Tom Grossman, Part 1

00:00:06

Interviewer: Okay, okay. Okay. About 30 seconds. Okay, thank you. Please tell us your name and where and when you were born.

Grossman: My name is Thomas Grossman, G-R-O-S-S-M-A-N. Spelled in Hungarian, G-R-O-S-Z-M-A-N. I was born in Budapest, 1927, May 1st.

Interviewer: Okay, did you live in Budapest your whole life?

Grossman: No, actually I haven’t. I was born in Budapest because -- basically because the facilities for birth and all that was much safer in the capital city than anywhere else.

Interviewer: Okay, tell us about your parents and your early family life.

Grossman: My father was a retired officer from the Royal Hungarian railroads and army, which was actually, basically, a joint venture back in those days. The railroads were controlled by the government and the army, as such, indirectly. My mother was staying at home, mostly, rearing my two sisters and myself.

Interviewer: Tell us about your family life when you were growing up. What was the Jewish community like?

Grossman: Well, we lived in a small town in the Tokaj area, which is famous of its wine production. My father, after retiring from the railroads after -- shortly after World War One, went into business of wine production and wood business of various different kinds, namely firewood production and also railroad ties.

Interviewer: Okay. Tell us about your -- what type of school you went to, and did you live in an all-Jewish environment, or was it a --

Grossman: That was not really such thing as that in our cities or our villages or towns. There was not strictly Jewish environment. It was pretty much assimilated at all times, except maybe the super Orthodox. They sort of lived for themselves, but even their children went to public schools and associated with non-Jewish children. The balance of the community, of course, the Jewish community was divided to, more or less, two parts. One was an Orthodox community, and one was super Orthodox, which was Beth Hamedrash part that was very Hasidic and quite religious group. We were all knowing one another and living in a small town of about a population of 4,000. Everybody knew everybody.

Interviewer: About 4,000.

Grossman: Right.

Interviewer: So your school was attended by both Jewish children and Gentile children.

Grossman: Right.

Interviewer: Was there any anti-Semitism growing up?

Grossman: There was always anti-Semitism in Hungary. That went with the territory, so to speak.

Interviewer: How did that impinge on your daily life?

Grossman: Well, unfortunately, which was the wrong thing to do by our parents, to tell us not to pay attention to it, which is the worst thing to do. You do need to pay attention to it.

Interviewer: For instance, what type of -- were there rules, or was it that they -- Jewish people just slighted by teachers or shopkeepers? What are some --

Grossman: Well, we were never slighted by teachers as such, you know, not openly, not in front of a class or anything like that. If we were slighted, we were slighted by our classmates or some of our classmates’ parents or something like that, but not by our teachers. That wasn’t the policy. We did have school prayers which was mandatory in all Hungarian schools, but it was a, strangely enough, a totally nondenominational prayer. It never said anything about neither this religion’s god and all the others. Never anything was mentioned except the Catholic kids was making the sign of the cross, and the Protestant kids was standing there with their hands held together, and the Jewish kids was just standing straight, but saying the prayers.

Interviewer: So the discrimination was more on a private level rather than institutionalized type of thing.

Grossman: At that time, yes.

Interviewer: How did things change, or did things change, in your town after the war broke out?

Grossman: Well, it was quite a bit of difference. In the first place, even before the war broke out officially, 1938 under the regime of Kálmán Darányi, we had the first so-called Jewish law, which was a pretty, I would say hefty, but yet not -- comparing to other things, not too bad of this communitary law. And yet it was the beginning because at that time, they already started out with not granting business licenses, new business licenses to new Jewish enterprises, not letting Jewish students go to universities except in what you called numerus clausus, which entailed a certain percentage, which eventually followed into high schools and colleges, in addition to professional universities like engineering colleges and other places.

Interviewer: So at one time, even Jewish children were prevented from entering high schools.

Grossman: That came later on.

Interviewer: About when; do you remember?

Grossman: That came actually in the mid -- not mid, but the early ‘40’s. By that time, we had like -- the new entry level was 6 percent.

Interviewer: So only 6 percent of the students could be Jewish.

Grossman: Right. Up until that it was 20 percent, which was absolutely no problem because it was always less than 20 percent who wanted to enter high school.

Interviewer: When did things begin to get worse?

