**Eva Szirmai – Life Before The War**

Eva describes her Family Background and her early education

**Read the Transcript**

INT: So we normally start off by saying good afternoon Mrs Szirmai.

E.S: Yes

INT: How do you want us to address you by the way?

E.S: Just Eva.

INT: Eva, right.

E.S: Yes.

INT: So today is the 12th of…

INT: April.

INT: April. See that’s why there needs to be two of us because I’ve forgot the date.

E.S: 1913…2013!

INT: So today is the 12th of April and we’re here to interview Eva Szirmai. So one of our first questions usually is where were you born and what was your name at birth?

E.S: I was born in Hungary, Budapest, and my maiden name is Eva Friedmann.

INT: And what did your parents do?

E.S: Originally my parents were from the country (Eva’s father was a Procurator Fiscal in the country.but was made to ‘retire’ in 1924 due to [Anti-Semitism](https://gatheringthevoices.com/glossary/anti-semitism/)). I had a brother.

I think after two years, they came up to Budapest and my father was working then in a family paper factory. He was the manager. This was a family business. So that is, was his last job as well before they sent him away because when the Germans came in they couldn’t work anymore; everybody was sent away.

INT: Right. And so did you go to primary school?

E.S: Yes I went. It’s a different system in Hungary. Primary was eight years.

INT: Oh right.

E.S: Yes and then after you could go to the middle school or Gymnasium. But just when you got to this age. It started at six years old, the school, not like here, people go much earlier.

E.S: So some people were nearly seven when you go. So when I finished my eight years I was fourteen.

INT: Right. And what’s the difference between the middle school and the Gymnasium?

E.S: Oh the Gymnasium is like grammar school, you know, much higher, gave you much higher education. My brother went to grammar school. They learned Latin and you know it’s…

INT: A very traditional…

E.S: Yes, yes, yes.

E.S: I went to a very good Jewish primary school but later on I started to go to another school for a very short time, maybe three quarters of a year, before I couldn’t go anymore. This was not Jewish but we had a Rabbi come once a week and they were teaching us, you know.

**Eva Szirmai – Life During The War**

Eva first describes her experiences as an apprentice photographer. She then goes on to speak about life under the Germans – the yellow star houses, the arrests, the hunger, the curfew, the ghetto and the good luck that saved her life.

**Read the Transcript**

INT: And what age were you then when the Germans came in?

E.S: I was fourteen. I wanted to study of course further but I couldn’t because the Germans came in. And then I think it was the first thing that they brought in the Numerus Clausus laws. I don’t know if you’ve heard about it?

INT: If you want to explain that would be…

E.S: Yes it was the… it meant that between a hundred pupils they took only ten Jewish and this had to be of course the very best and just imagine that in a big school there was much more than a hundred people so how many Jewish they could take…? So I didn’t get in.

INT: Right, right.

E.S: They didn’t accept me, or my brother, no. So this was in 1943 actually, so my father found us some apprenticeship. I went to learn photography.

E.S: I was fourteen.

INT: When you learned about photography.

E.S: Yes.

INT: And so how long did you do that for?

E.S: I stayed there not very long. It was not very proper because actually if you would read my diary you can see that it’s more detailed. You know that when you are an apprentice they don’t teach you, you just have to watch and try to learn something. So what I had to do, every day I had to clean the workshop.

INT: Right.

E.S: Sweep up the workshop and dust. And after I had to go down to the cellar and bring up a big coal, a big…how do you call it?

INT: Pail of coal.

E.S: Yes, coal. And I have…- I don’t know if I have a picture to show you. I was a very thin, very tiny little girl. But I had a very nice boss, you know, my boss. He was not Jewish but his wife was Jewish and, but they didn’t live together but he didn’t divorce her because he wanted to shelter her.

INT: Right.

E.S: But they didn’t live together anymore. So he was a very decent man and so many times he came and helped me to carry up. He was the boss, you know. And I had to make fire. It was two shops.

INT: Right.

E.S: It was a shop where they sold, you know, photograph machines, you know, and papers and other things and another was actually where they made the pictures.

INT: Right.

E.S: You know the salon.

INT: More of the studio.

E.S: Photo studio yes. So if I’m thinking back, what they let me do, they let me develop the pictures in the dark room. I could do this sometimes. Because that is how if you are an apprentice, you know.

E.S: So they, you know, you cannot do things. It was three years contract so, you know, it takes three years to learn things. But as I said, I was supposed to go to school as well to study certain subjects, you know, beside and I couldn’t go because we had to wear a yellow star. Maybe I went once and then my boss said that, he was called Joseph, ‘Why don’t you just take off your yellow star and just come?’ he said. So I did a couple of times but my parents said no way, because they could shoot me.

INT: I was going to say was that not very dangerous to do that?

E.S: It was very dangerous, very dangerous. So my parents didn’t like me to do it so I couldn’t go.

INT: Right.

E.S: I couldn’t go anymore. We were not allowed to travel, as I said earlier, on public transport or go to the cinema or theatre or library…nothing. Jewish people were not allowed to go anywhere. And as I say, that was my education as a photographer – it was not very long.

