

EI-953

PETER VERES

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: MELANIE DANIELS

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: EVAN TAPARATA

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- **HUNGARY: BUDAPEST**
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SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for The National Park Service. Today is Thursday, September 25, 1997. I'm at The Ellis Island Recording Studio with Mr. Peter Veres. Mr. Veres was born in London, left to come to the United States from Hungary in 1949 -- he was ten years old at that time -- and ended up one or two nights at Ellis Island. I also want to say, for the sake of the tape, that Peter Hom is running the recording equipment and listening to the interview in the other room is Mindy Hateman, a student intern with the Oral History Project, and Mr. Veres' wife, Ruth.

Anyway, Mr. Veres, thank you very much for taking a few minutes from your visit!

VERES: It's a pleasure.

SIGRIST: And can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

VERES: Certainly. I was born October 23, 1938 in London, England.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about your birth? Did anyone ever tell you a story about the day you were born?

VERES: Well, not particularly about the day, but I know that, why the circumstances were kind of interesting. My parents are from Hungary, their parents are from Hungary, from Budapest. And being in 1938 the situation in Hungary was deteriorating, there was more and more -- my family is Jewish, I should say. And they had a sense, for some reason, my father had a sense, that if I had a British passport, somehow it would help me in the next sequence of events. They were not going to leave Hungary. In fact, they went back from England within a couple of weeks of my birth. They snuck in there in some way because my mother's cousin was already in London and England did not let people in who were pregnant. My mother wasn't showing, at this late time, and she was able to bring me in, inside her, and I was born there. And then they returned to Budapest where both of their families lived. And so, I didn't miss the big show.

SIGRIST: Why don't we start by talking about your dad. What was his name?

VERES: My father's name was George. George Veres, which in Hungarian is *vörös*, and *vörös* means red.

SIGRIST: That's right, I was going to ask you what your name was when you were born.

VERES: Yes, yeah. Well, my name, when I was born was Veres. Veres Peter Janos. Which is Peter John.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

VERES: Peter. P-E, with an accent ague, T-E-R, and Janos is J-A, with another accent, N-O-S. Which is John, and Veres, V-E-R-E-S.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

VERES: And the story with that name was that my father's father, who was born in a small village, left there when he was thirteen, went to Budapest to have his life in the city, and at some point between that time and the time he became a lawyer, he changed his name from Roth, or Rote, R-O-T-H, to Veres, which is the Hungarian version of Roth, which is red in German. 'Cause we're looking at the whole history of Hungary and Austria Hungarian empire -- a lot of it was German. And so that's where Veres comes from.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little about your father's background, his family background and his growing up. What you know of it.

VERES: Okay, my father is I said, my father's father came from a small town, and his mother was from Budapest, whose last name was Hajosi, which is like, *hajó* is a ship.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

VERES: H-A-J-O-S-I, I or Y, I can't recall. And my father was the eldest child. He had a younger sister, name was Agi. A-G-I.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

VERES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You're catching on! (Laughs)

VERES: And Agnes I should say, it's officially Agnes, I guess. And, you know, my father went to school in Budapest. His father thought he should learn to be, become a lawyer -- father-son thing. My father had no interest in that, he wanted to be a business man. He was sent to Grenoble to school, where most of the time he played in clubs, some piano, jazz, and what not. And at some point, he took some exams and somehow got his degree, I don't know.

SIGRIST: When you say, played in clubs, what instrument did he play?

VERES: Piano.

SIGRIST: He played piano?

VERES: Yeah. Yeah. And basically enjoyed himself, rather than spending a lot of time in school. And he became a, the representative, the Hungarian representative, of the Goodyear Tire Company. In fact, in the early twenties, I think '22 or '23, Goodyear brought him to Akron, Ohio, to look at the Goodyear plant and the whole facility. So he had been in the States at one time, and then went back to Hungary.

SIGRIST: How long did he stay in Akron?

VERES: I don't believe more than a few weeks. I mean, it was just one of those office, you know, visits -- come to see the company. I don't recall the exact - - no, I don't have no way of recalling, and he's unfortunately not, not around anymore.

SIGRIST: When you think about your father's piano playing, what do you remember about that?

VERES: Well, when we, we landed in Ellis Island, when we came to New York, we finally ended up in New York, and one of the first things -- we had very little, if any money -- but one of the first things he did, when he had some money, he bought a cheap piano. And a piano was always in the house, even when he didn't have much time to play it, but he needed to have a piano in the house. And he wasn't what you would call, you know, a major musician, he just, that was something he loved to do.

SIGRIST: Do you remember as a child how you felt about your father's piano playing?

VERES: I don't recall. I, I, I really don't recall him playing piano. It's interesting, I mean, it seems something that he did when he was, before he was married, as a student. And he, I don't even know if he took official lessons or anything, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Just something he did for his own pleasure?

VERES: Yeah. Something like that.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

VERES: My mother's name was Katherine. Kato, in Hungarian.

SIGRIST: K-A-T--

VERES: K-A-T-O.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

VERES: Her maiden name was Krausz. K-R-A-U-S-Z.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about your mother's background?

VERES: Much more than about my father's background (laughs)! Because I have about twenty-four hours of tapes about her.

SIGRIST: Did you conduct those interviews?

VERES: Yes, I did.

SIGRIST: So you understand --

VERES: Yes, yes, my,

SIGRIST: -- the importance of those things.

