

**The Southern Institute
For Education and Research
at
Tulane University**

Presents

**STORIES OF
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
IN NEW ORLEANS**

ISAAC NEIDERMAN

ISAAC NEIDERMAN WAS BORN IN TRANSYLVANIA, ROMANIA. IN 1939, NAZI-ALLIED HUNGARY ANNEXED THAT REGION. ISAAC WAS FIFTEEN YEARS OLD. JEWS WERE BEATEN, EXPROPRIATED, AND FORCED INTO GHETTOS. IN 1944, THE NAZIS AND THEIR COLLABORATORS BEGAN DEPORTING THE JEWS TO AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU DEATH CAMP IN POLAND.

ISAAC WAS ORDERED INTO A NAZI “LABOR BATTALION” AND SENT TO BUDAPEST, THE HUNGARIAN CAPITAL. HE SOON ESCAPED AND OBTAINED A FALSE PASSPORT FROM RAOUL WALLENBERG, THE SWEDISH “DIPLOMAT” WHO RESCUED JEWS. ISAAC WAS LIBERATED BY RUSSIAN TROOPS IN JANUARY 1945.

ISAAC COMES FROM A FAMILY OF NINE. HE IS THE ONLY SURVIVOR.

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY THE SOUTHERN INSTITUTE'S PLATER ROBINSON IN 2000.

**PR (PLATER ROBINSON)
IN (ISSAC NIEDERMAN)**

PR Well, Isaac, thank you very much for coming. I'd like to begin by asking you when and where you were born please.

***MAP OF ROMANIA ZOOMING IN ON SATU-MARE,
TRANSYLVANIA***

IN Sure, I was born in Romania, in the state of Transylvania. The city is called Satu-Mare. It was a city of about a hundred thousand. There were twenty-five to thirty thousand Jews living in there, most of them very religious Orthodox Jews. We had a nice comfortable life there because I come from four, five generation before me, they were all Jews, they were all born there; of course it wasn't Romania at the time, it was Hungary before the First World War. But Romania occupied it after the First World War. So we were Romanians, the children were Romanian. Well, our fathers were all Hungarians. They were always talking how wonderful Hungary, how wonderful used to be, and all that. Our profession, we were wine business way back grandfather, great-grandfather. Transylvania had lot of wines growing, a lot of grapes, good wines. Then parents just took over from their parents, and we would probably take over from our parents. I came up under anti-Semitic country, whether it was Romania or it was Hungary. I remember when Passover came around, the priest with all his students came around to all the Jewish neighborhoods.

PR Before the war?

IN Before the war. I was still pissed, I didn't talk about it. Even before the Germans. They came around and threw rocks in Jewish synagogues. They threw rocks. I remember we were sitting by the Sabbath meal, and they threw a rock, fell right on my father's plate, even broke the plate, and the soup and everything go all over his lap. And things like that, so in 1939 the Hungarians came in. I remember a lot of the old Jewish people who know Hungary before the war, they thought they were the same Hungarians, but they weren't. They ran all out with the colors of the Hungarian flag and everything. And the anti-Semites start screaming, 'what you happy about this, you don't know what's waiting for you.' So they just turned low profile and went home. They wiped their nose and they say, 'They are not the same Hungarians anymore.' So, later on they start digging: 'Who belongs to who? Who came from Poland? Who comes from Galicia? Jews.' And they start deporting them. 'Course they couldn't do that to us because we were way back Hungarians, but they start looking for things how to get away the business from us. So they said that Jewish people cannot serve liquor, cannot sell wine and all that, only if they were farmers, if they grow their wines, so that's how we lost our business already. And then later on, my mamma was very sick, she had leukemia, she died around 1943. And we start struggling a little more, because we didn't have a lady in the house. My little sister was eleven years old, and my older sister was already married, she was living in a different town, she had two little girls already. And we just struggled along. Then later on they started telling everyone to move into the Jewish neighborhoods; the one who wasn't living in the Jewish neighborhoods. And later on, they surrounded it with a fence. And just about when they closed the fence, I got an 'invitation' for draft. Of course, Jewish people wasn't drafted for labor - I mean for the military - but they changed it, 'stead of military, it was 'forced labor.' The ghetto was 'liquidated' already, but they still kept it occupied, I mean surrounded, because they had

a lot of money probably hidden in it and all that stuff. And they put us specially, because 50% of the people from this group was from that city, and they figured we probably gonna know where the Jewish people hide things so they put us in there. They made our headquarters in there. We was going at night, looking for things, you know, everybody's home see if he can find anything, but we didn't find much. Everything that people hide already was dugged up by the Germans - I mean the Hungarians. One of my brothers, I told you, who was a soldier - first then came to labor. I find a guy who was liberated from that camp. You know, he told me how my brother died.