Grossman: Things was really getting worse in, like, ’41 and ’42 that we had different heads of states like prime ministers who was imposing stiffer laws and imposing work camps to Jews. Jewish men was expelled from the Hungarian army and sent to what you called labor camps instead of army. But still, that was not a concentration camp. It was a different level. It was like an army, but strictly Jews, and they had to wear a yellow arm band.

Interviewer: What type of laws were passed that restricted your own daily life as a child and with your family?

Grossman: Basically what restricted me was really none. I had not felt or wasn’t affected of any of these laws because of my father’s position as a retired person from railroad and army and his deeds to the Hungarian government, various different things that he was exempted from all laws that was discriminatory against Jews.

Interviewer: Did you have to carry special papers showing that you were exempt from these laws?

Grossman: No, not really.

Interviewer: How did they know to enforce it with the family here but not with your family?

Grossman: Well, basically when you lived in a small town, everybody knew you, so nobody really bothered you as such like from the police or from the townhouse officials or city hall or something like that.

Interviewer: When did things begin to change for your family also?

Grossman: It began to change, and it changed, like, overnight, in 1944. And it was after the overrun of the Nazi army of Hungary in March 16, 1944.

Interviewer: And what were the changes that you remember?

Grossman: Oh, changes were devastating.

Interviewer: Tell us about them.

Grossman: Immediately, schools were closed. All Jewish children was expelled from school. We had curfews to abide by. We could not go out in the streets. We were told to wear a yellow star. It was in chronological order, so to speak. Okay, in 1944, March 16th, I was living in a town called Kassa. It was formerly part of Czechoslovakia. Now, again, is a Czechoslovakian territory, the city called Kosice. I was a high school student there, boarding. In the small towns in Hungary, there were no high schools, and high schools were somewhat higher level in academic achievements and academic requirements than high schools in this country. Those schools are called gymnasium, which is not the same as a gymnasium here. To illustrate, something we had, we started first class of -- first year of gymnasium after four year of public school and immediately had Latin. They have eight years of Latin. Third years of school, we had two more foreign languages and algebra, pretty heavy. In the fourth grade of the gymnasium, we already had second-degree equation and calculus and things of that nature in the mathematics level and physics and so on and so forth. So it was a pretty heavy curriculum as such. But we were used to it. That’s the way the educational system worked.

Interviewer: So when March 16th arrived, you were away at boarding school.

Grossman: Right. I was in Kosice. I attended my sixth grade of gymnasium. And the day before, we were celebrating -- which was March 15th -- we were celebrating the March 15th revolution of the Hungarians against the Austrian regime, which was 1944, and the revolution took place in 1848. And everybody was happy and gay that we achieved what we achieved, that Hungary was free. And ironically enough, the next day we were -- SS tanks and *Wehrmacht* boots marching on the streets again. Of course, schools were immediately closed, and we were advised to -- those of us who were not actually living in that town -- to pack up and go home to our respective parental homes, which I did.

And everything was relatively calm for two or three days, and then the different little things came about, you know, like we had advertisement or told us, you now -- that little town, for instance, we had no radio or radio communication. They had had a man who came out with a drum and beat the drum and then -- he was the town crier, is what they called him -- and told everybody what the new laws are. And he was telling everybody that all men and women of the Jewish faith now will have to display a yellow -- not -- first, not the yellow star, but they have to stay in their homes between 6:00 in the morning and 6:00 at night. We could not get out of our homes. Of course, there was a method to their madness because the stores didn’t open until 8:00, and they closed at 5:30 or 6:00. So after that, we could not go out and do any kind of shopping. So if we didn’t have anything stored in our homes, foodwise, any kind of reserves, then we were in pretty bad trouble. Most of us, when we lived in a small town like that, you know, you had your own little vegetable gardens and animals and so on and so forth, so you were really not in any kind of immediate danger of starving. But there were some people, sick and old, that really started suffering hardship, and that was the bad part about it. And then six or seven days later came about to announcing the -- every Jewish member of the town have to report to the town hall and turn in their mechanized vehicles, whether it was a bicycle or a motorcycle or a car or anything of that sort, including their jewelry and their rings, watches and whatever that entailed.