VERES: My father died in '74 and we had been living in Berkeley, California. My mother was living in New York City and she came out with the first of her many eighteen or so albums that she eventually made of old photographs -- they go back into the early part of the nineteenth century of family photos -- and she began discussing these people in the photographs, and I said, "I don't even know this stuff, wait a minute!" I brought in my little cheap cassette player and started it, and that became the, this oral history, which still is in my possession but still in tapes, unfortunately.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what you know about her background.

VERES: Okay, my mother's father was a grain merchant in Budapest and was very well off -- very Orthodox Jewish family. He established, among other charities, an orphanage, a place where people were fed, a kind of, I don't know, the equivalent with like a Saint Anthony hall, kind of thing. He also established a musical group -- they had a Bach society, for example. He had several children, my mother's mother being one of them. There were about three or four daughters and a couple of sons. The sons became architects, lawyers, those kind of thing. And one of the architect sons built this three or four story building in Budapest, in which the whole family lived. It was like a clan, you know. The grandparents lived on the first floor -- well, the second floor in the way we see it, but première étage. And above them were the sons and their families, or the daughters and their husbands and their families. And this was there for, I don't know, I guess it's from the twenties to the war -- the Second World War. My grandmother married a person, his name was Bela, B-E-L-A. Her name, by the way, was Lenke, L-E-N-K-E.

SIGRIST: Thank you

VERES: And the grandfather's name was Deutsch. Okay, and again, this Austria-Hungarian thing. My grandmother Lenke married -- my mother's mother -- married Bela Krasz, K-R-A-U-S-Z, and that's the Krausz family name. And he came from Ager, which was wine country. And he was a student in Budapest. He was, he became a lawyer -- met my grandmother walking on the promenade and promised that he would, his friend, that he was gonna marry her. He did -- came into the, this, this incredible, patriarchal clan of a family -- which was the Deutsch family -- and had two children, my mother and her younger brother, Gabor, G-A-B-O-R. And my mother was born in

1911, my uncle Gabor was born in 1915. My father was born in 1906, if you need all this.

SIGRIST: Well, it's great

VERES: Yeah

SIGRIST: That you know all this.

VERES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what memories you have of your mother when you were growing up in Europe before coming to America. How, how does she stick in your mind?

VERES: It's an interesting question. It's hard to say what I remember and what I remember from photographs, or stories, you know. When, when my mother first was married, they lived in an apartment in Pest, but before the war, they moved to Buda. Now, Buda and Pest are sort of twin cities, but divided by the Danube. Buda is more residential, Pest is more like a downtown, you know, city. And they moved into a very beautiful home and my grandparents, her parents, lived next door. And it was a lot that went from one street up the hill to another street, so it was a large lot. And we ended up -- I don't recall very much about my parents' place because that by the time the war was over, that was gone. But my grandparents place was still around and that's where I was between 19, between the war ending and '49 when we left. So that's my recollection. I really don't recall much about anything before that. Although I do remember parts of the wartime, but that wasn't in the residence exactly. But my mother, I, I don't have really clear recollections, personal recollections except for, you know,

photos. But I can tell stories about her, I mean, I know because I've talked to her.

SIGRIST: Is there a story about something that you did with your mother when you were a child in, in Hungary?

VERES: No, most of my recollections in Hungary was that we had this wonderful yard with an orchard in the back and I'd hung around, you know, climbing cherry trees and such. And that was before the war and then the war was such, such a big block of a thing that much of what went before I can't remember really.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you did have little glimpses of memory about the war itself.

VERES: Yeah, I do and that one I know is my memory because I was not with my parents.

SIGRIST: What do you remember?

VERES: So there was no, you know, secondhand memories. When the war came, my grandfather, my mother's father, was one of the first taken. His name was on the list, and he disappeared, he was killed. My brother was born, my brother is, his name is Paul, was born in June 21, 1944 -- terrible time during the war. And my mother, my, okay, my father was taken away to a labor camp. My mother was giving birth to this child and I was, very shortly afterwards, put in charge, or given in care of, to be cared for by two women who were Swiss, because the British had left Hungary and all British citizens -- as I explained, I was a British citizen -- were to be taken care of by the Swiss who were still in Hungary. And so I was taken one night to these people, away from who my parents were, and, with my passport and

a little satchel of stuff, was left with them. This was a few days after, as I recall, my mother came home from the hospital with my brother, so I could see him. I remember seeing him in the, the bottom of the house where we were staying, which was where my father's parents were. And, and after that I was gone and one of the things that was surprising to me and the reason, one of the things I learned from my mother and through the tapes, I thought I was with these people for a couple of years. Turned out it was just few months, you know, but as a kid you don't have any sense of that time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt about being separated from your parents?

VERES: Well, it was very strange, and it was, everything was strange. By that time my father wasn't around, although once in awhile he'd escape and he'd sort of surreptitiously send messages and things. But I'm sure he arranged for this transfer of me. I, of course, knew nothing about these people but I was, one was an older lady and one was her niece, a younger woman. And they were Catholics, Swiss Catholics. I no longer saw my parents, or anyone, except very occasionally my father would somehow find a way to meet me in the, a public market place, at which point, he would see that I'm alive and I'd see he was alive, but I was not to recognize him. I'd just sort of pass by. And I was about six, seven, you know. Things that I remember, okay. For awhile, while I was still with my parents, they were in a ghetto building and they could not go out. And when the bombing raids came, we would all go to the basement. And that I was, since I was a small child, I was allowed to go out, for example, to get water. And I would go several blocks in this bombed out context to some kind of small reservoir type of place, with buckets and dip the buckets and bring a couple of buckets and bring them back a couple of blocks and then they'd boil the water. I don't know how they had the fuel, but they somehow boiled the water, so we could have water, you know, for food. That's, that's one memory. The other memory is

