dollar bond that after I finished my studies, indeed, I will leave the country. So, which of course they promised, but it took them two days to get to the Treasury, get the bonds—so at least it should bring some interest—bring the bond to the Immigration Service, the Immigration Service notifying Ellis Island to let me out. So, two days later, I was able to leave Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: So you spent two nights at Ellis Island?

SZABO: Two nights?

SIGRIST: How did you get to Ellis Island from the Queen Mary?

SZABO: On a little ferry. No, I'm sorry. I had to spend the first night on the completely empty Queen Mary. Then they let me out. So I spent the first night there, then they took me to Ellis Island on the little ferry. I don't know how I got to the ferry—probably in a police car, or somehow, Immigration Service car. And the ferry took me over to Ellis Island, and I spent a day there, a night there, another day, until in the afternoon they let me go.

SIGRIST: Tell me what it felt like to be all alone on the Queen Mary for a night. I mean, what were you thinking?

SZABO: Eerie. It was eerie, because of course, all the waiters, the help, they shed the uniforms. They didn't give a damn about me, but they fed me, so it was very nice. But it was very eerie, like being in a hotel all by yourself.

SIGRIST: Did you understand exactly what was going on? I mean, were they very clear with you about why they were taking you to Ellis Island?

SZABO: Yes. No, no, they were decent about it. They said, "Look, it's a formality. Probably you will be there only for a day or so, but this is a prerequisite, so we have to wait until your uncle will deposit the bond."

SIGRIST: Did you know what Ellis Island was? Did you know--?
SZABO: No, never heard of it! [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what happened when the ferry docked.

SZABO: The ferry arrived. It was a big hall, and you had to stand in line here, then you had to stand in line to register, then you had to stand in line for a medical examination. They checked your eyesight and they gave you an x-ray. And then I think that was it. Then you stand in line to get your dinner. And then there were reading materials there, and there were big dormitories, right—double beds, double-tiered beds. But I think they were decent; they were not harsh, or they were not cruel, or they were not shouting.

[End of Tape Two, Side A/Start of Tape Two, Side B]

SIGRIST: Were there other people there, other detainees?

SZABO: There were lots of other people, other detainees, all sorts of nationalities, and all sorts of languages.

SIGRIST: What are some of your strongest impressions about those two days spent at Ellis Island?

SZABO: It was a very frustrating two days, because you think that finally you are in the land of your dreams, and you're still not there. You're still detained, and way down in your mind, you feel, "My God! You're going to deport me back to Europe, and God knows, back to Hungary, now that I'm so close to my goal!"

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about meal time at Ellis Island.

SZABO: It was like the army or Boy Scout camp: you stand in line with a tray. But the food was good, and we were hungry. It was not the cuisine of the Queen Mary, I must say, but [laughs] I did not expect that.

SIGRIST: Going from the lap of luxury to the Spartan surroundings!

SZABO: That's right [laughs]. It was not quite as bad as later on. I have read about, that people were detained there for months, and then shipped back, and threatened with all sorts of things of deportation. Thank God it didn't.

SIGRIST: Did you inform your mother that this was all happening?

SZABO: No. No, I was not in touch with her for maybe a week, until I finally arrived at my uncle's house, and I was able to call from there, or send a telegram, I think.

SIGRIST: And where was your luggage during all this?

SZABO: It must have come with me. It's funny, I never thought of that! But there was one suitcase, actually, so it's not too bad. Yes, I'm sure it came with me from the ship to the ferry, and from the ferry to Ellis Island, and from Ellis Island back to the ferry, and then they were waiting for me at the ferry.

SIGRIST: When the Queen Mary docked, and of course your intention was to get off and meet your aunt and go off into America, do you remember what you were wearing, what you had on, when you were going to get off the Queen Mary, and set foot in America?

SZABO: I know I had a brown coat, which I had then for years, 'til afterwards. I think I had, again, maybe a beige, some sport jacket, and some trousers. So it was sporty attire, which I thought was maybe appropriate for entering your new country!

SIGRIST: [Laughs] Did you see anything, either on the Queen Mary, or at Ellis Island, that was completely new to you?

SZABO: The luxury of the Queen Mary was beyond my wildest dreams! You know, coming from a small country, in Hungary, I'd never seen such an ocean liner before. And to me, that was way beyond my expectations. The size of it!

SIGRIST: When you were at Ellis Island, did you have to undergo any kind of interrogation about why you were coming to America?

SZABO: Yes, they checked my documents, and I think that's how they determined that I'm coming on a student visa. Also I am admitted to two universities, but apparently all people coming on student visas had to have some kind of a guarantee that they would leave the United States after the completion of their studies.