The next thing was, two or three days later is the announcement of wearing the yellow star, at which point the curfew was lowered. We could go out during the day by having the yellow star displayed. That lasted about a week. A week later, we were told that we can expect some other changes. These changes were not told what it was, but the following night, the Hungarian military police knocked on our doors about 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and at gunpoint, ordered us to get two days’ change. Just put on what we had on, get two days’ change of underwear, and get out of your home, whereupon my father was, of course, you know, was -- got very indignant and told the men to get the hell out of there. That’s his home, and the men told him, “You damn Jew, you don’t have any home. That’s not yours anymore. Just get out.”

And we were herded into the local synagogue, where we stayed for about a little more than 48 hours, everybody jammed up, the old, the sick, the infant, and everybody else. No facilities could be used because there were no facilities inside in the synagogue in Hungary. First of all, that could not be done because of -- not in an Orthodox synagogue. So it had to be outside, but they did not let you go outside, so you can imagine what took place. So the place was totally desecrated as a result. Like I said, 48 hours later, or maybe a little more -- I think we spent three nights and two days -- we were herded down to the railroad station and hurled into boxcars and taken into provincial capital called Sátoraljaújhely. There was makeshift ghettos set up.

Interviewer: What was the train like on your way there?

>> Grossman: Train wasn’t -- it was just boxcars, you know, nothing too bad at that time because the whole ride wasn’t more than about two and a half hours, so it wasn’t really bad, and it wasn’t really that crowded, if I remember correctly. Maybe hurled in about 50, 55 or 60 people in the boxcar, which shouldn’t normally take more than 40, 45. When I tell you the story later on, that gets a whole lot worse. But I don’t want to get ahead of myself.

Interviewer: Good.

Grossman: We finally arrived to this place. Their private homes were evacuated for the purpose of setting up a provincial ghetto, which was for the whole province of Zemplén, and Zemplén was like a state of -- we can compare like South Carolina. I mean, it was a little bit different structure and infrastructure and setup, but basically, there was a governor and a lieutenant governor and so on, so forth with different political entities that went into that. And we stayed there for six weeks in about a 12 by 12 little room holding about 15 or 16 people, persons, in which we had to sleep and stay in and so on. And towards the end of the sixth week -- actually, let me correct this. About three weeks later, we started hearing the stories about, we will be taken out of the ghettos and taken to the southern part of Hungary where we’re going to be performing agricultural work to help the war effort of the glorious German and Hungarian army to win the war against the horrible United States and England and so on and so forth.

And the transports had started. Three transport came off, and we were landing in the forth. There were different kind of efforts made to get my family out of the transports to -- being sent away because whoever handled the case to help us not to be sent knew exactly where we were going, even though they wouldn’t tell us. After we were taken out to the railroad station and hurled into boxcars again, one of my sisters were with us, my mother, father, and one of my sisters, and my other sister were married at the time in the same town where I was going to school, as a matter of fact, Kosice. And we were just pushed into these boxcars, about 80 people at this time, not 50, and all of a sudden, my oldest sister reappeared, I mean, just appeared from nowhere in the company of an SS soldier and was put in the boxcar with us. And we were totally amazed because we couldn’t understand where she come from, and she explained to us that her husband were taken to one of these labor camps, and the soldier who was in the SS uniform, he was basically a friend of the family. He was a local boy, but of German heritage, and he joined the SS when the Nazis occupied Hungary. And he was really helpful to her family. I don’t know how much harm he done elsewhere. But nevertheless, she came and joined us.

And the thing that struck me, and I remarked to my father that, “There’s one thing that I don’t understand, Dad. If we’re going to southern Hungary to perform agricultural work, how come these engines on the end of this train are pointing north?” It so happens that the provincial capital, Sátoraljaújhely, was also a border town to Czechoslovakia, and Czechoslovakia was north and still is north of Hungary. And there was no doubt in our minds that we are not going to southern Hungary, but we’re heading to Poland, which, indeed, it happened.

In the mean time, we were in the ghetto, of course, you know. It was different things happened. It was very frightening. They pulled out people to go to work, to do this and that, and these men never returned. And we have heard occasional shots and different things. Many of the people, young people, men, women, was badly beaten. And it was a rather frightening experience. I could spend a lot of time to talk about it, but I don’t think we have too much time to do that. Next, of course, after --

Interviewer: Was your family personally mistreated in the ghetto?