seeing people on the streets, bodies on the streets with lime over them. Another memory was the soldiers coming in every time that there was an, you know, very often when we had air raids we were in these basements, packed tight -- sometimes there was some bedding on the floor -- and the air raids might just take a couple hours, sometimes longer, and the soldiers would come in occasionally. Initially, German soldiers -- I mean, we were occupied -- and would pull people out. That would be it, you know. And for us, I mean, over the months, it became this norm, it's a weird thing, you know. It becomes a norm, and one of the really strange things is that we were kids. I mean, several of us were -- I'm sure, more than me, obviously in this place -- and we learned these German songs that the soldiers were singing. And I recall one day I was sitting there in the basement, in the cellar, really, singing this German song. And all of a sudden, everybody grabbed me and shut my mouth up, put me under the bed, because Russian soldiers were coming in. That was, quote, "liberation." So you don't sing German songs, yeah, what do I know, you know. And so we were through that whole thing. Other memories, I mean, I don't know. One time we had a bombardment that actually hit part of our building and the building was on fire. Fortunately, not the wall we were near in the basement. And so there was this whole hassle to get out of the building before it collapsed. And many of these bombardments was, were conducted at night and very often they were like whole blocks destroyed. You know about Dresden, the fire bombing of Dresden. Well, there were many Dresdens -- they would take out a whole area. And there was one time when we were in some building, which was across the street from what they thought was a munitions place, and it probably was 'cause it exploded. We could see the sky-high fire and we had to run kids, adults, mostly women and children to someplace that we, that we could get into during an air raid, in another basement while our house was burning. So those are memories, right, those are not something I,

SIGRIST: When you say a ghetto, are you talking about, was this a, a Jewish area of the city or just, just a location where everybody was,

VERES: Certain buildings were designated as buildings for Jews. It wasn't like a whole – I mean I know what you mean, like the Warsaw ghetto, and it wasn't that. Budapest was an extremely cosmopolitan city, city before the war. It was an incredibly assimilated culture. In fact, my grandfather, my mother's father, was a captain in the army in the First World War. So there was no concept that this was gonna happen. That's why everybody stayed, right? And so they did have more of a ghetto context, I think in the villages and small towns. But in Budapest, they just said, "Ok, that building," or "that block," you know, would become that.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me when you lived in this situation the actual apartment or, you know, the dwelling itself that you were in?

VERES: Okay, when I was with these Swiss women, we were in a very typical city -- this was in Pest -- and the city building, which you would, be built around the courtyard,

SIGRIST: Is this after the ghetto experience? Did you go to the Swiss,

VERES: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Before you go to the Swiss women, just tell me about the living environment in the ghetto situation.

VERES: It was again a similar thing, because it was just a building. It was building in Pest, an apartment building.

SIGRIST: Was this an apartment that you had?

VERES: An apartment complex, yeah.

SIGRIST: And who lived in that apartment, with you?

VERES: I suppose my grandparents, my mother, her mother. I don't recall everybody, you know. My father was in the labor camp, so he wasn't there. Basically, that would be it, because it was my grandparents, my father's parents' apartment. So what it would be is maybe an apartment on the third floor, let's say -- that's how I recall it -- and it would be built, the whole place is built around a courtyard. You come in through a gate -- you know the Dakota on Seventy-Second?

SIGRIST: Here in New York? Yes.

VERES: A smaller version, much smaller. But you'd go in and then you'd go up the stairs up to the first landing, circle it, go up another stairs, etc., go to the apartments, and the apartments kind of faced this courtyard, and I guess, some of them faced the street. So, for example, in an air raid, we would have to run down the corridor, down the first step, around the corridor, down the steps, down to the basement. So this was the context, the -- how many rooms? I can't recall.

SIGRIST: And so it was from that environment that you were taken and placed with the Swiss women?

VERES: Yes, but the actual physical entity was very similar, another apartment building. So again I recall, for example, again, I told you this was a Christian family, Catholic family, so I had to learn the catechism, I went to church,

SIGRIST: That was going to be my next question, were there ways that they tried to, to, to change your Jewish background somehow?

VERES: I have to do it because I was going to be asked by the concierge, by the, you know, somebody, what am I doing there, right? So I was their relative or something. That was my alias and I had my British passport.

SIGRIST: Well, talk about what that process was like for a boy to go through.

VERES: Well, it was kind of strange because I had to learn to, you know, kneel down by the bed and say the Lord's prayer, which I didn't know. I had to learn that. And they would go to church, and I had to learn to do up and down and up and down, you know, whatever it was. And my family, my parents, were not particularly religious. As, as a Orthodox religious, though my mother was brought up that way, my father wasn't, and by the time that I was around, you know, maybe high holy days or something. So it wasn't, you know, anything that I was really used to. This was something I had to learn as being assimilated to this, two women. But,

SIGRIST: They knew that you were a Jewish child,

VERES: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, they were, without people like that, most of us wouldn't have survived. I mean, the reality of the survival of Jews, in Hungary and Poland and other places was because of, you know, the kindness of strangers. Tennessee Williams, right? And there was, of course, that was just one part of it, the other is just pure luck. Where did the bomb fall, or what drunken soldier came into your basement at a given time and wanted whatever you had and took you out.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what opinions, if any, the women had about Jews in general?

VERES: I wouldn't know personally, no.

SIGRIST: That was never expressed to you in any way?

VERES: I mean, I was a kid, right? They took me in, they made me feel at home, they gave me a bed. They taught me this ritual stuff so I could become, I could "pass," essentially. And -- I was six and a half, I don't know, you know.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you were not able to, to acknowledge your father when you saw him.