SIGRIST: I wonder how your aunt felt when they told—when it was asked that she put up a large bond?

SZABO: She was very disappointed. She was very disappointed. She hasn't seen me for the last twenty-five years. I think I was four the last time she visited

Hungary. But they were very nice; they were very helpful. They were wonderful people.

SIGRIST: Were they in a financial position to be able to do this easily?

SZABO: They were. My uncle, and my aunt, too, they came to the States in the early twenties. He was an architect, and worked for many years. During the Depression, he worked for the TVA, and was the designer of a town called Norris, in Tennessee, near the big dams that the TVA was building then. Later on he left the TVA, and worked for a private firm which did a lot of work for the city—Riker's Island, the Police Academy, was designed by his firm. Tellheimer and Wagner was his firm. Actually, he worked for them as a chief designer, later became a partner, and stayed with that firm until he died about fifteen years ago.

SIGRIST: I see. So when they were informed they would have to present this bond--?

SZABO: No, they were able to. They lived in a, to me, a nice house in New Rochelle, where I spent my first months.

SIGRIST: So you were released from Ellis Island; you spent one night there.

SZABO: One night there.

SIGRIST: You were released. Did your aunt and uncle come to Ellis Island, or--?

SZABO: I can't remember if they came to Ellis Island, or only to the ferry that took me back to Manhattan. I'm not quite sure, but I know both my aunt and my granduncle came with me, and I remember passing by the then-under construction building of the U.N., which was just about going up then, of which I already read a lot. And there it was!

SIGRIST: Did you spend the first night, then, in New Rochelle?

SZABO: I spent the first months, really, in New Rochelle, but I came in after the second or the third day, because I had to register at—there was a big discussion: which one to choose, Harvard or Columbia? And I told my uncle that I would like to be in advertising. He said, "If you want to be in advertising, I would recommend you stay in New York, because New York is the center of advertising." So I chose Columbia. So I had to go to Columbia to register, and orientation, and choose classes, and what not.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the first night, when you went up to your aunt's house in New Rochelle. What happened the first night you were in America?

SZABO: The first—there was a family supper, of course.

SIGRIST: And who was present?

SZABO: Who was present? My aunt and uncle, their two sons, then teenagers, and the parents of my aunt, who were in their late seventies I would say, or in seventies, who came to America after the war, but about a year earlier, in 1946. Being the parents of an American citizen, they could come ex-quota.

SIGRIST: And what language was spoken around that dinner table?

SZABO: English, because the children didn't speak any other language. My uncle still spoke Hungarian pretty well, and of course my granduncle and grandaunt, they never really learned English. At least my grandaunt never really learned English, although she lived here for another ten years.

SIGRIST: Where in the house did you sleep that night?

SZABO: There was a guest room, where one of the boys gave up his room, and slept in the room with his brother.

SIGRIST: Tell me about that first month or so, and what you were finding in America, and what was new to you, what you liked about what you saw, for the first month or so you were here.

SZABO: I was tremendously impressed with New York, of course. Skyscrapers—I'd never seen skyscrapers, of course. I was tremendously impressed with Columbia, the size, the layout of the campus. And the people, how kind and helpful they were—almost everybody. And this is true until today; I get the same feedback from my Hungarian guests, to whom I interpret, and are here for the first time. I usually ask them, after a couple of weeks or after a month—they usually are here for a month—"What is it that struck you most?" Almost invariably they say the helpfulness and the kindness of the American people [unclear].

SIGRIST: How soon was it that you started school?

SZABO: I started school about a week later, because I was a little late. The semester started end of January, and I was already about a week late. So I had to start about a week later.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the experience of beginning school at Columbia, and your adjustment and adaptation.

SZABO: It was tough. I thought I spoke English! [Laughs] I remember the first test they gave, and I just wrote on the bottom, "I'm sorry, I don't have the answers, because I don't even understand the questions." [Laughs] But that improved very fast.

SIGRIST: How? How did it improve? How'd your English get better?

SZABO: I think you retain a lot of your vocabulary. It's in you; you don't use it, but if you hear the words, then it comes back. Then I left New Rochelle about three weeks later, and got a room at an institution called International House, which is up on Riverside Drive near Columbia, which is a dormitory, let's call it, for foreign students, in a lovely building donated by John D. Rockefeller, where only graduate students can live. At that time two hundred fifty girls, two hundred fifty boys, at that time strictly separated—separate elevators with separate elevator men. But we were there from about sixty countries. Very wisely, one third of the students were Americans, so we know or hear or learn about America as much as possible. The rest were from the various countries; we were there six Hungarians. And we still maintain our relationship, after forty-five years, with all six.