Grossman: No.

Interviewer: But you saw it around you.

Grossman: No, they were actually never mistreated.

Interviewer: Okay.

Grossman: There was one -- we were, we were beaten a few times when we were actually hurled up to the train at the site of the provincial capital from the ghetto, but that was the only thing, you know. But it was not anything severe. But nevertheless, it was a beating.

After about three days -- it took about 72 hours-plus train ride to our destination. We arrived to Auschwitz. And how that was figured out and calculated is still beyond me, but it was calculated so that we got there right in the middle of the night, like 3:00. It was pitch dark, and it was actually more frightening and more dramatic to get out of a boxcar than it would be at 8:00 in the morning or something like that. We had 80 people put into that car, approximately, or may be more. We had some people died during the -- old people died and -- during the trip, which was very unfortunate. Here, again, was -- were absolutely no facilities and you just had to take care of yourself the best you could. The cars were sealed. There was no way to even look out. When the cars rolled through stations, nobody knew what it was because just -- sped through stations. Occasionally we pulled aside to let other trains pass us.

You know, it’s very strange. The other night, I was listening to a program with Elie Wiesel, and he was making a statement that toward the Final solution days, they were so obsessed that they let army trains pull aside to make trains go to -- deportation trains go faster to the concentration camps or places like Auschwitz or other places. Well, I did not experience that. I’m not saying that’s not so. That could have been so, but at the time we were taken, we were pulled off to let other trains pass by. I know that for a fact. It could be so, but I find this strange -- hard to believe, basically, because I don’t think, even for the Nazis, it was that important to let Jews suffer in the boxcar that they would let their precious army trains to sit aside. So that is a somewhat -- but it could, you know -- anything can happen. I’m not saying that it didn’t.

When we arrived to Auschwitz, like I told you, that was a very frightening experience. There was this SS running around with ferocious-looking German shepherds, dogs, and tried to hurl off everybody from the boxcar, then beating -- they were beating us off of the car. They weren’t just asking us to come down and hurry up, but they were actually coming up that boxcar and beating everybody as -- where they could reach them. That was unbelievable. The cruelty of these people are beyond human imagination, and anybody today who makes a statement that the Holocaust did not exist and is only an overactive imagination of Jewish people, anybody who makes this statement ought to seek mental examination because it did happen, I was there, and I do not have an overactive imagination. And that person can come to me and talk to me about it, and I’ll tell him anytime what happened and I’ll tell him anytime where to go, on top of it. I promise you that person will never get lost in his life after that because I’ll direct him exactly where I want him to go. So much for that.

The next thing is that when we were finally hurled off of that car, those boxcars, we saw that humongous sign that said -- when we actually thought that we were in Auschwitz, we were not in Auschwitz. We were outside of Auschwitz. There was a gate like the Arch of Triumph and was written over it, “Arbeit macht frei,” which means, “Labor makes you free.” Yep. I don’t want to comment on it. But at that gate, there stood a tall SS colonel, or he may have been captain. I’m not exactly sure. I wasn’t too familiar at that time with the rank insignias. And he were standing up and pointing like this. And this man was Dr. Mengele, and he were pointing the old and the women, pregnant women and young children and mother with young children and older people who he felt that were unable to work to the left and the “able-bodied,” quote, unquote, to the right. And we were told when we asked where we’re going, those of us who spoke any German, which I did, we were told we were going to take some showers and we’re being -- we’ll be de-liced. I asked why should we de-lice? We have no lice. Well, I got a tremendous slap in the face when I made that statement. I was told to shut up and just go.

We were standing in block of -- column of five and ordered to march. We were going into some big rooms, tremendous rooms with pipes going all over the place with showerheads coming off the pipes, and we were asked to strip, leave our clothes there, and go, just step aside, and there were some people who came with some hand shear and sheared us, all our hair off our bodies, our head and everything, and made us change into -- we could keep our underwear and our shirt, and some of us could keep our shoes. Those were a little fortunate. Others had to -- their shoes were even taken and given some wooden shoes of some kind. And then we had to change into these striped suits. They gave us a cap, this striped cap of sort. So it was like a prisoner’s suit. And after we were given this stuff, we were told to put this things down that we were given. We were given a little round piece of -- it wasn’t -- it was a piece of hard paper but was framed with some light metal and -- with a number in it, which was, from thereon, our prisoner number that we had to memorize, we were told, and then we go stepping into the shower.