VERES: Right.

SIGRIST: What about other relatives?

VERES: Never saw them.

SIGRIST: Mother?

VERES: Not during the war. Not after I was separated. And as I say, it was just a matter of months, but it seemed like a very long time in my memory. One recollection in this house, again, it was like this other place which had up and down stairs and going down to the basement. There was an air raid and it was around Christmas. And so they had a Christmas tree. And we went into the air raid shelter, which was basically, the basement. And afterwards we came up, and the tree was smashed. Cause there was a bomb that fell, had fallen close enough for the concussion shocks to, you know, to do this. And that's sort of a memory you get. Smells are memories. Sometimes I used to have these smells, you know, that brought back --

SIGRIST: What did you smell, or what kinds of

VERES: I don't know! Probably just mustiness, I don't really recall. Maybe some food, you know?

SIGRIST: What about, we're sort of going a rather cursory trip through this because --

VERES: Sure, sure, sure.

SIGRIST: -- I don't want you to be here when the museum closes! But what happened right after that? What was the next step in your life --

VERES: After the war?

SIGRIST: -- after you had been with these women for a few months. You had been converted, to some degree,

VERES: Well,

SIGRIST: And then what happened?

VERES: Coached.

SIGRIST: Coached. That's right.

VERES: Well then, when the war was over -- which meant that the Russians entered Budapest and the Germans blew up all the bridges after them and left -- we somehow, my father found us, you know. I mean, he was, he survived. And my mother had her ailing mother with her and my baby brother. And I recall a trip across the frozen Danube, because there were no bridges, back

to Buda, on some kind of a horse and buggy thing and we went back to my grandparents house, which was in Buda, which had been occupied by soldiers. And I vaguely recall that there were hoof prints on the parquet floors. And, you know, that's what it was, it became a stable. And slowly we kind of moved into that. Both my parents, my grandmother -- her husband was gone -- my father's parents were still in Pest. They survived also, miraculously. And, you know, soon as the war was over, I know this from hearsay, from my mother, they immediately applied for visas to get out of there. Immediately, it was available. That didn't mean that you get it, but you applied. And that was the first step because as my mother said, they didn't want us to grow up with the kids who were the kids of the people who were killing people. You know, that was the forecast. The school -- I was school age, first year of school -- and there was no school. It was bombed up. So I missed a year, which I never caught up with (laughs), but that's alright. And then yeah, things kind of went back to a life.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to see your father again? You know, I realize you had seen him in passing but I mean --

VERES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: -- he has actually returned from a rather dramatic experience, I imagine.

VERES: Oh yeah, well, I'm sure it was an amazing experience. I, I can't play that movie back for you. I don't recall.

SIGRIST: Had he changed in any way?

VERES: Well, he lost, he lost a lot of weight. He was beaten up severely, he was not in good shape. He was not in good shape. Nobody was in good shape,

everybody looked very thin. We had no food for months, you know. I mean, everybody was just struggling with,

SIGRIST: But had amazingly survived --

VERES: Survived, yeah.

SIGRIST: -- that circumstance. So, you went over into Buda, you said, and you stayed with your paternal grandparents, right?

VERES: Yeah. I should mention one thing, which is sort of interesting in the view of the larger points of history. You know about Raoul Wallenberg, and we, my father was at one point put into, I mean he escaped one of the labor camp things. He was helped in the Wallenberg house and kept, and it was my mother as well.

SIGRIST: Just say for the sake of the tape, 'cause someone a hundred years from now might not know just what that,

VERES: Well, Wallenberg was a diplomat sent from Sweden to try to arrange for the rescue of the Jews of Hungary who were still there. I think he came in about, what, '43, '44, I don't remember. Just before Eichmann came in to do the final solution. And he was able to save thousands of people before, before the end. And there were these safe houses that he set up in, just in parts of town, which, which, which flew a Swedish flag. And that was like sanctuary, at least for a time being. And, yeah, my parents were part of that benefit, benefited from that. As from other things, you know, we all had false papers, false passports, you know. Because that was the, the Germans always looked for your papers. You know, what you had.

SIGRIST: And they were constantly surveilling [sic]

VERES: Oh yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay with your paternal grandparents in Buda before you actually left the city?

VERES: I don't recall anything of it. Probably a very, very short time. Very short time.

SIGRIST: And did that part of the city also experience the same kinds of destruction?

VERES: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

VERES: Well, what you had is a dual thing. It was, it was several months of siege, where the Russians came in from the east and they approached, you know, Pest. And so part of the bombardment was from overhead and part of it was from across the river. So there were houses that were blown out to the middle floors, for example, even though the top was there because they came from cross bombardments. So, it was, yeah, it was devastated, sure.

SIGRIST: This, this is all very interesting, it's too bad we're doing this so late in the afternoon! We're going to take a break for a minute and Peter will flip the tapes over and we'll get you to America!

VERES: Good, I'd like a glass of water while I'm coming across.

END SIDE ONE, BEGIN SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now starting side two with Peter Veres, who came from Hungary in 1949 when he was ten. We were talking about, you said once your family all sort of all reunited and went over to Buda, and, and, and sort of took up housekeeping with your paternal grandparents --

VERES: Right.

SIGRIST: -- that then the process began to try to get out.

VERES: Correct.

SIGRIST: And can you talk about what had to be done to get out?