PR How did your brother die?

IN He was an artist, very clever, you know, beautiful handwriting and everything, he couldn't do no handwork like this. They was building a... for a river, so the river wouldn't come through...

PR A dam?

IN A dam, a levee, you know? And they had to push up fifty or sixty wheelbarrows a day, up, you know, then you had to come down empty, push it up, and he just couldn't do it, but they pushed him to do it and then he got sick he had pneumonia and he died of pneumonia, and they buried him right there.

PR So of your family, Isaac...

IN That was one of my brothers. Another brother, who I told you that he was a printer, they send him to the Ukraine. Somebody came back, it was a guard of his, a Hungarian. He was trying to blackmail my father, you know, we still had a business. He always came for a little wine, then my father was getting tired of him. He said, 'Look, if you have something to say about my son, say it. You just can't come here and blackmail me all the time.' 'Okay,

I'm gonna tell you about it,' and he was drunk, and he said, 'Your son's both legs was frozen. He wasn't used anymore for work. They was doing mine-picking, they pick mines, and maybe by now he's probably already dead.' And that's what he told my father.

PR Mine picking? Explosive mines?

IN Yeah. So now I have two brothers already dead right there. Now, my momma died before the ghetto, the year before. My father went with Moshe, one of my brothers, he was Moses. And the other one was Heschel, he was the little one, and a sister Miriam. Those three children my father took with him.

PR Your father took them where?

IN To Auschwitz. They all went to Auschwitz-Birkenau. And a cousin of mine who came back said that they, the same day when they arrived, they were so tired, hungry, sick, and they chased them with the dogs. 'Los, los, los.' 'Hurry up, hurry up.' To the ... where what's his name?

PR Mengele?

IN Mengele, the 'Angel of Death.' I call him the 'Angel of Death.' And they sent them right into the crematorium the same evening they arrived. Then they started bombing Budapest.

MAP OF ROMANIA AND HUNGARY, ZOOMING IN ON BUDAPEST.

So they say they are gonna send us to Budapest, and that's gonna be our station area, we probably gonna be there for a long time. Because Budapest is bombed three times a day; in the early morning by the Russians, in the afternoon by the British, and in the evening by the Americans. And we had to go in the daytime, we

were usually sitting home, as soon as after the bombing was finished, they took us right at the area that was bombed. I remember they were bombing the airport, a lot of military planes was under the ruins. We had to clean up the ruins and get the planes out of the hangars.

PR What year was that?

IN That was 1944. That's when a cousin of mine, and I, and another guy, decided we gonna escape tonight. And we heard about Wallenberg. They had leaflets thrown all over with the plane: 'Anybody who can make it to the Wallenberg camp is gonna be saved.'

RAOUL WALLENBERG, A SWEDISH "DIPLOMAT," ARRIVED IN BUDAPEST IN JULY 1944 AT THE HEIGHT OF THE NAZI DEPORTATION OF JEWS TO AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU. WALLENBERG WAS ATTACHED TO THE SWEDISH CONSUL, BUT HIS REAL PURPOSE WAS JEWISH RESCUE.

WALLENBERG GAVE FALSE SWEDISH PASSPORTS ('SCHUTZ-PASS') TO JEWS. SWEDEN WAS A NEUTRAL COUNTRY, AND THE NAZIS WERE FORCED TO RESPECT THE 'SWEDISH CITIZEN.'

DESPITE THREATS FROM NAZI SS OFFICER ADOLF EICHMANN AND HUNGARIAN COLLABORATORS ('ARROW CROSS'), WALLENBERG MANAGED TO SAVE 20,000 PEOPLE.