And since I’m here, you know that the shower was legitimate. Some of the others was not that fortunate. Some of the others who were hurled into the shower were told they were going to be cleaned and bathed. They had Zyklon gas coming out of the shower and died the most horrible death that you can think of and you can possibly imagine. And the horrible part of it is that the Zyklon gas specific weight is a good bit lighter than air -- no, I’m sorry -- heavier than air. And the fresh air was going up, and the gas was going down. As a result, everybody was -- excuse me -- everybody’s climbing up on top of everybody else to gasp for the fresh air to be able to stay alive until this hall actually was filled up totally with gas and everybody was killed.

Interviewer: Did your whole family get sent to the right, or did some of them get sent to the --

Grossman: No. My whole family was sent to the right.

Interviewer: To the right.

Grossman: So my father and myself ended up in one place, and my mother and my two sisters ended up in another place. We have seen them briefly after the showers to march in one direction, and we were marched to another direction. So we actually never went into Auschwitz, neither one of us. We stayed in Birkenau. Now, Birkenau was -- it was a horrible place. It was one of these transient camps, and people were just there to -- waiting for transports to various different places. And so my father and I were shipped from there to a place in Oberschlesien called Oberwüstegiersdorf. It was a small mining town that we were shipped to, and we were working in a stone quarry. Actually, inside of the mountain we were building an airport, an airstrip, a landing strip and also takeoff, you know, obviously. And we stayed there from -- basically, from last of April of 1944 until February, 1945. During the time, of course, we were changed to two different camps, but somehow or the other, we ended back up in the same place again.

During the time while we were in that camp, various things happened, or different atrocities of various different kind, but basically, this was a work camp, and not much of the infamous killings or anything like that took place. A couple of people tried to escape. They hung them with an open display. I, one time, stepped outside the gate, purely as an accident. I was -- saw something and tried to -- picked it up, and I was shot at. Fortunately, nothing happened. I wasn’t hit, but nonetheless, I was shot at. When I got back, I was severely reprimanded and bodily punished.

1945, February, we were experiencing something very curious. Things, you know, we have seen, some very interesting things happening. We have heard thunder and lightning, which was rather peculiar in north Germany, northeastern Germany, which was northeastern Germany at the time, at that time of the year. That was beyond our imagination that we could hear thunder and lightning. And that was, of course, not any thunder and lightning, but it was the heavy artillery of the Russian army that we have seen.

During that time -- of course, I like to mention this as well. While we were in these labor camps, we had several selections. People who got rather skinny and undernourished, they were selected out and sent back to Auschwitz, and that was the first time actually we have really learned -- when we have found out that they are being sent back to Auschwitz -- what was really taking place in Auschwitz. At the time when we arrived, we had no idea what that fantastic red sky meant, the flames and the stench of burning flesh. We had no idea what that come from and what -- we never experienced anything like that. And we have found out, as we were there, that some of the guards who were old and talkative just tell us, “You won’t behave, you’re going to end up like your buddies there.” We said, “What are you talking about?” “Well, they were sent back to Auschwitz, and they’re going to be burned.” “What do you mean, burned?” “Don’t you know what’s going on?” We said, “No, how would we know? Who would tell us?” So they actually told us that these people would be sent back to Auschwitz, be gassed, and cremated. And so when we arrived and we saw all this, this fantastic flames and the sky red and everything else, that’s what we saw.

Interviewer: Were you still with your father at this point?

Grossman: Yes. So February 1945, like I told you, we seen this artillery barrages which we had thought at first was thunder and lightning. The Nazis decided they’re going to have to occupy -- they have to evacuate the camp, and everybody who was able to walk or march will have to go. And my father, at this point, unfortunately, was not able to walk, so he was left behind in the barrack for the sick, and the rest of us were taken on a trip, on foot.

And this trip took two weeks. We were marching, 700 of us. Two weeks later, or maybe a little more, maybe a little less -- I’m not a hundred percent sure at this point -- we arrived to a camp called Flossenbürg, 200 of us. The rest of them was either -- just died on the roadside or shot to death by the SS. If they could not walk or they refused to walk because they were too tired, they just simply shot at the back of their neck, and that was the end of it.