VERES: Well, as you, you know, one assumes, I, the, the kids didn't know anything about it. My, my father, who was a very clever and astute man of the world, figured out some ways to get a, a passport, because the visa was not enough. And they also had to pretty much sell everything so they could afford whatever the papers and the bribes and all that needed to get done. And at some point, people came in to pack, and they packed much more than anybody could imagine needing. We were still, we were legally leaving. It was one of the very last of the legally leavings of, from, from Hungary because after that the Russians kind of shut that immigration, emigration out, down. But,

SIGRIST: Do you remember something of yours that was sold off?

VERES: No. I don't remember that, but I do remember the boxes in the living room and all the things that went into it, and the pots and pans. Which, looking back was insane, you know, because who's gonna have -- we won't have the right pots and the right wooden spoons in America, right? And my, some of my grandfather's books -- which he was a great book collector --

and they stayed with my mother until her death in her place. It was just like a memory of the old times. And pictures, and certain things couldn't be taken because if they had any sense of value, they couldn't be taken. And I'll tell you a story about that in a minute. My big, my biggest loss was my trees and my backyard and, you know. I'd go up there and cry about leaving, and it was a very traumatic thing to leave, for me. I mean that was something I do remember -- not so much what I took, or didn't take, I don't recall. We went from, we left -- I would, well, we got into New York March 31st, I believe. We were two months in Milano [HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Sigrist is referring to Milan, a city in northern Italy which is commonly known as Milano.] trying to get this visa thing worked out. And they were the winter months of Milano, you know, working back from March 31st, then crossing,

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you traveled from Hungary to Milan?

VERES: Yes, yes. We took a train, took a train in which I know for a fact that I had a berth to sleep on. Because what my father came out with, that became his business, was his stamp collection. My father was a stamp collector, although he was a tire salesman, as I said. And, in fact, just to back up a minute, my father was so clever, before the war, he hid four rubber tires underground someplace -- maybe in the backyard, you know. And after the war when he had nothing, those were the first things he sold 'cause there was nothing to -- tires were gold. And he began to build up his tire business again -- separate issue. But anyway, yeah, we, he took out his stamp collection, which was mostly Hungarian-Austrian stamps. Now stamps are a wonderful thing to put your money in because they're very small, very light, very compact. And you could put it under your ten year old kid as he's pretending to sleep while the guards come through to inspect everything. So that was my job, I wouldn't [inaudible]. And we had to stop periodically to be checked at any check point and border and whatever. So we went on

that train from Budapest to Milano, and we stayed in a *pension, libre autre*, for two months I think, eating mostly salami because we brought that and it was hanging overhead the four of us in this bedroom, and filled with the smell of Hungarian salami. And that went on for two months till my father figured out a way for us to get somehow to New York, because our passports were to Costa Rica. So somehow he figured out a way to get to New York. My brothers, my mother's brother had been living in New York since about 1939, so we needed to hook up with him to see if he could finagle a way for us to stay in New York. That was the idea. But to get there we went through Halifax and then down to New York.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your father, and you may not remember firsthand, but how your father got passports to Costa Rica at that time?

VERES: Well, I know that he, 'cause I went with him sometimes, he would go down to the embassy in Milano and just spend his hours talking to people, trying to find a Hungarian connection because that's how everybody did it. *landsman*, you know? And so he did find somebody that he had known through The Goodyear tire trade. I mean, he was working in an international capacity in some ways, importing, exporting, you know, buying and selling. And this guy was somebody he had known through the business, and I can't now remember his name, but he was in Milano for some reason. And he knew somebody who knew somebody, etcetera, you know, that kind of thing. So the papers were set up and on my passport, which I still have, has the stamps of, you know, visa to, to Costa Rica but via New York, somehow. As long as they could hit second base before they got to third, and they would try to somehow sneak in that way, which they eventually did.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about what you remember about the process of getting to New York. What was the first thing that,

VERES: Well, I do remember Milano because it was both wonderful and miserable. It was terrible, it's cold, and rainy, and miserable. You know, it's winter in Milano.

SIGRIST: It's, it's mom, dad, you,

VERES: And my brother.

SIGRIST: And your brother.

VERES: And my mother's mother, Lenke, who survived. She was old, she was frail, but she came with us. Although she didn't come on the same ship -- we didn't get the papers in time for her. So she had to stay a little longer then. She came later, also to New York. But yes, those were the people in this *pension*. Although I can't remember, I'm sure my grandmother wasn't in that same room that we were all sleeping in. But I just remember, you know, there was pretty much a post-war setup in Milano. You know, you couldn't exactly say it was rebuilt yet. For example, we played in front of Castello Sforzesco, but it wasn't open, which is now a beautiful museum. The paintings were not in the, in the galleries, they were all still behind sandbags somewhere. The Duomo was fantastic because that was the place you could go to, and there was the galleria we could go through, which is beautiful, and people went to have coffee and look at things.

SIGRIST: Where did you go to get the ship?

VERES: Ship was from Genoa.

SIGRIST: So how, tell me about leaving Milan and going to Genoa.

VERES: Well, I just assume we just packed everything we had and shipped the rest and took another train to Genoa. And I don't recall staying in Genoa. I mean, maybe there was an overnight, I don't recall. And then we went on this ship.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

VERES: The ship was The S.S. Sobieski, a Polish ship. And it was, I don't know what size it was, you know, who knows. I mean, I never had a ship in Budapest, what do I know?

SIGRIST: Do you remember as a ten year old what you thought when you saw the ship?

VERES: I thought it was great, you know, it was just, just fantastic! It was a great ship. My mother, of course, was horribly seasick the whole time, so she had a horrible time. I was about the only kid on board that could play shuffleboard through thick or thin, you know. It was fun for me, it was great. I didn't get seasick.

