**WILLIE STERN INTERVIEW WITH LES GLASSMAN – YOUTUBE 23 NOVEMBER 2019**

I was born in 1935, in Budapest, Hungary. We led a normal, what is known in Yiddish as a balebatish life, which means an upper middle-class life. My late father *zichrono livracha* was a textile manufacturer who managed a factory which delivered textile goods to the Hungarian state. And that became terribly important, because in that role, when the Germans invaded Hungary on the 19th of March 1944, he was freed from the obligation to live in the ghetto and he was able to help a large number of Polish refugees (who had come to Hungary in 1942 and ‘43) with *parnassa*, because he was a manufacturer of textile goods at a time when the anti-Jewish laws which Hungary – enacted already in 1939 – put a great many Jewish textile retailers out of business.

I led the normal life of a schoolboy, attending school until 1944. We had a comfortable life, large apartment, and on *Shabbatot* very many guests. In ‘42 and ‘43 – I remember a great many Polish refugees who were our guests on Shabbat. I should add that although I consider myself as a Hungarian-born Jew, it is skin deep only, in that my late father z”l was himself Polish-born. He came as a boy of 13 to Hungary when his father, who had deserted the Russian army, fled into Hungary in order to avoid the consequences of a possible Russian occupation of Poland.

I remember distinctly Sunday the 19th of March ‘44, because in terms of a little boy seeing the world I didn’t understand what “Nazi occupation” meant. But I did understand that my father said we must leave the house immediately; if not, he will be arrested because he was one of the prominent members of the community. I remember for a week I slept on the sofa of some friend of the family, until he felt it was safe to return. The next thing I remember is late June 1944, when we assembled in order to board the train which became known as a Kastner train.

It was a cattle train which took a few days to reach Bergen-Belsen. We were stopped in Mosonmagyaróvár which is on the Hungarian border with Austria. And I remember that distinctly, because we left June 30th from Budapest; my birthday is July 2nd, and we celebrated my ninth birthday in the fields of Mosonmagyaróvár. As a kid brought up in a normal home in a city, I became aware for the first time of the need for people to use latrines in the fields because there was absolutely nothing else. We were piled together in the cattle train in a very uncomfortable manner. I recall one traumatic incident where one of the doors of the train was open and my late grandfather… I should mention that in addition to my nuclear family, father, mother, two siblings (a brother and a sister), my late father was able to get the entire Stern family onto that group. So, there were five brothers of his with their families, a total Stern group of 32 members in the Kastner group, including my grandfather and grandmother…

So, to come back to grandfather: he was, on a very hot day as the train was making its way to Germany, sitting with his feet outside the train, and riding. Very suddenly I hear a commotion, and they wanted to keep him back, he was about to jump. That I recall distinctly. But anyway, he didn’t, he survived. I’ll come back to grandfather in Geneva in 1947 in just a few minutes.

To come back to Bergen-Belsen, I summarize my experiences as follows: my late father was the head of one of the barracks. The barracks housed about 120 men each. The makeup of the Kastner train group was a very mixed makeup. Kastner was a secular Zionist from Kosice [actually, Cluj-Klausenburg] who organized the journey, but he needed money. And the money to bribe whoever needed to be bribed was collected from what I would say was the upper-middle class Orthodox Jewish population of Budapest.

So, in one barrack, in our barrack, you would find FOUR what would become world-famous rabbanim, The Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum; the Rav of Debrecen, Rabbi [Shlomo Tzvi] Strasser; Rabbi [Avraham] Jungreis (the father of the famous now-late Rebbetzin Jungreis, who was a girl my age, a girl of 9 in the ladies’ barracks, as I was in the men’s barracks); and Rabbi Yonason Steif, who was a Dayan in Budapest and became a Dayan subsequently in Williamsburg, in New York.

So, on the one hand you had this very right-wing religious element, and you had a totally secular, for lack of a better definition, left-wing element. How did it become problematic? Because everyone had to have his toranut, his obligations of cleaning, not only the barrack, but also the latrines. And clearly my father wouldn't allow the rabbonim to have to do that job, something which upset the secular Jews very much. And there was an incident, which I didn't see, but my late mother told me about it a number of times, when one of the secular Jews went with a knife against my father saying if he will continue to discriminate in this manner, you know… so my father found a solution, which was to appoint an alter-ego for the rabbonim who wouldn't do the toranut, and my late brother Alfred, Avrohom, became the alter-ego for the toranut of the Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, and that created between them a lifelong bond which continued in America. My brother would go to him very often; we are not Satmar chasidim, but it established a bond.