PHOTOGRAPH OF RAOUL WALLENBERG ON THE TELEPHONE

IN I didn't met Wallenberg personally, to shake hands with him all, but I saw him. You just couldn't go there and talk to him. He was very busy with trying to get more and more people passports and everything else.

PHOTOGRAPH OF A MEETING ZOOMING IN ON WALLEMBERG

PHOTOGRAPH OF GROUP OF MEN ZOOMING IN ON WALLEMBERG WITH HAT.

IN He looked like a average, nice people - to us he looked very good! Because we know that he saved us, you know. He was a regular civilian, nicely dressed, nice hat. He wore like a, what do you call it, an 'Eden hat.' That's what we call it in Hungarian, an 'Eden hat.' And it looked more like an old fashioned hat, you know. And he was very sweet, very nice.

PHOTOGRAPH OF JEWS LEAVING HUNGARY WITH THEIR LUGGAGE

PR He was the savior of the Jews of Budapest.

IN That's what we called him: "the savior of the Hungarian ghetto, the Hungarian Jews." And he told Eichmann himself that 'Why don't you give up? Don't you see the Russians banging on our gates already? And if you gonna try to deport those people, I'm gonna see personally to it that you gonna be hung right in the square of Budapest,' you know. That's what he said.

PHOTOGRAPH OF 'SCHUTZ-PASS'

PR How did he help you? He gave you a passport you say? Was it the 'Schutz-pass'?

IN Yeah, the Swedish ‘Schutz-pass.’ That means they had the Swedish flag flying outside and the Hungarian flag, and that means that this is a ‘Swedish camp,’ and the Germans couldn’t put their feet inside. And, of course, they asked us, and they begged us not to go outside. ‘Stay around the camp as possible.’ A lot of them was captured. They tried to get out to get some, you know, like a refreshment, an ice cream or something in the nearest place that they could, but they were captured and they were sent to the camps.

PR In the last months, right before the Russian Army arrives at Budapest, the local Hungarian fascists are bent upon murder.

IN Yeah, they had a lot of Jews who dressed up for them, you know, so they’d be able to go out in the street. Some of them was captured and hunged in the square, and they wrote on their chest, ‘That’s why anyone who’s gonna imitate a hero is gonna wind up that way.’ They hung them in the square. They hung about ten like that.

PR And you saw that?

IN Yeah.

PR And also they took them down to the river, to the Danube.

IN They took them down to the Danube River and they shot a lot of them there. And while the march was for deportation, they didn’t have no trains anymore, and a lot of them fell down in the street. They had old people, children, and it was cold. It was still winter time, I mean it was February, it was November, December, February, something like that, and, yeah, and a lot of them died frozen away. Market malls, you know, Hungary had big ones like that, they were stocked up with dead people, frozen people, shot

people. You know that the Arrowheads [‘Arrow Cross’] did it, the Germans, too, the Hungarian fascists. And, of course, there was another month passed, and the Russians already came into the area where I was. I think that was January the 8th when I saw the first Russian groups, coming in. And I was so happy to see them that we went outside, hugging and kissing, you know. And they were screaming (in Russian), and that means, ‘Give me your watch.’ I took the watch off here and gave them my watch. ‘I’m glad to see you.’ But poor Wallenberg, when the Russians came in, he went to present himself, who he is, and right away they arrested him. Why did they arrest him? Because he comes from such a family, a rich family, and they just hated, you know, the Russians hated those kind of people, and they figured if you could do something like that for the Jews against the Germans, you must have collaborated with the Germans in some kind of way. So they took him like a German spy, like a collaborator for the Germans, and we don’t know what happened. All we know is that he was arrested, and we never heard anything about him anymore.

PR The man who saved so many could not save himself.

IN Yeah, and they took him to Russia, he was in one of the *gulags*, you know and some people who came from there, who was liberated from them *gulags*, they even saw him. After the Russians said he died of a heart attack, you know. Because they tried to cover up. They said it’s not true because the Russians said this and this month, I don’t remember exactly what the month was. ‘We saw him a couple of months after that, we was together in the same camp, but later on they took him out and they send him to a more strict camp, camp where he couldn’t escape from some kind of way.’ Now, if you want to know about this group, we were 300 of us...

PR The labor battalion.

IN The labor battalion. Only 80 of us came, 80 came back. A lot of us died when they were bombing, because when they were bombing Budapest, we wasn't in the bunkers, we were outside. A lot were hit from the bombs. Pieces of iron and stuff. They lose their legs, arms, there wasn't anybody to heal us, you know, we were Jews. And, of course, about 150 of us went to Mauthausen, and my cousin told me how Mauthausen was. 'There wasn't any special labor for us to do, but they made us carry big stones, way up on the rock, and when we were on the rock, we had to throw it down, and we had to come back and bring it back again up. People just died from hunger, from starvation, and from just fell down from the mountain, because they couldn't walk anymore.' And from that camp, from that group, only came back 20. So, anyway, altogether, only 80 of us survived. So when I was liberated, I went back. I got on a train, I arrived to my hometown, but I didn't recognize it. There were no stations, you know. Everything was bombed in that area. So I walked all the way to the house. Our house bombed, the business was bombed. I found right away a guy by the name Willemberg, not Willemberg... Joel Willemberg. So I said 'Joel, You remember me?' He said, 'Yeah, how you doing? You know, your house is all bombed,' because it was in the ghetto, whole ghetto was bombed. Why? Because when we left, the Germans made headquarters over there. It was already surrounded, you know, so they made it their headquarters. And the Russians find out about it, so they bombed the whole ghetto. Our house only left, about one room left, so I went into that room, and I slept over there at night. In that room, I find a stack of pictures like that, my whole family. Took them out of the bag, put them away. Then later on, next morning, I gotta found out what's going on here: where you can get a meal or something. So they told me to go the Jewish hospital, and you are going to get a meal, and probably a place where to sleep, too. And they gonna examine you how you feel, and all that.

PR And of the Jews in your town, how many survived?

IN Jews in our town, I couldn't really tell you, because very little came back. And a lot of them even who survived, they didn't even come back at all. They just looked for a camp, for a refugee camp, for where they were. Like if they were from Mauthausen, they looked for an Austrian refugee camp. If they were from somewhere, Dresden, they looked for a camp next there. They didn't want to come home. They didn't want to see what's going on. They knew for sure their parents is dead. I came home because I was in Hungary, and there wasn't any camps that time. We didn't even know about any refugee camps, so I think I just go home as soon as possible, see if anyone is alive.

PR Isaac, during the war, as you learned that your loved ones had perished, had been murdered by the Nazis, yet you kept going, and I wonder how you found the strength?

IN I don't know myself. We was getting almost like stones. Because we couldn't think too much about it, what happened to them, because we had to support ourselves, too. We looked where the next meal is gonna come from, or like next clothes, whatever. Matter of fact, in those three months when I was home, a couple Jews came home and started baking the matzos for Pesach, the Jewish holiday.

PR Passover?

IN Passover. And I used to do it before the war, too. So I registered to do that. Just to keep my mind occupied, and to get a little salary so I be able to support myself. But I didn't want to stay there even three months. I didn't want to stay there. But I figured there was paper going on the list from concentration camps every day who survived, and who didn't. And that list closed, that's when I decided to leave.

PR During the war, Isaac, with all the destruction around you, were you able to mourn the death of your loved ones? When you were with your friends, with your cousin, trying to survive, how did you, how did you carry on?

IN You see, my cousin came home a lot later than I did. He was in Mauthausen deported. He didn't escape like I did. He was afraid. I wanted him to. He came home. One full rash, his whole body was one rash. And when he got on his feet, he wanted to take over the business, start all over again. 'What else can we do?' he says. 'That's all we know.' So I said, 'I ain't gonna stay here, I'm leaving.' So we didn't agree with each other, see. We didn't. But they got two other guys who were in wine business, too. He went together with them. He find a little bundle, and they found a little bundle, so they gonna start getting to wine business. Of course, that's a long story, but I'm just telling you in short. I begged them not to do it, 'because the Russians gonna get you.' Business: that was worse than a murder, by the communists. They was operating about a year or two, year and a half. He got seven years. They caught him that he is doing 'business'. Seven years in jail.

IN 1946, ISAAC LEFT HUNGARY AND WENT TO A 'DISPLACED PERSONS' CAMP IN ITALY. THERE HE MET DORA, A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR FROM CZECHOSLOVAKIA. THEY TRIED TO REACH ISRAEL, BUT WERE TURNED BACK BY BRITISH AUTHORITIES. ISAAC AND DORA WERE MARRIED IN 1948.