SIGRIST: What were some of the other things you did on the ship? You played shuffleboard, what else, what else did you do?

VERES: We had somebody shooting skeets, I don't know if I ever did that kind of thing. We saw movies, American movies.

SIGRIST: Does something specific stick out in your mind about that?

VERES: Not really specific. I mean, I just sort of vaguely recall being on, you know, doing these things. And I had, it's a long time ago, I had, I had no bad experiences, as I recall. It was, you know, I was, I was this kid, I really liked

that notion. Having a kid, I was sometimes eating alone, in this, you know, the dining area, 'cause everybody's down below sick. You know, it was kind of weird.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is it?

VERES: Well, we got here end of March. What would it take? Four to six weeks, I guess? Four weeks, I don't know, two weeks, how long did it take? I have no idea, you know?

SIGRIST: (Laughs) It varied from ship to ship.

VERES: Yeah, I guess, I don't know. At least two weeks, I'm sure. The motor conked out between Genoa and the Straits of Gibraltar, I remember that. They didn't go back, they somehow prepared it, and that was a rough passage there. Then we went up to Halifax, which I guess that was their point of entry or, to the States. And from there it came down to New York.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the ship getting to New York?

VERES: Well, the skyline, you know, it was obviously a major effect. I mean, I guess we came in the daylight because I remember that, you know, the Statue of Liberty coming through that. Everybody was just awed, as usual. I'm sure everybody says that, but it's true. It's very true. You know, the reflections, I mean it's not like the skyline now at all. It was much more like a peaked look to it. When you come in now, with these new buildings there's, it's sort of asymmetrical, it's different. But, yeah, that was amazing. And then we ended up coming to the pier but we couldn't get off. People were getting off, we couldn't get off. So then there was this whole thing as to what's going on. And of course, I wasn't privy to this. My uncle was on shore trying to figure out a way for us to somehow be able to stay in New

York -- Costa Rican visas, you know, what are we gonna do? And that's when we finally disembarked, and we were put on this -- I'm trying to think, when we came across on this ferry today, but I don't believe it was this similar kind of ferry that we took because I know it didn't just come up from South Ferry. It must have been near the port, near the, where the ships, you know, landed, that several people, including us, were put on this little ferry or tug or something and taken to Ellis Island until they figured out what to do with us. Now maybe, and I don't recall this really, it might have been a weekend. There was no, nothing opened, no ways to do business. Or maybe that was the week or night, or two nights we were here, I don't know. But,

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about being at Ellis Island at that time?

VERES: Well, the first, the only thing, the major thing I recall was coming into this big space and they welcomed us. And it wasn't like any of these photographs. I mean it wasn't like mobs of people. This was 1949. And very, very kind and, you know, after all the hassles we've had, everybody was very opening, welcome, you know, come in, like a guest at a hotel, you know! It was just so, so strange, you know. And of course, it was very nice on the ship as well. I mean, it's sort of an extension, it was like we were on vacation or something. And they showed us a room where the four of us would stay. And I kind of remember it being like a room, just a room with beds, and very well made beds. I remember there was all this, you know, what I learned later was hospital corridors, the whole deal, right? Very un-European -- very bare, but very plain. And then they took us to the dining room -- which I was looking for here, and I don't find -- which was my major impression because it was a cafeteria style thing. So you got your tray, and you got a, it was a, I think either a ceramic plate or a metal plate, with divisions. You know, the kind of things that you're now familiar? I had never seen a plate divided! And you'd go through, and they'd put the meat

on one little quadrant and the potatoes on another. It was so magical, you know, it was so strange, you know. And a box of milk, a box of milk! What does that mean, I mean, you know, you don't get milk in boxes in Europe, at least not then. So it was that, that kind of thing, you know, stays with you. And I don't remember lots of people here. I do remember that we met some people who had been here a very long time, or it seemed like a long time. And it just, this may be fantasy, but I remember there was a kid who apparently was born here or something, you know. Well that was kind of weird, you know. How long are we going to stay here? I mean, after all, this becomes a, a new concept, you know. What's going to happen here, right? But it turned out that they worked out a system where somebody, my, my uncle vouched for us, and my uncle had a connection, somebody who vouched for us, so that we were able to get, at least a visa to stay in New York, you know. And there was also the technicality of the Displaced Persons Act, which came in very shortly before we arrived, in which because my parents were from Hungary -- that is from a Communist occupied country -- we did not get sent back there. This was the Cold War politics in our favor, in a way. However, I was not under that context because I had a British passport. I was not a displaced person. So that was a whole curious thing and for years I had to, you know, register as an alien until several years later I had to go out to Canada. They put me on a train by myself, go to Canada, come back in through Rouses Point, or some immigration point, get my passport stamped and enter actually into America as a, I don't know, under a different visa or immigration. Until then, I was an alien. I, I feel like an alien, right? (Sigrist laughs) So that was a little later on but,

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about your parents at Ellis Island or, or has your mother ever told you about how she felt about, about being here?

VERES: She felt extremely amazed at the good treatment. I mean, because we were basically *flotsam* and *jetsam* -- we had no real capacity, we were supposed to go to Costa Rica. So they could have, you know, anticipated just all, just fill this stuff out and go in there and do this and that. No, it wasn't like that at all. So she was extremely amazed and, and very pleased. This was her first hit of America, I mean literally. We stepped off the boat, we got another boat. This was the first real domicil, you know, our first, first residence was Ellis Island. It was huge, but it didn't have that sense of, I can't recall these monstrous spaces, I'm sure we didn't come in that entrance. They must have had a side entrance or some smaller, so it wasn't this sense of coming into this cavern, you know. It was more domesticated.