Anyway, my recollection as a child: we were in Bergen-Belsen from July third or fourth I think, when we arrived, until mid-December, when the second train took us to St. Gallen, Switzerland. I say the second train, because the first train left already at the end of August, and had about 300 mostly children on the train. The first train left following the visit of a German Nazi officer called Krumeyer who was one of Himmler's assistants in Budapest. And my father approached Krumeyer in Bergen-Belsen, reminded him that Krumeyer had promised him in Budapest his assistance if needed, and he said could we please be part of the first train (I mean at first we didn’t know it was first or second), of the train. And Krumeyer asked him how many members of your family, and father answered 32, and Krumeyer gave him a big slap in the face, and mother tells me that father became gray on that day after that slap in the face. Anyway, we didn’t go on that train, we went on the main train which left, as I said, mid-December.

Everyone left on that train, but I recall about 8 people who did not have passports. They were stateless and they were left behind. But otherwise the entire Kastner group made it to Switzerland on the fifth day of Chanukah 1944. We were taken to a quarantine camp in a hotel, what used to be a hotel, now it was converted into a camp in a little skiing village above Montreux in Switzerland.

The first ones to be liberated and allowed to live in the city was Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar rebbe, who was told you can choose 2 other families to come at the same time. My late father’s family were one of the two. So, we came to Geneva. I remember distinctly my first day in Geneva which was Taanit Esther 1945, because we arrived in the morning and I went to listen to the megillah that evening. But what I recall distinctly was not the reading of the megillah or the shul but the fact… at the time, the Agudas Achim Orthodox shul was next door to a department store called Grand Passage. For those who know Geneva, it is in the center of the city, next to the Place du Molard, a very nice shopping place in the city center. And I, who had come from a concentration camp, I remember my amazement seeing shops where people could go in and buy things and circulate and didn’t have to report or be afraid of anything. My first taste of freedom: the impression remained with me all my life.

***Did you ever come in contact with Recha Sternbuch?***

My father did (I was a kid). Yeah, we knew her. I remember very much when we arrived to Montreux on the train a delegation of Jewish people headed by her welcoming us and giving I think sweets to the children or something,

***When they had the Kastner trial, did they ask your family to give evidence?***

No, my father was not involved in that at all. The reproach made to Kastner was that he failed to inform Hungarian Jewry all the horrors of the concentration camps and the mass killings that were going on, and he made it sound all very nice and sweet, and thereby prevented or was instrumental in preventing what could otherwise have been, I don’t know, a Warsaw ghetto type of rebellion. That is the basic reproach.

My attitude was purely to say that in Jewish history when when situations of life or death arose, rabbonim of 2000 years ago took steps which subsequently were judged by Hazal as having been the wrong step. Specifically, when Jerusalem was under siege and [Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai] was able to escape and see Vespasian. This is a story related in the Talmud. Because he very much impressed Vespasian, he was told you can have one wish and he asked for Yavneh and its scholars. And the question was, why not Jerusalem, “let us off this time”? And the gemara condemned [this decision], saying sometimes clever people lose their cleverness and do things that are silly. Yet that’s what happened in Jewish history.

What I’m really saying is it’s easy to use hindsight and say you should have done this or that. I am not fit to make a judgment A) because my life clearly was saved as a result of being part of that train [and] B) because I don't know what others would have done in their place. I think Kastner tried to save as many Jews as he could. Whether he could have acted differently the Almighty alone knows; I have nothing much to contribute on that.

To add, about the effects that traumatic events can have, I will relate just a couple of consequences of our stay in Bergen-Belsen.

The first story goes back to my late grandfather. In 1947, we all lived in Geneva normal lives. I go to school, my late father is in business, and I would visit my grandparents with my parents. And I suddenly see in the lounge, grandfather going to a cupboard. He would say it’s food, and I couldn't understand why was food in a cupboard when there was a kitchen there. And I found out that the hunger which he had suffered made him after the war hoard food within his own home. He wouldn't just trust the availability of food in the kitchen, although it was his daughter and son who were in charge of the household - but he had to have his own little hoard.

I personally have a little story to tell, and you Mr. Glassman saw me drink coffee and jam, which is unusual. And that story of the jam goes back to Bergen-Belsen. I will explain to you why - because my late mother Z”L would be in the woman's barrack and she would on the very thin piece of black bread which we had prepare sandwiches, put some butter on it and jam, and ask me to take it to my father.

But I was hungry, and I was tempted, so I licked off the jam and then spread the rest of it thinner. And it left me with a complex of theft. All my life I was stealing jam from my father and I retained a craving for jam which today, at 84 years old makes me, instead of sugar, have jam with my coffee. This tradition goes back to Bergen-Belsen. These are small, seemingly silly effects.