SIGRIST: Were they all from the Budapest area, or were they from all over the place?

SZABO: Most of them were from Budapest. I think four were from Budapest, two were from the country. And they all made a career, and one of them is the brother of George Soros, that Hungarian billionaire. But he is the brother.

SIGRIST: How do you spell his last name?

SZABO: S-O-R-O-S.

SIGRIST: Would you say that the six Hungarian students became—sort of traveled together?

SZABO: Very close friends—absolutely! They became friends because we still could talk Hungarian. We had the same problems, monetary problems, adjustment problems, language problems, study problems.

SIGRIST: Do you think that this was an advantage to your adaptation to America, or a drawback?

SZABO: I would say so. No, I think it was an adaptation, like people start, or trend, or apt to feel at home in their particular ghettoes. The Hungarian ghetto happened to be on Second Avenue, at least that time—I'm going back to 1948, '49. From Seventy-Fifth Street, to Eighty-Sixth Street. Then the German enclave started. South of it was the Czech enclave. Next to it, the Slovakian enclave, and so on. And you felt at home! There were

Hungarian butchers, Hungarian grocers, Hungarian travel agents, Hungarian doctors, whatever, which was a great help.

SIGRIST: Did you experience, in those days at Columbia, any kind of prejudice against you because you were a foreigner or spoke with an accent?

SZABO: Once. Well, Columbia, thank God, has at least maybe fifteen to twenty percent foreign students, from all around the world [coughs]. So having an accent was not such a rarity at Columbia. What hurt me, however, was that as a foreign student, being here with a special immigration card, as a foreign student, we had to ask special permission of the Foreign Student Advisor to be permitted to work during the summer. So I went for the interview with the Foreign Student Advisor, and he asked me, "Well, what are your plans?" I said, "Well, of course, after I finish school, if it's possible, I would love to stay in America." "Well, how would you try to achieve that, since you have only a student visa?" I said, "Well, I might volunteer to the Army, or Navy." And he said the following, "What do you think, we're going to take you? We don't want to be shot in the back." That hurt me; that I've never forgotten—why he would say that?

SIGRIST: And a man in his position!

SZABO: And a man in his position, too, Foreign Student. Sure, he came from a Communist country, that's true. But that sunk in. The other thing happened a couple of years later when I was looking for a job. I met a very nice guy at Coca-Cola, here in New York. He interviewed me, was impressed. The guy said, "Gustav, I'll be honest with you. You have all the qualifications. However, don't forget, we are a Southern company, Atlanta, Georgia. Your future, with an accent, and being a foreigner, would be very limited. Look somewhere else." I appreciated that; at least he was honest. These were about the only two incidents I could recall.

SIGRIST: Nothing among students at all?

SZABO: No. No, because especially living at International House, everybody was, two out of three, was a foreign student.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what your relationship with your mother is at this point. How frequently are you in contact with her?

SZABO: About weekly we write each other, and whenever I could afford, I called her. And luckily, one of my first jobs I got after I finished Columbia was with the Voice of America, as a Hungarian announcer. I could—I was able to notify her, using my middle name, that Uncle Oliver—Oliver happens to be my middle name—got the job with the radio station, and you might be interested in hearing him on the air. And of course she caught on, so from then on she could listen to me every night! So that was marvelous! At that time, we gave live newscasts at—let me just think, we are six hours there—two in the afternoon, and two in the morning. So, because that was six hours later, that was eight in the morning, and eight in the afternoon. So that way, she could listen to me. [Laughs] She wrote in one of her letters, "Oliver seems to have a cold. Would you tell him to take care of himself?" So that was one of my first jobs. It was fun!

SIGRIST: Did you ever send your mother something from America as a gift, or--?

SZABO: Yes, small things: toiletries or perfume or soap, or reading material. Because people started to travel more often, and the mail became now normalized, so you could send small packages. And there was a service whereby you could pay in X number of dollars, in American money, to an outfit within New York, and they paid out either chocolates or coffee, or flour or sugar, or coal, or firewood, whatever. So through that, I could help her.

SIGRIST: So then, I gather that the Hungarian community in America was very much conscious of the big Hungarian community in Hungary, and wanted to help them?

SZABO: Absolutely, absolutely.

SIGRIST: Your mother—tell me a little bit about what your mother's ideas of America were. I can only imagine that your mother's ideas of America were formed by her father, to a certain extent.

SZABO: Exactly.