SIGRIST: Do you remember before you left Europe what your ideas about America were? What, what kind of, how did you envision America as a, as a child growing up in, in Hungary?

VERES: Well, since my mother's brother had been here, and he actually came back in '48 before we left to visit -- and so we knew stuff about America through him. Yeah, it was magic land, you know, what else? Everybody said the same thing, and when you look at the skyline, it certainly is different from anything that you've ever seen in Europe. And I didn't travel Europe, I was a kid but, you know, it was different. The size of it, you know, just the, the building size, especially as you land in a ship you're right near a downtown. My, my uncle wasn't wealthy by any means but, you know, he was able to send us gifts and stuff. I'd say, "I got a pair of roller skates!" You know, this was wonderful, you know, it's great.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about being released from Ellis Island.

VERES: I think it was just a sort of, you know, we had been on and off and on and off things all the time, so it was just another step, probably. We just got onto another boat and went to New York. And I remember passing, well, coming to Ellis Island the big thing was to pass the Statue of Liberty so close, you know. That was a big thing. And going back the same, you know, we saw it again. And so then the adventure was going to begin, I'd, you know, I had no idea.

SIGRIST: Well, well, start us off on the adventure and we'll get as far as we can. Where did you go when you left?

VERES: Well, we, first, our first place was in a, a building called, Hotel, at that time, called Hotel Colonial, now it's a co-op, on Columbus and Eighty-First street. Right across from Hayden Planetarium -- wonderful location. Why there? Other Hungarians went there. It's always, you know, that kind of thing. And we had a small apartment, my uncle worked that out for us. And I was still wearing short pants, we'd go down to the park, you know, that kind of thing. And it was in March so, end of March, beginning of March, April, so there was just a little bit left of school year. And that was my first big part of the adventure, go back, going to a public school. It was public school, I think P.S. Eighty-Seven, which was on the West Side near where this house was. And, I mean, that was like the big thing that was my personal life beginning because here I was, I didn't speak English, thrown into this junior high school. Sink or swim, you know.

SIGRIST: What are some of the things that stick out in your mind about beginning school in America?

VERES: Well, there, there you really are a foreigner. I mean, you feel that more in the school situation than any where else and, of course, there was no one else speaking Hungarian. I knew a few words of English because

somebody in Milano had taught me a few words of English. And I could draw, that was my skill. And that was my *entrée*, you know. I would be given the Thanksgiving posters to draw or something, you know. Well, not in March, but maybe there was an Easter poster, I don't know. So I kind of got to do that. And nobody played soccer, I didn't know play baseball, I didn't, I didn't know any of this stuff, right.

SIGRIST: Did you look different in some way than the other kids?

VERES: Oh, I'm sure I did. I had, you know, short pants, I had, you know, a European looking haircut and I don't know what else, you know? But my, the language is the main thing. I mean, I didn't know how to speak. But I, I guess I was pretty gregarious. I learned, I know I learned English within the half a year, you know, as well as I could. And people were fairly friendly. There was nothing else to do because I wasn't in the immigration wave where there were a lot of people of my language. I mean, there was no way to, like now, sort of subset yourself into a Spanish speaking or a Vietnamese speaking or an Italian speaking group. I was alone, I mean, I was the alien from Mars. I had to make it, right? It was, it was alright.

SIGRIST: Do you remember an incident where you were actually made fun of or, or ridiculed in some way for being foreign born?

VERES: Well, there were jokes, you know, like some guy would say, you know, this, pointing to his pencil, "This is called a fuck." And you'll go to that girl and ask her for a fuck, you know, that's a pencil, and of course, what do I know, right? And that kind of thing. Which is great, you know, that's kids, you know. So you learn, quickly! (Both laugh)

SIGRIST: What about your parents and, and their attempts, if any, to learn English?

VERES: Well, my father had some English skills because he was a Goodyear representative. He had gone to England a lot and he knew some. My mother also knew some English because they came from a class of people who, as I told you before, Budapest was very cosmopolitan, but, unfortunately, that all, everybody spoke Hungarian. It's the only country that speaks Hungarian. So if you're cosmopolitan and you want to travel, you learn other languages. My mother knew five languages. So English was one of them and they had had, I don't know, governesses who spoke English, I don't know. But she was able to get along. I very quickly switched completely at home from Hungarian to English. They would speak to me in Hungarian, I, I'd answer in English, you know. That was my way of doing it. My brother had a much harder time. He was only five and he, he was silent for a year or two. He was overwhelmed, you know? I, I think he had a harder time. But, you know, my parents immediately tried to get some work. My mother was the first to get it. She had learned to be a seamstress on her own in, in, -- a dressmaker really -- in Hungary before the war, and she got a job with Lilly Daché with hats. And then that was, from there she went to doing dresses and she ended up on Seventh Avenue being an assistant dress designer. She ended up being the pattern maker for Simplicity Designs. So that was her career in America.

SIGRIST: What do you think the hardest thing for her was to get used to in America?

VERES: I think the main thing was to live on her own as an income person, as somebody works in the world, because she was a housewife. I mean, she had maids, you know, and people in, in the middle class had maids, had cooks, etcetera etcetera. She had never had to do anything before the war. And the war came, it was a whole different thing. And then after the war, she again had the maid. I mean, it was part of the structure. So she had to learn to cook, she had to learn to shop, she had to learn to, well, she came home from work on the subway and then had to deal with that. Huge

difficulties, you know. An interesting side issue. My, as I said, we were a, a Jewish household, but not particularly Orthodox or religious. Well, in New York on Seventh Avenue there were a lot of Jews working in the dressmaking business, and they couldn't believe she was Jewish 'cause she couldn't speak Yiddish. Middle class Budapest, that wasn't Yiddish, and other parts of Europe were. So that was kind of interesting, you know, as a context of culture and religion together.