INT: So the war [had] started and you said you went, where did you go?

E.S: What?

INT: You said that you left?

E.S: Yes and then soon after we had to leave our house where we lived.

INT: Right and was that the whole family?

E.S: Yes my father and my brother and my mother yes. We were four of us. And then we had to leave to go and live in a designated area called ‘yellow star houses’. It was in the old Jewish quarter in Budapest. And the non-Jewish people, they had to go out and then we moved in. And then we couldn’t take furniture or nothing. We had practically just very little things.

That is how it started, you know. Really very bad, a very bad time. And then immediately my father was called up; he had to go to the army at the same time. And my brother also.

INT: This would be the Hungarian Army working for the Germans?

E.S: That’s right. They had to work together with the Germans but the Jewish people couldn’t do that even if they wanted to because they didn’t trust them so they had to go hard labour. You know, dug trenches or however you call and other heavy things. Actually my brother had to go to the airport because cleaning the…

INT: The runway?

E.S: The runways after the bombing.

INT: Oh dear.

E.S: Bombing was very hard, you know.

INT: Very hard.

E.S: Hard bombing. Every day was bombing and this was the most dangerous place because, you know…

INT: Of the bombs.

E.S: And of course they wanted the Jews to do the jobs.

INT: Yes.

E.S: So my brother had to go every day. They took him in a bus and then at the beginning he came home for the evenings – he was allowed to come, but it just was a very short time.

But actually my brother was very good because he, he was the head of his Scout group, a Jewish Scout group, and he was eighteen, you know with a bit grown-up boys. So they decided they would do something, wanted to do to save people so they managed to make false documents with them and took off their yellow star in the evenings and they went on the road looking for people where they stayed.

Because people were arrested for no reason, you know. Because there was a curfew, I forgot to tell you. We weren’t allowed to go out of the yellow star house. Just two hours a day to buy a little food, just locally you know. So if somebody they caught outside, you know, they just took him, you know. So they went out on the roads and were looking for them and if they saw that some people were arrested they went there and they showed their papers.

INT: And they said that they were…?

E.S: Yes and they said that ‘We have to take this person. We got the order to take this person somewhere else’.

INT: Your brother was doing the hard labour

E.S: Yeah

INT: And

E.S: And my father as well. (\*\* The last time Eva saw her father. \*\*26th October 1944)

INT: Your father as well. So…

E.S: Yeah. We didn’t know where they were but one day my father came home because his stepmother died and they got 24 hours. He came back for the funeral but we didn’t see him, we didn’t see him.

INT: And what happened after that?

E.S: We were in the yellow star house and then the life was not very good there because they just came in every day practically and then shouted up the order, you know, it’s different houses there. They got this, how can I say, this is the floors and it was open ground. Did you see houses like that? And then we had like a balcony, you know?

INT: Like a courtyard?

E.S: Courtyard, yes, yes, sorry.

INT: With flats all around it?

E.S: Yes. So they…everybody, they shouted up or I can’t remember, if they wanted something. They ring the bell and we had to go out and they said the orders – every day something new, you know. And then every day they came up with something new. And then, but the general thing was that everybody had to go for, for labour or deportation, we didn’t know. From eighteen to forty, women, and men I think it was, that’s right, men was up to/under sixty. That is why they took my father away; he was fifty-nine. And then I remember we were so sad because other people were to be taken at the same time and they said that they are younger.

INT: Older?

E.S: I mean older, sorry. They came home, he didn’t.

INT: Your father didn’t.

E.S: He didn’t lie. He didn’t lie. I don’t know why. He should have said because people had no papers, not everybody had, you know.

INT: Yes.

E.S: Not everybody had their papers at that time already.

INT: So was your mother older than forty then?

E.S: My mother was older and I was younger so that is how we managed to get to the ghetto.

INT: Right.

E.S: But I think that, but it doesn’t mean anything. It just really was pure luck.

INT: A lot of…

E.S: God looked after me, I’ve always said that because all my school friends got worse situation than me. They were deported, same age, and they died. They didn’t come back from Budapest, you know. So it just was pure luck. There was no reason. If you were unlucky they got you, you know. There is no explanation, you know, but this was the general rule, you know. As I say that if they caught you, if you were out after the curfew and then they took you for any reason, you didn’t know. Any minute they, you know, you didn’t know what the other minute brings.

So we were just alone, my mother and me and then, after a while, my mother saw that people started to disappear from the yellow star house. But we didn’t know what was happening in the world – we didn’t know what was happening in the country, because unfortunately my, most of my family lived in the country and I don’t know, you have probably heard about that, that they all took them to Auschwitz, but we didn’t know.

They took them first, the little villages or towns, to bigger towns in ghettos and then stayed there, I don’t know. It was not at the same time, you know, they took them at different times and they took them to the wagons and took them to Auschwitz. And then most of my family died except my two uncles came back.

INT: So eventually you were taken to the ghetto?

E.S: Yes.

E.S: Before that there were a lot of things that happened. You know, because we found out that there were various people disappearing and probably you heard about Raoul Wallenberg?

INT: Oh yeah.

E.S: So he was in the Swedish Embassy. He was there and he tried to save people and he…people went and they got a document. My original is still in this book. I will show you. And then…my mother found out that people moving in so-called safe houses.

INT: Right.

E.S: That meant if you went they accepted you as a Swedish citizen, example. But really you was not but as a collective, you got like under…you know.

INT: As a group.

E.S: And that mean they had safe houses in Budapest. They bought up actually houses, the embassies.

INT: Right.

E.S: Switzerland, I think Rome, Rome, yes. It was very good but very few people. I think mostly who was… became Catholics, you know, they had them. And Sweden and Switzerland.

And then they bought houses and then you were able to move in, out from the yellow star house, you know, at that time. And then my mother heard that and she didn’t tell me, I just heard afterwards, she didn’t tell me. One day she got up and dressed up in her best clothes, nice hat I remember and a nice blue coat and without the yellow star she went out.

INT: Without the yellow star?

E.S: Without. And she said to me that ‘I have to go somewhere but I’m coming back soon’. And then she went away and I was waiting and waiting and she didn’t come back.

Because she went to a place where she had been told, you know, from somebody that you can buy a Schutzpass it’s called, if you’ve heard this name? This was a document called a Schutzpass and let me show you. And then for all other money that we had, little money, that give it to a place. She went on the tram. She went on the tram and it’s interesting because after a while she found out everybody was like her.

They were all Jewish, because they were all arrested on the way back, you know.

INT: Oh.

E.S: So she went there – she gave her money – she got this document and then when they came out back to the tram, they were all arrested.

They took them away in a brick factory that was outside Budapest and she spent a day and night sitting on the bricks outside in winter, wintertime. It was already October or something. It was very cold. No food, no water; nothing. But she managed to find somebody who was willing to take a note for me and she gave, she had nothing else, she had her wedding ring because you were able to keep your wedding ring. You had to give in all your jewellery but you were allowed to keep your wedding ring. So she gave her last possession to send me a note. And I was alone at home and my mother didn’t come home.

I was crying my eyes out. I didn’t talk to anybody, I didn’t tell anybody and I got the message only in the morning because, as happened that the house, where the yellow star house was, it was my great uncle’s, he owned the house – used to own, you know because he was Jewish as well so he didn’t own anymore. Nothing, he didn’t own anything. Actually he was a professor of, a child specialist.

So the house manager (who was there originally, he was not Jewish) he got the message and he immediately went and phoned to my great uncle Professor Armin Flesch.

INT: Right

E.S: That I am alone, my mother wasn’t there. So he made arrangements for me and then this woman and her husband said that just dress up nicely and take with you a change of clothes and somebody will come for you.

And the next morning my cousin, who I didn’t see for I don’t know how many years, he came for me because he was hiding and then he said, ‘No yellow star. Don’t wear a yellow star’. I was so afraid.

And then he took me, not very far, where my auntie was hiding. He took me to this house and then ironically my auntie was hiding in a, a German house where all German officers lived and she was working for a lawyer, who worked for the Germans, as a housekeeper.

But the lawyer knew she was Jewish, you know, he was hiding her. So that is where I was taken.

My auntie Alice, this is what she was called, she had a very tiny flat, so I had been taken there and I had been told that I am not allowed even to pull the toilet even, I had to be just quiet because nobody was allowed to know that anybody was there.

INT: Nobody was there.

E.S: And then my cousin had to go because he was working on the airport as well so he left me alone. So I was so tired I just went and slept, because all night I didn’t sleep. I just was crying, ‘What’s happening? Where is my mother?’ you know. So later on in the morning somebody came to the flat, my auntie, and she said that they had recovered my mother because this lawyer was so…

INT: Influential?

E.S: Pardon?

INT: Did he have influence?

E.S: No he had, you know, influence yes. Sorry about my English.

INT: No it’s fine.

E.S: He had influence. He hired a car and went out to the big factory and was looking for my mother but he didn’t find her. But in the meantime what happened that day – fifty thousand people were arrested.

INT: Fifty thousand people!

E.S: All over the road.

They got them. Everybody was taken to the brick factory as happened because the Germans were losing the war, you know, a lot of other countries were liberated, and then they were running away.

And they wanted, not wanted, they did herd the people, fifty thousand, [on] foot to Austria. They had to walk to Austria. But they took this – who were eighteen, under eighteen or over forty, they didn’t take.

INT: Right.

E.S: So…But my mother was released. That is why they didn’t find her. But this man just went on the road and found her. It’s amazing.

INT: It’s fantastic.

E.S: It’s amazing. Yes. So my mother came home, poor thing in the nice hat and the nice clothes, looked terrible you know. But I was so happy and then was very, very disappointed because we had no money left at all.

We couldn’t buy anything, not because you could buy a lot of things by that time, you know. So we just were sitting around and then we heard about them going to take us in the ghetto but we didn’t know when.

E. S. I don’t know anybody else who was in the ghetto my age. I don’t know. I didn’t know anybody. I knew there were two boys who were a bit older than me, that’s all I knew. I didn’t…Also my mother never let me out, you know, because she was worried with me being a girl, you know.

INT: Absolutely.

E.S: So she didn’t let me go anywhere, anywhere. And at sometime they came and we had to go to clear the rubble after the bombing and she was hiding me behind the cupboard. Put away the cupboard and I had to go and stand behind the cupboard, you know. Because they knew I was there but when they searched I’m not home, she said. So I never went to clear the rubble, you know. It was dangerous. It was dangerous really.

INT: And how long were you in the ghetto for?

E.S: You see in Hungary the ghetto was not standing very long. I said because the Germans were already retreating and then was very big fighting it was, you know.

And eventually the Russians came first. They arrived first in the country but it was very, very heavy fighting, you know. The Russians lost a tremendous amount of people, you know, in this war as well. And they were the first to approach. And example, in Budapest it was house to house, fight was, you know. It was so severe still because the Hungarians had to still fight and the Germans were still there but, you know, they were packing and took everything and they were going away.

So they put us in the ghetto because they couldn’t do anything else. It was in the Jewish quarter ( of Budapest) and very quickly they, I think it was 3 metre or 4 metre high walls surround and when you get in you couldn’t get out from there. You couldn’t get out.

But in a way it was lucky that, you know, we managed to get in. And as happened that, we were between first people who get into the ghetto and it was a big advantage because we managed to get a room with a single bed and I’d sleep together with my mother. And it was a small room. There also was a double bed where a couple with their, one of the, I think, their father-in-law, the three of them were sleeping in a double bed. But it just was the beginning because when the bombing and you know when sometimes ten, fifteen people were sitting on the floor during the night, because they were bombed out.

INT: Yeah

E.S: They had nowhere to go. So it was not very comfortable but we were still very lucky – we had a bed and then we took a pillow and a duvet, and remember I was carrying, on my back, in a rucksack, so it was really not so bad, you know. At least we had a bed that we can put our head down, you know. So the ghetto, you asked me how long it stand, it’s about, I think, nine weeks and three days because we were liberated in 18th of January 1945, we were liberated.

INT: By the Russians.

E.S: By the Russians.

E.S. So after that other people, Hungarian people, they were Arrow people they were called. [\*\*Hungarian Arrow Cross Party was a national socialist party which led a government in Hungary from 15th October 1944 to 28th March 1945]

INT: They were…sorry?

E.S: Arrow people because they were, just made …It was an arrow in their arm.

INT: Oh right

E.S: You know like the Germans had the…

INT: Oh yes.

E.S: The swastika, and the Jewish we wear the yellow star; they had an arrow.

and they were all Hungarians/Hungarian but they were worse than the SS.

INT: Oh right.

E.S: They were worse. They were horrible – they were terrible people. Example – they went, they didn’t honour the houses, you know the safe houses, the people. They just went there and then took them to the Danube. It’s a big river in…

INT: The Danube yes.

E.S: Budapest. And then would shoot them. Thousands of Jewish people who were supposed to be in a safe house.

INT: Yeah.

E.S: So in a way we were lucky we didn’t get there even.

INT: Yeah, yeah.

E.S: We were luckier to get in the ghetto at the end. We didn’t know, you know, we didn’t know. But that’s later on, you know, we realised that. I think the ghetto, it was not a holiday place, I cannot say that, because we were starving and it was freezing cold. It was about 17/18 minus in the winter.

Winter is very cold in Hungary and big snow, big snow. And I never forget – it’s always before my eyes, that people who died, on the road, after we were liberated… They shifted the snow very high beside the kerbs you know and then when somebody died they just throw there and the snow came over and froze in. It was frozen dead people. It was terrible. It’s always before my eyes, you know.

I never forget that. So it was so cold – it was so cold and there was no heating, was no warm water, was no food and my mother became very weak, very weak because she was older, you know. And I was always hungry, starving. And then…Every time, as I said, the same story. They came for these people – they come for that people.

And then they came for me as well one day.

INT: And did your mother, did she hide you or…?

E.S: No they couldn’t, they couldn’t. I could read you this part [from the book about her life that Eva has written] but I can’t say anything. It’s, you know that it always was somebody that was on the lookout. If anything wrong coming we tried to save ourselves, you know. They would work together the people there. And one day a man rang to ask and they told my mother to immediately put me to bed because they coming for me, two SS men coming for me.

Because later we find out that the housekeeper/house manager was not Jewish, they stayed in this house, and he reported that there is a beautiful young girl hiding in the ghetto. Because I told you that was not my age group, I didn’t meet, not one in my age group. But it was really exaggeration a beautiful young girl because I was a very tiny, very thin little girl and I had two little pleats that my mother put, you know, and I was starving. So everything you can see but I was not a beautiful young girl, luckily, luckily.

So mother immediately put me in bed and they told me that, to say that I got heart condition, that is why I’m staying, all the time I have to be in bed. You know, they told me, this man who brought the news. And I tell you that it was not maybe five minutes, they put me to bed and they put my mother – they hide my mother away, you know. I was alone in the room.

These two men came in. I tell you that they were two beautiful men top to toe in black leather, SS, two SS men, young, I don’t know how old…maybe early/after twenty? Young people. Beautiful, everything beautiful, boots shiny. Beautiful two men came. And they came in and they said to me, ‘Why are you in bed?’ and I just said, ‘I am very ill.’ I said that, ‘I am – I cannot get up. I have to stay in bed’. They ordered me out of the bed, to get up from the bed. So I came out – I didn’t have a very nice nightie, I cannot say I had at that time, you know. Maybe I had one and I had to wash it all the time.

So I come out without shoes or anything, a tiny little girl I was, and they looked at me, looked at me and said that, ‘Would you like to come with us?’ That is what they asked. Looked at me up and down and I just said, I said, ‘I don’t care’ I said, ‘But I don’t think I could walk very far.’

‘Why?’

‘I can’t walk’ I said, ‘Because I stay in bed all the time’. Just imagine I had to do that. And I was lucky, I was lucky because they started to talk to each other and they didn’t like me, thank God, they didn’t like me, you know. I was not a young beautiful girl.

INT: Yes.

E.S: And then they said, ‘Go back to bed – We advise you don’t get out from bed because we are watching you’. And they left. They left.

INT: Terrifying.

E.S: And you know that they brought my mother, she was in a state, and we later find out that she had her first heart attack. She got a heart attack. She was so worried about me. And then everybody was so happy and everybody brought me something when they heard. They were really so nice, the people there – that I escaped.

You know I heard a lot of stories about what they did with girls in the concentration camps… I know about it. So that is about it.

**Eva Szirmai – Life After The War**

Eva describes the poverty of Hungary after the war. She mentions the horrible behaviour of some of the Russian ‘liberators.’ she tells the interviewers what happened when she and her mother tried but failed to return to their flat.

**Read the Transcript**

E.S. Actually I went back after the war when I was liberated.

INT: Oh right.

E.S: Yes I went back and it was very good because there was nothing to eat, was no food, not just for Jewish people; nobody had after the war, you know. The whole country was in ruins, Budapest was in ruins, all the bridges were blown up for example, you know. So it was very hard and there was nothing you know. It took a long, long time until the life started to go back to somehow normal, you know.

So it was very good I went back because I got a little wages and then also it went with they had to give me lunch. So…

INT: So you could get a meal.

E.S: So they were not Jewish. They had a little at home, you know, more than… because we had nothing.

INT: When the Russians took over could you notice the difference between the Russians and the Germans?

E.S: But of course. They were our liberators. Of course.

INT: OK.

E.S: But you know that after, when we eventually were liberated that we were not allowed to go on the road, especially me. Young girls because was…

INT: Dangerous

INT: So after the Russians came what happened to you… and liberated. What happened to you and your mother?

E.S: As I said it was three days, you know, when an army came

E.S: It was three… They robbed everything – they break up all the shops and steal everything. And I don’t know what else they did, you know, I don’t know. There was three days; that is a rule. I think for the soldiers. And they, I remember all they did. There was a kosher wine seller and they broke this up and the whole road was filled with, with wine because they opened up the big barrels. And then I remember my mother managed to get a little bit of it and brought home and some biscuits somewhere. Because they opened up everything.

INT: Just looting everything.

E.S: Looting yes. Ransacking. It was terrible. But I don’t know, I didn’t see because I was not allowed to go out because they said that a young girl should stay in. So we, I think we stayed at least about ten days in the ghetto and then a little bit everybody started to go out and everywhere was the big tanks with the, you know, facing you with the rifles and everything.

INT: Soldiers.

E.S: And my mother and me, she said, my mother ‘We are going home’. And then it was very big snow and very cold and then she managed to get a…how do you call? When you pull?

INT: A sledge?

E.S: A sledge, a little sledge. So we had our possessions, we put it on because we had no strength to, to carry anything. And then we went back where we used to… we walked, there was no transport, nothing. No gas, no electricity, nothing, no heating. There was nothing, you know. It was all ruined, everything.

And then what happened on the way I still was wearing my yellow star because we thought that maybe save me from the Russians, if you’re same, you know? So and I remember we went and it was an open ground, I can’t remember where it was I just saw that a Russian came and got very frightened and he just came to us and was watching that.

And then came over and took out a pocket knife, a pocket knife and cut it off – cut it off and put down and stepped on it. And then said something not nice probably. And then…we didn’t know why he does it, and it turned out he was Jewish. He started to speak Yiddish. It was a Jewish Russian and then we didn’t understand very well but he said, ‘Don’t wear anymore’ you know?

And then I remember he gave me a biscuit, probably that was all he had. So I always remember this episode you know because many people ask me if I have my yellow star but I say no. Some people have, you know, but I don’t have.

INT: So how did you…?

E.S: So we went back and we went to the house, the house manager and then we said we have come back and then he said, ‘Don’t go up. Don’t go up because other people live there’. And then we said ‘But this was ours, our flat’

So they were very bad after, you know, they didn’t…He was not happy to see any Jews was alive and come back/came back. And then…We didn’t go up. We were afraid to go up.

So we went back to, we went back but there was nowhere to go so we went back to the yellow star house and as it happened, in the yellow star house were we lived it was my auntie’s flat. They lived originally in this flat. They gave us a room.

INT: Right.

E.S: When we moved to yellow star house. So she let us go back until we found something. And eventually, I think maybe after about six months, we managed to get another. It was the same, yellow star house; it was not yellow star house anymore. But we managed to get a third floor flat but we had nothing. We had nothing, you know.

**Eva Szirmai – Immigration**

Eva explains that she eventually came to Glasgow because her Husband had been offered a job at Queens Park Synagogue. She describes the challenges she faced when trying to get a visa to leave Hungary.

**Read the Transcript**

INT: So how did you end up in Britain then?

E.S: How did we end up here? I got married to my husband in 1949.

INT: Right.

E.S: And still the situation was not how it should be, you know. But we married, my husband wanted to marry. He was seven years older than me. I didn’t want to get married because I just was nineteen at that time but he was twenty-seven so he wanted to get married.

I was twenty when I got married. I was very young when I got married. And then my husband was a First Reader in this Bethlen Ter Synagogue [in Budapest].

I lived with my mother-in-law because there was no chance to get, you know, was no money; we had no money, and it was bombed down, a lot of houses. We couldn’t get a separate flat so I lived with my mother-in-law. It was not very convenient because we had a room and she had to walk through me and if she wanted to go to the bathroom or kitchen you had to go through me, so it was not very ideal for a young couple. But you know, but we had to be thankful there was somewhere at least to settle.

INT: What were the Russians like with Jews? Were you allowed to practise Judaism?

E.S: Oh no, oh no, no. No. It was, you cannot say that it was Communism in Hungary, Socialism you know. It was not very strict. Oh but, no, no, you cannot, you cannot do it.

That is why we came away actually because we were religious and you was not allowed to practise, not just Jewish, any. There was no religion. My husband was lucky because my husband at that time actually, before we came, he was not a Chazzan anymore.

INT: Oh.

E.S: No, he was an opera singer.

INT: Oh right.

E.S: He was a member of the Hungarian Opera, yes. And then, and then he just had to go on Saturday for rehearsals and he could walk because it was not a distance where we lived.

And then…So we always could keep the Shabbas you know. And then of course he was also still a Chazzan, very much sought after beside.

[\*\*A Hazzan  or Chazzan  is a Jewish musician, trained in the vocal arts who helps lead the congregation in songful prayer. In English, this prayer-leader is often referred to as cantor.]

So we were financially, really was very good financially. But it is not the/it was not the matter because we still didn’t like the life, you know? You were not allowed to say a word, anything against the government or anything. But of course everything was… How do you call this word? You know that they took away everything the government.

INT: Socialised…Nationalised!

E.S: Nationalised, yes!

E.S: They were all took away. All took away. We had nothing. They couldn’t take away anything. We had nothing; they already had taken away everything. We had nothing left to take away.

So one day, one day somebody rings the bell and who was there, my husband’s school friend from Mattersburg. They went to school together. He is called Samuel Soberman, we call him Shamo. He actually lived in Budapest.

He still lives in London.

So Shamo saw my husband, they saw each other. He came in and then he heard that my husband survived and asked around. But my husband was quite well known, you know? The Chazzan, you know, Jewish.

INT: Connections.

E.S: Between…So he find us and then he said to my husband, ‘Why are you living in this horrible anti-Semitic country with what they do to you?’

He said, ‘Why do you live here?’

And to my husband said ‘Why don’t you come to England’ And to my husband said, he said that ‘You are a good Chazzan, you could get a good job, good wages’

And my husband said jokingly, he said, ‘If you find me a job I’ll come’.

Shamo went home and soon after he send us…Queens Park Synagogue, they were looking for a Chazzan.

INT: In Glasgow?

E.S: In Glasgow.

I remember it was a beautiful spring day, we went out somewhere in the green and sat down at a little table for a coffee and my husband and me wrote a Yiddish letter to Queens Park Synagogue. And maybe after two weeks or three weeks a letter came, in Yiddish, and they said that they are coming with a car, a European tour and they would come to visit us if that’s OK. But they didn’t say when they were coming.

And I remember it was a summer day and every summer Sunday when my husband was free from the opera we always went out to the hills, you know. We liked to go every week. Agnes was alive by that time, my older daughter. And then I remember in the morning we left, even I didn’t make my bed. We just went away, made some sandwiches and we went out.

And then when we came home the house manager knocked on the door and said that, ‘Two gentlemen, foreign gentlemen was looking for you’ that, ‘I think they came from Vienna’ he said. He didn’t understand German or English probably. I don’t know what language they talked. And then, ‘They said they are coming back, eight o’clock’. So quickly made my bed and we changed and then made some coffee.

I remember and then really eight o’clock the two gentlemen knocked on the door, two old men. And then they said who they are and immediately, I am not a good Yiddish speaker but my husband was very good, you know. And then immediately they could talk to each other so they came in.

We had a very little flat as I said; we had one room and my mother-in-law lived in the other room. So they came in. We had a nice room, with nice furniture. It was nice but very small. I had a bed that I opened up for the night and closed it you know.

INT: Folded it.

E.S: So that you can sit on it during the day. So they, Mr Rosen and the brother came in and they asked my husband to sing something for them and then later they confessed that they thought the whole house will collapse on them because he’s got such a big voice, my husband! They thought that it will collapse on their heads!

E.S: Oh yes, so they were very impressed, very impressed and they said they would be coming home just after the tour, they said, about three weeks time and we’ll have a big meeting in the Shul and then you will hear from us then.

So in the meantime, you know, in Hungary, I don’t know about other opera houses, in Hungary the opera closes for two months. July and August, there is no opera for summer break.

So we went on holiday to Balaton Lake. That is very nice in Hungary. We went to holiday and then, but my husband had to come home, every Saturday night he came home, he went home to Budapest because he was appearing in the open-air theatre in the Margaret Island. It was open-air, beautiful.

He came home and he said that he’d got the letter from… and they said, ‘They’d send a ticket for me and they want me to come to…’

INT: Scotland

E.S. To here. So they sent me a ticket from Vienna to Glasgow and then sent money to buy me for Budapest to Vienna…not Vienna, Glasgow. It was later when we came eventually.

And then I had Agnes. And then we had a passport but we did not understand because it was a visitor passport because we couldn’t go travel anywhere from this Communist country but they gave occasionally. If you were lucky you could go. If you could afford it you could go. And my husband had a cousin, a second or third cousin, in Vienna, Max, and then he invited us. And my daughter Agnes was on my passport because you know, no separate passport. And, but we couldn’t take her – I mean we wouldn’t / couldn’t take her because they wouldn’t let us.

INT: Right.

E.S: The whole family, because they knew that many people just forget to go back. So we didn’t want to risk that, you know. So we left Aggie with my mum, my mum and then we went there.

And actually we spent three weeks here because we were so inexperienced to travelling we didn’t book a seat to come home and they couldn’t get a seat for us.

I was not there on Friday night but I walked down to wait for my husband to walk home. That is he put his hat and went on the floor before my husband he was so, so…

INT: So impressed.

E.S: Impressed, yes. So Sunday next day was a meeting. They made a contract. They wanted him already. So it was all beautiful like a….like a…

INT: A fairy story?

E.S: A fairytale. But because we knew that we don’t know how we are able to come away. So… They were lovely to us. They took us to the seaside, by cars. Max Berkley – was lovely. They took us there I remember. So they show us around.

Everything was nice, I just said to my husband that I don’t want to live in Glasgow because it’s so hilly. I said that because Mrs Wolfe, you know, where she lived it’s up the hill. I found hard to walk. I was not used to it you know. It’s a joke because we couldn’t wait, you know, until we could come.

So anyway, shortly, we went home eventually. They gave us a lot of presents and were really nice to us, and some money, so very nice. And then we came home and for a whole year we planned how can we come away.

We had a Jewish lawyer friend so we went to advice if we could we apply for a passport. How do you call this passport, you know? Emigration. An emigration passport.

And then this guy said that you cannot apply because you will be refused and then they watching you. Even if you just say you are going on holiday, you’ll be watched. That was the story with the Russians you know. And…But it happened that this passport was still six months valid.

INT: Valid. Right.

E.S: So my husbands cousin in Vienna, Max, they talked Yiddish on the phone because even you couldn’t talk things like this because of…

INT: In case they were listening in.

E.S: But Yiddish, you know, there was a hope that they can’t understand.

So Max said that, ‘You just come. You just come. All of you.’ Because my Agnes was on the passport. ‘You just come. Say you are coming on holiday to me.’ And he rented a flat for us, you know. Just say that. So when it was a holiday, as I said during the, again the opera holiday, we decided we try. If we can’t go, we could come back and still have a job, you know, in Budapest.

So we came eventually and we just take with us a little summer clothes. We are going on holiday to Vienna for two weeks.

So when we arrived there Max said just come, we will see what can we do.

And then we went there and then took us to the British Embassy and we showed our contract and they didn’t believe us very much. It was over a year ago it was dated; maybe the job is not available.

But they phoned to Glasgow and they checked and it was OK. So they said that… the situation was that everything was arranged from this part.

INT: From Vienna.

E.S: Work permit and visa and everything, just from there. We couldn’t, we couldn’t use that to put in a passport, the visa, because we didn’t have an emigration passport.

INT: Right.

E.S: So the Hungarian… I went to the embassy, the British Embassy. I talked to them because you could talk there, I felt.

But I didn’t say. I didn’t say we ran away. I just said that we got a job.  My husband got a job, and later on when we are ready, we will go.

And I got a house, it’s true, it was true because they offered us 10 Third Avenue, you know, and then I said that I have to go there and see what I want to buy – furniture, blah, blah.

But they said, you know, that they still cannot put my visa, you know because it was an agreement with the Hungarians.

INT: Yes, right.

E.S: They couldn’t work against them, you know. So we just went on a train. It’s not far, Vienna. It’s maybe three hours on the train, or less, from Budapest.

So anyway we spent nearly four weeks, by the time they managed to get our visas. They sent a courier from the British Embassy from Vienna to the Hungarian, to Budapest British Embassy.

INT: Yeah.

E.S: And this courier brought us the visa and in Vienna they put it in for us. So it was a very unique situation you know.

**Eva Szirmai – Settling In**

Eva talks about her first experiences of life in Glasgow. She describes the delight she experienced when she and her family celebrated their first Friday night in a free country.

**Read the Transcript**

INT: Ah, no, what I meant had you had your other children? Were your other children born in Scotland?

E.S: No my daughter born here, in Scotland.

INT: Ah right.

E.S: She was born here in Scotland, yes, a few years after we came.

INT: What year was that?

E.S: ‘65, 1965. 13th of July we arrived. It was a Tuesday. They came to the airport, Max, we didn’t know him before.

So they took us to Mrs Wolfe’s and then Jack Barman said that, in Yiddish we could talk, you know. Luckily we could talk. Because we had nothing; we had the house but we had nothing. We couldn’t bring anything.

So he said, ‘Tomorrow, 9 o’clock I come for you and then you make a list what you need’. And they took us to warehouse and the Goldbergs. And I was up with my daughter Aggie, who was eleven, all night and we made a list. I’ve still got my little notebook, what we need for a new life.

Dishes, milk, meat, and then cutlery and then everything and bedclothes and covers…you know we had nothing…towels, you know.

So we made a list and then we bought everything what we need and then we had no money at that time but we paid off, you know, I don’t know two or three years, I think. They took a little bit off all the time, the Queens Park, you know, they paid for us. And then it was Wednesday, and Thursday we went to the house; they took us to the house and the goods arrived, everything arrived on Thursday.

And I remember Jack taught me how to make a bed in Scotland because we didn’t have blankets.

INT: What did you have? You had a duvet?

E.S: We had duvets so I didn’t know how to make a sheet, you know, but he was nice. And then the goods arrived and then after he took us to Morrisons [the Kosher Deli] and the kosher butchers and then we shopped and it was Thursday. And Friday night was my first Friday night I had. I cooked. I baked. I have a picture somewhere and we were sitting in my beautiful big dining room.

Somebody…Max gave me two candlesticks, not very nice but it was something, you know.

And then my husband went to Shul to daven, the first service and then came home and I had the candles lit, everything ready. So it was such a happy…

INT: Oh that’s lovely.

E.S: Happy day. And then I should say since that we never looked back really, never looked back.

But we couldn’t go home for seventeen years because if you would go back they would put us to jail because we left the country. And then three of us started to learn English [before they left Hungary]. But my husband just dropped out and Agnes had to go to school. We didn’t want to force her very much; we didn’t want to know at all, you know. She confessed later that it was a very difficult situation, Agnes, because in the school she was not allowed to say that she is Jewish and she go to school and we took her to the Cheder every Sunday morning, it was the Cheder, you know. So she was not allowed to tell about this, you know. As a young child it was very hard on her.

INT: Very hard.

E.S: Really, really very hard. But I thank God at the end we managed to get here and I start a free life, you know.

INT: Did you go to the opera here?

E.S  …always free tickets so every week we went to the opera. Once a week.

INT: And did your husband miss being an opera singer?

E.S: He was still singing opera concerts here, you know, He was always singing.

**Eva Szirmai – Reflection On Life**

Eva emphasises that the highlight of her life was living in Scotland in a free society

**Read the Transcript**

INT: Eva we always finish with asking people to say their highlights.

E.S: Yes

INT: And not so much the low points of their lives. But what would you say, reflecting back, what would you say are your highlights?

E.S: To live here.

INT: And about, quite often people say…

E.S: I told you about that, you know, it was a new world. It was a new world, a free world. You could say what your opinion was, what we missed very much. And also you can practise your religion freely,

We, financially we were really fine because my husband you could say had two jobs. Because, for example, he was already in the opera and then from Berlin, came, they asked for a Chazzan because there was no Jewish Chazzan.

So the government recommended my husband, you know, because he was the best voice, you know. So my husband went to sing in Berlin for High Holy Days,

And we didn’t know a long time [about the fate of her father]… didn’t want to tell us. We were always hoping he will come home but my brother George, thank God, came back. But he (George) was very ill all his life. But he still managed, he was eighty-six when he passed away, two years ago he passed away.

INT: And so you have three grandsons I know that.

E.S: Five.

INT: I was going to say, and what’s your other daughter had?… But it’s grandsons as well.

E.S: I have five grandsons.

INT: Five grandsons.

E.S: Thank God.

INT: Eva, I’d like to say thank you very much for the interview. It was very interesting and thank you very much.

E.S: You’re welcome.

INT. And thank you very much