SIGRIST: So what is she thinking? What does she think is going on in America? How does she think about America when you're here?

SZABO: Well, it was a brand new world. Of course, she saw it through my letters, and through my letters, through my eyes: my impressions of Columbia, of my fellow students, of the family here, and generally the tremendous freedom. I always characterized America here, you can do anything you wish, as long as you pay your taxes! Nobody bothers you, which I still maintain. That was what my sort of basic impression of America is. This country was very good to me.

SIGRIST: Was there any time in, say, the first couple of years you were here, that you wanted to go back, or wished you could go somewhere else, other than here in America?

SZABO: No, no. As a child I wanted to come to America, mostly what I heard through my grandfather. And I think America fulfilled those dreams and expectations. If you work hard, and have some patience, I have found it takes about three years for an immigrant to reach the same level of economic prosperity, let's say, that he leaves behind. It takes about three years, but from then on, it's really limitless. Yes, you need luck.

SIGRIST: Well, we've got ten minutes left. Why don't you fill us in on what happened, the rest of your life, 1950 to now, say?

SZABO: Okay. After the Voice of America, I was a Hungarian announcer for Radio Free Europe for a while. Then I was a photographer's representative, which is a delightful job, surrounded by beautiful models, and all our clients were in the perfume or in the fashion field. But there was not enough money in it, so I became a partner first, and then an owner, of an export-import business specializing in building materials. I had that company for thirty-five years. We had very good years in the early eighties, when most of our business was export to the Middle East and Far East, heavy construction: nuclear power plants, missile sites, tunnels, desalinization plants, dams—wherever water is in or out, sewage treatment plants, water treatment plants. I sold my company then four years ago, and then I started my new career by sheer accident. I read an article that the State Department is looking for Hungarian interpreters. So I applied, went down, passed the exam. They have three grades: there's the escort interpreter, there's the simultaneous interpreter, and there's the conference interpreter, for the big shots like the White House and what not. So this is what I'm doing now. Going back, thirty-five years ago, thirty-seven? More than that. I got married. My first wife was half Swedish, half Canadian, but born in America already. I have two grown-up sons.

SIGRIST: What was your first wife's name?

SZABO: Jean.

SIGRIST: Maiden name?

SZABO: Maiden name Jean Nelson.

SIGRIST: N-E-L-S-O-N?

SZABO: N-E-L-S-O-N. Good old Swedish name.

SIGRIST: You have two children by her?

SZABO: I have two sons by her, one is now—one was born in '55, so he is thirty-nine, the other in '57.

SIGRIST: And his name?

SZABO: Paul and Thomas. Paul works for Chrysler of Westchester as an expediter and in charge of the computer there. Everything is computerized, as you know. And Thomas worked for my company for ten years, and stayed with the company when I sold the company. But he resigned a year ago, and he works for an outfit in the Brooklyn Navy Yard called New York Modular. They make prefabricated housing units, complete rooms with--[scratching sound]. That's our dog; wants to come out [laughs].

SIGRIST: And then you remarried?

SZABO: I remarried four years ago an Austrian lady who worked for the Austrian Foreign Service.

SIGRIST: And her name is?

SZABO: And her name is Maria.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

SZABO: Maria Goessler, G-O-E-double S-L-E-R. And to my great delight, she's started to learn Hungarian, which is a tough language!

SIGRIST: [Laughs] Speaking Hungarian, I was hoping you could say something for us in Hungarian, perhaps a poem, or a prayer, or some sort of self-contained text in Hungarian?

SZABO: All right. The Lord's Prayer, for instance, sounds like this: [Hungarian].

SIGRIST: Thank you. If you had a young, twenty-seven year old Hungarian in front of you right now, who wanted to come to the United States, what advice would you give him or her, because of your own experience?

SZABO: By all means, do everything you can to come here. I will help you, or there are many Hungarian churches, clubs, foundations, the government, the Peace Corps, AID, United States Information Agency, who would invite you. The Soros Foundation, where you could get financial help, to finish your studies, or spend a certain amount of time here, as a doctor, as an engineer, as an architect, if he is already established professional. The opportunities are limitless. I still feel so.

SIGRIST: Great. Dr. Szabo, I want to thank you very much—

SZABO: Well, you're welcome.

SIGRIST: --for letting us come here, and sort of disrupt your life, at least for the beginning!

SZABO: I enjoyed it!

SIGRIST: But it was a terrific interview. Thank you.

SZABO: Thank you very much.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Dr. Gustav Szabo on Thursday, December 15th, 1994, here in Manhattan.

[End of Interview]