***PHOTOGRAPH OF THE NIEDERMAN'S WEDDING,
ZOOMING IN ON THE COUPLE***

IN 1950, ISAAC AND DORA MOVED TO NEW ORLEANS. SHE OPERATED A DRY CLEANING BUSINESS AND HE WORKED AT A JEWELRY STORE. THEY BEFRIENDED OTHER HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN NEW ORLEANS AND FORMED THE 'NEW AMERICANS SOCIAL CLUB'.

PHOTOGRAPH OF ISAAC AND DORA WITH A FRIEND

PR Isaac, have you been able to find happiness since the war?

IN Sure, I'm very happy right now with my wife. So we just happy with each other.

PHOTOGRAPH OF ISAAC DOING A HEADSTAND WITH FRIENDS

And, of course, with the Jewish community here. We like New Orleans. Everybody is friendly, nice. You know, I work with people 50 years already. You know, I like them all. I do. Boss likes me. Matter of fact, my boss was seven years old when I came here. I even told him, 'Don't fool with me.' When I get here he was seven, I was 27. I could take him on my lap.

PR Did you lose your faith in God during that time?

IN In a way, yeah. Well, I didn't say it to nobody. I just kept to myself. See, we used to go to a synagogue twice a day, every day. Saturday, three times. And I never missed a day without going to synagogue. Put my prayer things on, they call it (Yiddish) and our Tallis every day. And when my mother died, every day I went to synagogue, said a special prayer. It's called Kaddish. I did all those things, but when I came home, I didn't do it; it's all gone. When I came back, when I came to Italy, in a refugee camp, there was a lot of Jews together. A rabbi from our... not from our home town, but from Transylvania, and he said 'Isaac,' he calls me 'Yitzhak', my name is Yitzhak. 'I know you come from a religious home, because I sit down with you. How come you left everything alone?' I said, 'Because everything that happened to us. If there is a God, if God could see that, so I don't know if I will still believe in God or not, but don't worry rabbi. I'm frustrated now, later on.' Matter of fact, when I came to this country, I joined a synagogue. I pay dues. Whenever I can, when somebody dies, I go visit them. I go pray with them. That same rabbi married us. We have it in our picture.

PR You and Dora, in Italy.

IN We used to sit down, sometime learn a piece of Talmud, we used to enjoy it. He said, 'It will be hard, just give it time.' He was right. We came back. We still do with her together, same synagogue, sometimes study together. We go now to Passover. We gonna sing Jewish songs. We gonna go to Jewish synagogues and ritual, everything, because if it wouldn't be for Passover, we wouldn't be here anyway. That's when Moses liberated us. It's a big holiday.

PR Isaac, of your family, how many survived?

IN My family completely gone. I am the only one. We were five brothers, and two sisters, and my father. Of course, my mother died before. So eight, I mean, we were eight in the family left. Plus my sister had two little girls already. That makes it ten. I am the only survivor.

PHOTOGRAPH OF ISAAC WALKING BY A POOL IN NEW ORLEANS

PR It takes real strength for you to speak to us, and appreciate it so very much, and I want to ask you: what message do you want people to hear from your life story?

PHOTOGRAPH OF ISSAC SMILING

IN My message is to try to live together with all nationalities. We all brothers really. We all the children of God.

ISAAC COMES FROM A FAMILY OF NINE, HE IS THE ONLY SURVIVOR.

Dr. Lance Hill, director

Plater Robinson, Producer

Ralph Madison, assistant producer and on-line editor

Seth Boonchai, technical assistance

Funding provided

**by
The Rita and Harold
Divine foundation**

**Special Thanks:
Dora and Isaac Niederman**

**Denise Chetta
Bryan Snow**

WDSU-TV

**Sean Bradley
John Champagne
Kathy Dupuy
Richard Enseault
Eddie Kalil
Collen Kessler
Norman Robinson
Larry Small
Chris Sunseri**

Photographs courtesy of:

**The United States
Holocaust Museum**

Dora and Isaac Niederman

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**Music composed by
Faina Lushtak**

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