Flossenbürg was an unbelievable concentration camp. It wasn’t only a *Vernichtungslager,* which means a total elimination camp, but also set up to torture, to starve, to beat, to reduce people to an absolute subhuman level. The slightest punishment for anything you have done that was a crime in the Nazis’ opinion was hanging. When we were marched into this camp, we have to file by 12 people hanging -- we had to look at it -- for various different crimes, and then we had to be called for *Appel,* which was a normal occurrence in the concentration camps anyway, but this was just unreal of any, any camp I’d ever been to because we were called to roll call for 5:30 in the morning, and we stood outside, rain or shine or snow or sleet or whatever, until about 10:00 in the morning. And then they let you go back to your barrack, and they called you out again for something else. This wasn’t a work camp. They just had you there to slowly kill you.

One day I volunteered for a work detail because I just couldn’t stand sitting in these barracks and every day waking up with somebody dying next to me. Every morning I woke up, I woke up to a corpse next to me, or pretty much so anyway. I volunteered to work, so they let me work to unload trucks of various different kind. There came a truck bringing food for the SS. They brought in big baskets, you know, like wash baskets, laundry baskets, full of bread, so I took one. I knew if I got caught, I’d probably get killed, but I didn’t care because I was so hungry. I haven’t seen a piece of bread for I don’t know how long. So I just took one. And sure enough, I got caught because somebody saw me to take it, and he wanted half of it, and I gave him half of it, and three others jumped, and I ended up with nothing, but I was reported. So I was sentenced to be hanged.

Well, I was fortunate because delegation from the Swiss Red Cross came in, and all the overexaggerated punishments had to stop. But they shipped me out of that camp next day by a train with a bunch of other guys, and we ended up in Dresden, Germany. It was a work camp. They gave us a little food. They took us out every day to work on the streets. The detail I worked with, we went to the railroad station that was bombed to shreds by the American air force. You know, it was a beautiful sight. I enjoyed cleaning up the rubble. I was just wishing that they had done a little more than that. So we were there for about, I think, two or three weeks, something like this.

During this time while I was in Dresden, I had a very curious experience. One day they wanted me to come and peel potatoes, which I did, and there was a young SS guard who was sitting there. And he was sitting there across the yard from me and peeling an apple. He had a knife. And when I’d seen him to peel an apple, I just felt so craving for that apple, you know, I couldn’t keep my eyes off of him. And I must have looked kind of hateful at him, you know. He must have felt something that it wasn’t pleasant coming from me, so he came over and asked me what I’m looking at. I said, “I’m looking at you.” He said, “Don’t look. I’ll cut your eyes out.” And he actually took his knife that he had and aimed it to my eye, and I just bent my head down real quick, and he cut a piece of my -- right here, so I still have that --

Interviewer: Scar.

Grossman: -- scar. And then it was some strange reason, two days later, I was shipped out of there, too, and we ended up -- well, actually, at this point, we weren’t shipped out. We were really marching, partially -- no, we’d been taking a train from Dresden and then taken off the train and started marching. During the march, we had two air raids, and then we had a very, very bad episode one time. I had been together with a very dear friend of mine who was also my classmate, and I was kind of aiding him, and one day while we were marching on the road, a horse-drawn flatbed wagon comes up with two SS men and asks us, “Who is tired that wants to ride the flatbed?” And my friend said, “I’m going.” I said, “No, you’re not.” “Yes, I am. You don’t be crazy. You come too.” I said, “No, I’m not going. I’m absolutely not going, and you don’t go either.” “Oh, come on, don’t be silly.” So he went, and so did 25 others, all around, sitting around on those flatbed and some in the middle of the flatbed. And then the two SS took off, and they took off the road. The horses started running, you know, galloping or trotting or whatever, and then they veered off to the left -- I remember like it was today -- into the woods, and all of a sudden, I hear the submachine gun going off. And these two bastards are coming back and asking, smiling. They says, “Anybody wants a buggy ride?” So we kept on marching. About two days later, we arrived to a camp called Leitmeritz. It’s in Czechoslovakia. Name today is Litomerice. This was pretty well in the beginning of April at this point. And --

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