SIGRIST: Well, you said in Budapest that the Jewish community was very assimilated,

VERES: Yes, but they were,

SIGRIST: During the interview.

VERES: They were also very much within their Orthodox community. It's, it's just that they weren't Yiddish. That was in the country or in, in Poland or Russia, but Budapest not. At least not,

SIGRIST: Did your, did your mother feel some sort of exclusion because of this here in the United States?

VERES: Not exclusion, she just knew she was different, you know. I mean, it was a different, she was from a different class too. I mean, there's a class structure in this country -- and people deny it, but there is, as much as in Europe -- and it has to do with education, it has to do with the background, how much you've traveled, how many languages you, did you read or not read, did you go to the opera, symphony, concerts, this kind of thing. And that was their world. And it was very interesting because they considered themselves from that world all their lives, although, in New York their lives were working class. I mean, my mother certainly was in the working class

situation, but not her culture. But her colleagues were, had a different culture. So that was a mix that was not available in Europe really, or at least not before the war. But, you know, she was very open hearted, open minded and it was fine – never complained about it.

SIGRIST: I think it's interesting that you mentioned that your brother, who was younger than you, actually had a harder time learning the language, and -- can you talk a little bit about that because I would think that being younger it would have been easier in some ways.

VERES: Well, let's look at it this way. He was born in the middle of the war -- very little food, if any. My mother couldn't breast feed, so he had a very poor beginning. I had a very rich beginning before the War. He did not have the, the nurtured situation in the first years of his life. He's, I mean, he's shy, I guess, and he never really had a schooling before he came here. He never had any way of meeting kids his age in that kind of context. I had been in school, in Hungary, into four, four years of school, so that was a familiar environment, even though the language was different. I, I was put into that already. So, here he was put into a, in, in a totally new environment. I mean, imagine an American first grader going to school, it's new, right? Imagine that kid not learning, not knowing a word of what's being said, it's doubling you, it's worse, right? Being shy, you know, it's, it's a burden, it's a really different thing. He, he eventually made it, I mean, you know, a year or two later he was American kid, I mean, you know, you do it. But I, and I took him always, I mean, I was in charge of him. Down to the park, this and that, you know, that was my job, you know. Take care of the kid. But, you know, eventually you, you change, you know. I went to, from grade school to junior high school, he was still in grade school. He was six years younger -- big difference in age. So he really had a different life after a while.

SIGRIST: And in our last couple of minutes, talk about your father once you got to the United States.

VERES: My father had a harder time because he tried to get himself back into the Goodyear company but he didn't have -- his English wasn't good enough to be a salesman, to do that. They offered him some job in Rio de Janeiro or someplace and he didn't want to do that. So what he did was he parlayed - - that story I told you about the stamps -- he parlayed that value into becoming a partner with a, with another person down in Nassau Street and started a stamp company. The Hudson Stamp Company on Nassau Street, and that was his life for years and years. All of the stamps were eventually sold, he bought new stuff. It was a, you know, seven day a week business - - six days, I think. Whatever.

SIGRIST: And, and what about his, you said he knew a little bit of English but, but how did he feel about once he got here, I mean, how did he feel about life here in America?

VERES: Well, he's a very practical man. He was able to do that. For example, I'll give you an example of this. My mother wanted to always live near a park, near some, you know, trees, and we only lived in the, that hotel for two years. And my father knew he was going to have to leave there, so he went up and down West Central Park West, next to the park, and met and talked with every doorman, every superintendent up and down the blocks till he found this, an opening on Ninety-Seventh Street, and that's where we moved. And that's where I grew up. So, you know, he was able to carry all that practicality, which made him survive the War. I mean, he went into, when he was called up, he took a typewriter with him because he knew with a typewriter he'd get an office job and not just dig ditches. And having that office job he got a lot of people out, writing out their releases. You know, that's practicality.

SIGRIST: We've got to end because they're going to be closing the museum any minute now, but let me just ask you,

VERES: End up here another night, huh?

SIGRIST: That's right! [Laughs] How do you think of yourself in terms of nationality?

VERES: Nationality?

SIGRIST: Yeah. When you think of your ethnicity and your nationality, how do you think about it?

VERES: I'm a New Yorker! [Laughs] Well, no. I mean, I, I'm very aware of the fact that I'm an immigrant. But I mean, I really grew into my head in New York. I was here since, 'till I got married, and grew up in New York schools and public schools and college, so, you know. And I've been in California for more time than anything else, but, you know, that's how I see it. But there is a difference, you know, and you, you have all this stuff behind you. And interestingly most people of the next generation -- when I grew up, when I was in high school, my good friends were all called by their nicknames as nationalities. And it wasn't a put down or wasn't anything. It was just like their tag, you know? I was a honkey, or something. And then there was a whole other period when it became the kind of balkanized situation and it wasn't there when I came. It was just part of your attribute. You were Hungarian.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Veres, thank you very much for taking --

VERES: Hey, it's a pleasure!

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SIGRIST: -- time out from your visit. We gotta get you back out there fast. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Peter Veres on Thursday, September 25, 1997, at the Ellis Island Recording Studio. Thank you very much, sir.

VERES: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW