

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Francis Akos
September 23, 1998
RG-50.549.02*0021**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Francis Akos, conducted by Gary Covino on September 23, 1998 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Chicago, Illinois and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

Interview with Francis Akos
September 23, 1998

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr collection.

This is an interview with Francis Akos, conducted by Gary Covino, on September 23rd, 1998, in Chicago, Illinois. This is a follow up interview to a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum videotaped interview conducted with Francis Akos. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gratefully acknowledges Jeff and Toby Herr for making this interview possible. This is tape number one, side A.

A: My name is Francis Akos, A-k-o-s. We are recording at Orchestra Hall in Chicago, which is my second home, being assistant concert master here for the last 44 years.

Q: And you're about to start the season, I guess, huh?

A: Yeah.

Q: And you just -- you just come back from a tour of Europe?

A: We just came back from -- from a scenic tour of Europe and Friday is opening night.

Q: When -- this is jumping ahead some, actually, but since you mentioned you've just been in Europe, I imagine, with what you do in life, you go to Europe fairly often?

A: Well, it started in '71. Until then the Chicago symphony was an unknown, great orchestra. But '71 with Shorty, we went to Europe the first time and since then, several times to Europe and to Japan and Russia and Australia. We were all over.

Q: So, you've been going back then for, you know, since the early 70's, it's a --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- quarter of -- quarter of a century.

A: Quarter of a century, right.

Q: What is it like to go back? Does it -- does it ever bring up memories of what happened to you during the war? Do you ever -- have you ever been to, or near any of those places again?

A: At ce -- at certain -- at certain times it happened, but generally speaking, not. But at one point, when we were in Hamburg, I went out to see the -- the place where the Caparkone wa -- bombing happened and since then there were some books written and there are -- there is a museum there and I didn't feel at home too much when I went back to Hungary. We went -- we were in Russia and then we went to Hungary and -- and Vienna, to play a concert each. It ba -- it brought back memories, but for some reason, I wasn't too upset about what happened. But as concertmaster of the Berlin opera house since -- I mean from -- for '50 -- f -- '50 til '54. I took this as a rehabilitation -- kind of restitution, because I made it -- I play in a proba -- a -- a -- an audition and I ma -- got the job and I lived there for three years, almost four. And I made some very good friends. Not -- not all of them were -- were -- were avid Nazis. And they treated me very nicely, so I -- I didn't have any bad feelings about being back to Euro -- to Germany, specifically, and Berlin.

Q: So you feel like your time in -- in those years in Berlin right after the war, it was almost like there was a timeta --

A: Yeah, it is --

Q: Some sort of reconciliation?

A: It was -- it was like that, I took it that way. Some -- some people couldn't understand how can you live in Germany. But everybody is little different.

Q: Mm-hm. You mentioned the Caparkone.

A: Right.

Q: Ho-How do you spell that?

A: C-a-p-a-r-c-o -- no, a-r-k-o-n-e. Caparkone. Well, in English it's with a c, I think in Germany it was also the same way, the spelling of the -- of this ship. That was a 37,000 ton Hamburg - South America liner. And since then I discovered, by accident, that when the Germans made a f-film of the Titanic, in '41, they used this ship for the feeling of that -- of the Titanic.

Q: They made a movie about the Titanic?

A: They made they -- they are the -- very famous movie, it was during the war time. And this is the -- the ship they used.

Q: We should mention -- I mean you go into description at some length in your interview with the Holocaust Museum --

A: Right.

Q: -- and also with the S-Shoah Foundation, you tell the story of being on the ship, it was a ship where they had taken thousands of prisoners, the Germans had put thousands of prisoners on these ships. It was right at the end of the war.

A: There were three -- three big ship in the Bay of Lubec. And that's the North Sea and what we found out afterwards, there was no fuel on the ships. So what they planned with us, nobody knows. M-Most likely, they wanted to do something to -- to get rid of all this per -- concentration camp prisoners, but the British took it into their hands on -- on May third. And they were on the ships in the afternoon. And there was about 7,000 who died and maybe 400 who -- who are alive.

Q: The British bombed it --

A: Who were alive.

Q: Right.

A: The British bombed it because everything was going -- going north. The -- the -- the Germans were evacuating and -- and sending all the troops further north and they thought that thasat -- these ships are transport ships for -- for German military. But what came out later -- what was found out, that the -- Bannerat, the -- the Swe-Swedish Bannerat -- the Swedish what?

Q: I think he -- he was called Count.

A: Count. Yes, Count Bannerat had a meeting with Himmler in -- in Lubec. That's where they -- they shipped us in f-from. To the -- to the big ships. And he found out that there are sh -- pris-prisoners -- concen-concentration camp prisoners on these ships and by eight o'clock in the morning, the British got the mes-message that don't bomb these ships because they are innocent survivors of -- of the concentration camps and the British supposedly said, "It's too late." And at 2:30 they bombed the ships.

Q: Mm.

A: So, coincidences happened, nobody knows what happen -- really caused them.

Q: It's still being investigated to this day, no?

A: It sure is. There is a film that was made by a German young man who -- who happened to -- to be spending some vacation time at the North Sea, and he's -- heard about that there is a -- a memorial for the Holocaust ma -- victims, 7,000 of them. And he started to dig in and -- and look -- look into it. And he found ca -- found out all kinds of details and he found a few survivors, including me. And he made a film at -- a documentary about it. Unfortunately, the film is not well known at all, because the English subtitles are not legible. Very -- they didn't have enough money to -- to do the right subtitling. And that's -- that's where it is. It was played in -- I mean, it was shown in -- in Germany several ti -- several places, in France and in Holland. But, many people know about the Titanic, everybody knows about the Titanic. Nobody knows about the Caparkone and the Deutschland. And the Athena, there was three ships.

Q: And the vast majority of people on those ships died.

A: Right. There were only -- only about 400 all together that survived. And 7,000 are at - known dead. So they -- they knew the numbers that -- that were shipped -- put -- put on the ships. So this film was done on a very si -- very low budget. This is a one man operation, basically. The guy is from Berlin and he was trying his best. But a -- without enough backing, is not going to be well-known anywhere.

A: Right. So you're experience actually, on the -- you know, your quote unquote, "Day of Liberation" --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- consisted of diving off the side of this --

A: Of jumping into the -- into the cold sea and being lucky enough to be fished out by -- by some little boat that was around the ship and getting into the -- o-on land, when the British came in, that was a -- a -- barracks -- some kind of barracks when we -- we came on -- on shore and the British tanks were coming in and -- and tearing down the -- the flags. And then we -- we had nothing. Basically zero. What we had on was wet and that -- that was what -- what we owned, the few people who -- who survived. So the British went into different houses and told the Germans, give these people eat -- to eat, give these people something to wear and shoes and -- and this is how I started my new life.

Q: When -- do you remember, when you were with the British and they were telling Germans to give you something to eat and to give you clothes, I guess, how were the Germans reacting to that?

A: Well, they -- they had no idea what's going on. They only saw the -- the British come in and they didn't know what were these wet -- wet people came from. They -- they saw some bombing maybe, but they didn't know that those -- those -- the concentration camp prisoners, until they saw them with -- with the hair shor-shorn and no -- well, nobody had anything, but basically, no-nobody has a -- had a piece of paper to -- to prove who they

were. Anyway, the British then -- then gave us some -- some identification cards. But it was hairy.

Q: Hairy?

A: Very hairy.

Q: In what way?

A: In very many ways. You -- you didn't know who you were talking to, whether it was a -- a Nazi who -- who was trying to kill you before and who is now trying to -- to save his own hide or -- or whether it was somebody who just came off the ship, by accident.

Anyway, it was very -- a long time ago, so I can't remember. Then it was difficult to get -
- get where you wanted to go, because that -- the French and the Belgians, I think and the Poles sent their -- their people to -- to collect their own people, because there -- they were notified. But anybody behind the Iron Curtain, like -- like Hungarians and Czechs and -- nobody cared really, but there was a United Nations relief organization, you -- the UNRRA, Unrah, and I had a chance to -- actually, I -- I found somewhere -- I organized myself a -- a violin and through -- through -- through the British, I became a -- a violinist for the officer's club. I didn't know much -- too many British officer songs anyway, but I -- I survived somehow and I played a little bit. Of course, it was difficult because -- I spoke a little English, but not -- now, my English is better, my acc-accent is the same. But I had to make myself understood. And s-si -- one of the officers helped me to get notification to the Red Cross, because I had an uncle in Ankara who survived the war in -
- in Turkey. And I knew his address. I didn't have a chance to send anything to Budapest,

because I -- I didn't know whether my parents were alive or not, first of all and secondly there was no c-communication or -- or mail or anything like that. But through the Red Cross, I -- I sent a note to my uncle, who then notified my parents that I was alive. So it took four months until I -- I finally got back to Hungary -- to Budapest. Mayas -- with a Czech transport. There was nothing going on for -- for Hungarians. But I -- I joined at that Czech transport and I got back somehow. On buses, on trains, on -- had no money, of course. And then I went to -- to my old apartment, not knowing whether my mother is around, or my father. That's where they -- they deported me from, originally. And so they were alive. And then I became concertmaster of the -- of the Budapest Concert Orchestra. They knew it through my mother that I was alive and they were waiting for me, as a -- with -- with that position. And those were the first few months, everything was very difficult. There was inflation, there was no -- no food, no money, no nothing. Basically, it was terrible times. And it was basically Russian occupation. So, we went through all kinds of horror stories. But I played. I practice, I played and I got back into the swing of things and then I left. Some of us felt that the -- the world is open, now that the war is over, the world is open for -- for -- for us talented, good, good instrumentalists, etcetera. And we went over to Austria and then to France and we ha -- we s -- we had a -- with some colleagues, I played in a string quartet and nothing really j-jived. Because the world wasn't open. In France, you couldn't -- couldn't get a job if you didn't have nationality -- I mean, didn't belong to -- even -- even as a -- as a foreigner, if you didn't have the right kind of papers, you couldn't get a job. So when I went back, I played an

audition for the opera. They were looking for a concertmaster in Budapest and I got the job. I was the youngest concertmaster they ever had in the Budapest Philharmonic. T was like -- like in Vienna, the Philharmonic and the opera orchestra is the same -- or was the same. And I was there for -- for a season, two seasons and somebody who knew me from way back, when I was a student -- this lady was a pianist and she survived the war in -- in -- in Sweden. And she recommended me for concertmaster to come to Gurterburg, in Sweden. So I got the passport, I didn't promise them anything, but I went out to -- to play the audition. And after I played out the -- the audition and I was -- I got the job, then I went back to Budapest -- oh, I went back and I got a year of -- va -- leave of absence -- a leave, yeah. And then I never went back, afterwards. I didn't go back, I went out to Sweden and I was concertmaster in Gurterburg for three years. Then there was an opening in Berlin and they wanted me to come. I played an audition again. I got the job and that's when I started in the opera house. This Shtetisher oper, meaning civic opera, but that was one of the big operas. They had three in -- in Berlin -- in West Berlin and in East Berlin, there were three or four opera houses, but three of -- three of them were famous. The Startsh oper and the Commisher oper was -- were in East Berlin. My opera, the Shtetisher oper was West Berlin. And I never went over to the east side, because I wasn't interested in it. I knew -- knew what Communism is and I knew what Russian occupation is, I wasn't interested. But that was an interesting life. West Berlin was -- was an island in -- in -- in Germany. And that was very good, until I got my American pa -- visa, which took eight -- eight years I was waiting for the American visa. And when I got

it, I couldn't say, "No, I don't come, because I have a good job in Berlin." So I came to America.

Q: Let me -- before we take up that part of the story, let me ask you a couple questions.

I'm curious -- you know, you're -- most -- most of the people that I've interviewed who survived the Holocaust, they have very vivid memories of their day of liberation. And usually it's soldiers march into a camp or they're -- they're in hiding and they -- they see the Russians coming or the Americans coming or whatever and it's a -- it's a very distinctive experience. Now your day of liberation is actually being bombed, scrambling for --

A: Much more distinctive.

Q: -- scrambling for your life --

A: Just looking.

Q: -- tremendous -- tremendous chaos.

A: Yeah. It was -- it was -- I was right in the middle of it.

Q: Yeah. So my -- my question is -- do you know, or can you remember, when was -- you know, all these other interviews I've done, people say, "And then -- and then, when we went out and met the Russians, then we were liberated." You know, they knew they were liberated. They -- people knew what their -- that their moment of liberation had come and I'm wondering, when was the time you ever felt that, given how crazy it was that day?

A: I -- I never really verbalized it, but I suppose it was the time when I saw the English soldiers coming -- coming in the -- in the tanks, into this Ubertshooter -- what is an

Ubertshooter -- un -- submarine school, basically. It was in the submarine school where -- where the left side of the -- the harbor, that we hit land with these little boats that helped. Not too many. And at the same time, this Bri-British tanks were coming from the right and those British soldiers took down the Nazi flag that was still o-on -- on the flagpole. And I suppose that was the time that I was liberated, because now -- now I could speak English to the English soldiers. So that was -- that was the end of the war for me. I didn't know it's -- May three is -- is just a date. And now I know what it was, cause they were -- five more days they -- they went on with the war, but that was almost the ho -- the end.

Q: But even now, when you're talking, you say, "When I saw them take down the flag, I suppose that was it." Sounds like --

A: Yeah, I suppose that was it.

Q: -- y-you say you suppose that was it, sounds like at the time, it didn't really strike you.

A: I didn't -- no, it didn't. I was wet and cold and I was worried. I really didn't -- didn't feel liberated, but that was it, cause I was liberated, basically. And I survived. The other 7,000 died.

Q: Did you ever have any discu -- I mean you s -- you s -- you spoke some English, so I believe in your other interviews, you mentioned that you were able to speak with the British about what had happened. Did you ever --

A: Nobody -- nobody really asked me what happened. They -- they just -- somehow they -- they must have known it from other people, too. I probably told them, I don't remember exactly what -- what I told them, that we were on the ship and the ship was

bombed, that -- and who we are. Maybe I did, but they -- they seem to have known that these are people who should be helped, these are not Nazis coming out of the water.

Q: Did you feel -- you know, the British saved you on the one hand, but had bombed you on the other hand. Did you feel grateful, resentful?

A: After -- after the fact, I've -- I felt very resentful, but I was glad that it was over. It was over because of them. That was a big, big mistake that they made and nobody can explain how it happened. Nobody really could find out details. This guy who -- who made the film went all -- all the way to -- to the British command and --

Q: If you could move --

A: -- he interviewed -- he interviewed some of the pilots -- no, that was in the Stern magazine, that was a -- a -- a serial that they had an interview with the pilots and they really did not have any inkling what they did. But then when they found out, it was -- they had regrets, too. So thousands -- thousands perished and a few hundred were survivors.

Q: Could you tell me a little more about what it was like when you went back to Budapest, where you were from?

A: Yeah.

Q: The war was over now, what was the city like, how did it feel to be there? How did you feel as a -- as a Jew, being back there?

A: It was very difficult for everybody, basically because -- because of the Russians. The Russians took as much as whatever could they -- could take out besides the -- the -- the --

the Nazis ruined Budapest with street fights. And I remember when -- when they deported me, first they took us -- that was night -- evening, raids during the day and during the evening, they put -- put together I don't know how many hundreds of Jews into the big synagogue -- that's the biggest in Europe, the hung -- the -- the Budapest synagogue, and that's where we were -- we were kept and during the night, we heard demolition sounds. All but one bridge -- bridges were detonated and -- and there was no connection between Pest and Buda, other than one that they left. And that's where we went over to the Buda side. In the morning --

Q: Now, this is when -- when is this happening?

A: And this is -- this is November four an -- '44.

Q: So this is during the war?

A: During the war when -- when the -- the Hungarian Nazis took over the government and they rounded up all the Jews. Most of them into ghettos, but some of us were deported right away. And we walked to vie -- to Vienna under -- under guns. So that was coming back to -- to this place, to -- to Budapest, it was ruined by -- by the Germans and it was ruined by the Hungarian Nazis and then it was ruined by the Russians. So it was a pretty bad situation, but everybody tried to survive and there was no -- no difference between Jews, non-Jews. We -- we were musicians. We played in the orchestra and -- and there was craving for -- for some culture after awhile, but we played in this overcoats because there was no heat. So it was a very, very strange situation.

Q: But the Jewish community of Budapest had been devastated, no?

A: Yeah, most of it, most of it. The only place where -- where there were some surviving Jews, was in Budapest, because of the ghetto situation and there was -- there were some - - some houses that were under Swedish and Swiss protection, supposedly. Well, they took me from a Swedish -- Swedish pro-protected house, too. But in general, Jews from the countryside were deported much earlier than -- than what happened to me, or us. And the surviving Hungarian Jews were all either in hiding or in -- in ghettos that were so-called liberated by the Russians.

Q: What would -- what did it feel to -- like, to be walking down familiar streets in Budapest, where once, you know, you had family, friends and all this life in this community and what was it like then, after the war?

A: We didn't really know too much in the beginning, who survived, who didn't survive? Who was around, who wasn't around? It was a strange world all together. And I remember that a school -- school friend of mine, I didn't see him again, not until just a few years ago, he was in -- in Chicago and he talked to me. I knew his father was in the same transport, walking to Vienna and then on the -- on the cattle car witzness going to -- being transported to Hamburg mayan gummer. And I saw him die in -- in the camp. He was in the same barracks where -- where I was. So, I didn't see him when I came home, but I knew certain things. And I saw one of my friend from school, who became a -- a partisan in -- in -- in Russia, fighting on the side of the Russians, against the Germans. He came back with the Russians to Budapest and became a high positioned police officer, who was trying to find and did find th-the Nazis who -- the Hungarian Nazis who were

responsible for most of the atrocities that took place. So it was strange, it was a very strange world and -- and -- and I left it behind and came back to it. But by then it was a little better, where I was concertmaster in the opera house, but we still didn't have peace. Not just peace, but bombed out buildings and -- and bombed out apartments and -- and very little -- very little food. The Russians took as much as was movable, they took. They -- they dismantled toilets in the hotels and -- and washing -- wash basins and took them, because most of these -- these so-called soldiers, they have never seen anything that rem - - rem -- that is close to co-comfort and that is close to luxury. So they -- they got -- they went wild. They took the watches off -- off your arm and they had -- some of them had five, six watches on their arms. Duvi, duvi, that was the -- the word. Give, give, whatever you can. And they took the rings off the fingers of the people and -- and the watches and it was a very strange world, but you know, it just comes to me sporadically, when I talk about it. Otherwise, I don't think about it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: It was after all five -- 50 years ago. 45 -- more than 50 years ago.

Q: Do you feel that -- I mean, your life is a life of music, do you feel --

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Francis Akos. This is tape number one, side B.

A: -- talk about it. Otherwise, I don't think about it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: It was after all five -- 50 years ago. 45 -- more then 50 years ago.

Q: Do you feel that -- I mean, your life is a life of music, do you feel that -- were you sort of mentally and emotionally, maybe even spiritually, sort of cu -- yo -- is so much of your life bound up with the music that -- do you think it was any help in surviving what you survived? And do you think it was a help after the war in taking your mind off what was going on all around you?

A: Well, not that -- not in that vein, what you were just saying, the last sentence. It -- you just keep on living. But help, yes, because in the concentration camp, I survived because the -- the guy who was in -- in charge of my barracks -- for some reason, I don't know why and how he -- he found out that I am playing the violin and -- and there was suddenly suddenly there was a violin. And every evening they were -- they were trying to -- to keep up their spirits and they were singing -- there were Polish people, German people, Hungarians, all mixture. And I was playing the violin for them and this guy liked it. So he really saved my life, basically, because there were transports going out of that camp to Bergen-Belsen and to Auschwitz and he always saved me. So that's sh -- music helped me a lot.

Q: Right. Well, we should say that you tell that story in both of your video interviews.

A: Yes.

Q: Actually at -- at greater length, so if anyone wants to --

A: Right.

Q: -- check them, they can just --

A: It's -- it's -- it's my story, so -- and that I remember very well.

Q: Hm.

A: Later, when I was concertmaster in Berlin, somehow I connected with him -- either he connected with me or I connected with him, but then I lost track of him. So we are now back in America, '54.

Q: How -- let me ask you, you said it took eight years to --

A: To get the visa, because of -- of the -- the what do you call it, quota system. Okay, a Hungarian, no matter where you -- I ask for my visa in Paris, but I was born in Budapest, so it went under a Hungarian quota and it took -- took six years until -- or s -- eight years until I got it.

Q: When you first applied for the visa --

A: Yeah?

Q: This was soon aft -- not too --

A: That was in '46.

Q: Why did you want to come to America?

A: Because America was -- was everybody's -- in everybody's mind, that was the place where to -- where to escape, where to go. A free country and -- and you -- you get what you -- what you deserve as far as, you know, your -- your knowledge, your talent, whatever. And that was well-known before the war, during the war, after the war.

America was the place where to go. Many people went to Canada, many people went to

Australia. Sweden wasn't bad either, but I -- I didn't feel like I belonged to Sweden, because it was so even. Everybody had everything, basically and no big difference between ups and downs. The -- the best and not -- not -- and the worst. It was very much in equilibrium. I -- somehow I didn't feel -- when I went this German -- the Berlin position was offered to me, that I should come and play -- audition -- audition, I didn't hesitate. I could have stayed in -- in Sweden and become a -- a satisfied, even keeled person.

Q: But that -- so, Sweden was -- well, it sounds like you're saying Sweden was a little boring?

A: Well, it -- you can -- you can say that somehow, yes, but there are some Swedes who are not boring, either. But I was too young for -- for settling down for good -- good life, in general. I had a good job and it was very nice, but it wasn't exciting enough.

Q: By the time your visa was coming through --

A: Yeah?

Q: -- after -- eight years after you applied to come to America, did you still really want to come to America or did you have some thoughts of maybe you were settling in in -- in other parts of Europe?

A: Well, I was concertmaster in Berlin, I didn't want to go anywhere else, but I had an offer from Swede -- Switzerland, also. I p-played -- played a solo in [indecipherable] with the -- with the orchestra there and they wanted me to come from Berlin to -- to Switzerland, but th-then the American visa came and it was really difficult to say no,

because that was, you know, originally the idea, to come to America, now here is a visa. I couldn't say no.

Q: Where -- when and where did you finally come over to this country?

A: I came over in January, '54. And the previous summer, I was concert -- I was one of the members of the Casals Festival Orchestra, that has several concertmasters from -- from America and from other places, from Canada. And I made friends with -- with a few and they told me it will be very difficult. First of all, you have to become a member of the union before you even can -- can play an audition. And then you have to settle for what -- what's -- what's available. So it wasn't an -- an open book. So I came over, I had to stay in New York, I was staying in New York for awhile. And I couldn't play an audition for the opening for the following years, but I was offered a -- a position that was not a union position. The Aspen School of Music, the Aspen Festival was available for me and that's where I went during the summer, which wasn't a bad summer, to spend the first summer in -- in America in Aspen, which was very nice. And then I had to fly back to -- to New York to get my union card and then I played an audition and made it into the Minneapolis Symphony, as leader of the second violins. And that lasted one year. I mean it would -- could have lasted longer, but I wasn't -- wasn't satisfied, I -- I wasn't happy with just being third or fourth member of the -- of the hierarchy in the violins. And there was an opening in -- in Chicago. I played the audition in Chicago and got the job and moved to Chicago. That was '55. And I stayed, got married, have two daughters and I am

here now for -- assistant concertmaster for 44 seasons, which is long time with one orchestra.

Q: What is your wife's name?

A: Phyllis.

Q: Phyllis? And your daughter's names?

A: Daughter are Katie, or Kate, as -- as she likes to be called and Judy. And Judy has two little ones, Justin is 11, well 10, basically and Melissa is eight. And I am a proud grandfather. Phyllis has three daughters, they are older. My -- my -- my older daughter is 40 and her older d -- older daughter is a little more than 40, I think 42. She has three lovely ladies and I have two, so we are f -- a family of five girls and her oldest daughter has two sons, so we have three grandsons and one granddaughter.

Q: Did you meet your wife over here, or --

A: Yeah, over here, yeah. She is from Chicago. And she graduated as a piano major in -- at Northwestern. So music brought us together, basically.

Q: Do you ever talk with your -- or years ago, did you talk with your daughters about your experiences during the war? Have you ever talked to your grandchildren about it?

A: Yes, s-s-slowly and -- and a little bit. Not -- not much. But my daughters know most of it and they -- they know the -- the tapes -- the -- the interviews that I made, it probably gives them more than what I gave them before. And with the grandchildren, not -- not yet. Not yet, but after awhile I'm sure they -- they will find out. It's very difficult to, you know, to just give them one part and not the whole story and the whole story is too long

and too difficult to understand and -- so I'm -- I never really sat down, now you look, you -- you listen, okay? I didn't do that.

Q: Would they -- was it more that they had to ask you something to -- for it to become a subject of discussion?

A: Not really, I -- it was no subject, but I think now that they are old enough to -- to understand, at least partially, what -- what I can tell them. I -- I s -- really thought -- the other day I just -- I was just thinking I will sit down with the older ones together and -- and talk -- tell them a little bit.

Q: These are your grandchildren you're talking about?

A: Yeah, these are grandchildren.

Q: What about years ago, though, in your house, with your daughters? Did you talk about it much with them?

A: There was a time when we -- we belonged to -- to a Temple and there I -- then I was talking to them a little bit, because I was still -- I was asked to talk to the class to -- you know, Sunday school. And I told them a little bit, very little. It's very difficult to -- to make them understand. When they go to the Holocaust Museum, they will understand much more than the -- what I -- I can give them, I think. But this is a wonderful thing that -- that interview business, that they are going to try to -- to make the next and the next generation understand what -- what it is and what it was.

Q: What about you, yourself? Would you -- your own preferences, just going all -- along in life, with your family, whatever, is it something that you prefer not to dwell on? Is it

something that you don't think about that often any more? Is it something that y -- that is with you a lot?

A: No, I -- I have met people who think about it all the time and who talk about it all the time and I wasn't that way. I don't know, it's -- it's my nature, probably. I got over it. Somehow I -- I probably got hurt by it, but I didn't dwell on it for a long, long time. Then -- then I became more interested in it when -- when it became -- I think mostly with -- with the interview, with the Holocaust Museum interview, that I should remember it more and -- and talk about it more. The first time this Caparkone story came out, a friend of mine from London sent me a clipping from -- from the Times that was kind of a description of the Stan magazine's articles that came out every week, as a serial, about the Caparkone. So, the only -- only reason I knew about it, because he send me a Time mag -- and then I -- I started buying the Stan magazine issues. And that's how it all s-started, really. And then I -- I knew about the -- the man who -- who wrote the book a little bit, who -- who wrote the -- the articles, the serial in the Stan Magazine, he also put it in a boo-book form and I got in touch with him. And then later I sent them some -- sent him some material that I had, like the -- the first identification card that I got from the British [indecipherable] in Noistat and other stuff. Then we -- we became friendly, because he -- he looked me up when I was in Hamburg with the symphony. And he took me back to the memorial that -- that's on the beach in Noistat, over the Lubec Bay. And so I got into more -- more and more to discuss, to talk about it, to -- to think about it. But

I am not -- not upset any more. I was -- it was a long time ago and I survived, that was the main -- that -- that's my main feeling.

Q: What about when things happen, like you know, in the 70's there was -- I believe it was in the 70's, there was a series on American television about the Holocaust. When a movie like "Schindler's List" --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- comes out, do you watch those things? Do you avoid them, or --

A: Well, I went -- I went to see "Schindler's List" and I was very -- very much taken by it, because it was very close to what I understood -- what I -- what I experienced. So yes, I do -- I do see it [indecipherable] lot, the last -- what was it, the six days of -- the invasion. "The Longest Day" was a film and -- and things like that, yes, I do see it. I do -- I do remember a lot, but I -- I wasn't going to see the "Titanic", it -- I don't -- I don't care much for the -- for the story, because I have my own story and -- and it was -- with all the love story that went with it and all that, I -- I really wasn't interested in it. It's bad enough that it happened, but to me that's not entertainment.

Q: Mm-hm. You had your own version of the Titanic.

A: Ah, yeah. Right, right.

Q: Are there -- have there been, during your -- you've been here 40 -- 40 -- what, 41 years, I think, yeah.

A: In '55, yeah 43 years.

Q: 43 years here.

A: 53 years.

Q: Wait, no.

A: 40, oh now, fif -- 43 years, right.

Q: 43 years here at the symphony, are there members of the symphony now, or during the time you've been here, have there been other members who were also survivors of the Holocaust?

A: Well, I think so. Well, there's one -- one Hungarian colleague of mine who is -- who is here, who -- who hasn't been in concentration camp, but he was in -- in -- in -- drafted in the Hungarian army just like I was. And he is a survivor, because he was around, he was Jewish. And I don't know too many. We have -- we have several who were not born in this country, but I don't -- don't know of anybody who is -- or the -- the guy who is a Czech. He -- he came out after the war, so he survived the -- the war. But he is not Jewish, so it's not the same category. I don't -- I don't know of any other.

Q: Mm-hm. When you were with the academies in Europe after the war -- I mean, you were concertmaster or whatever --

A: Yeah.

Q: Were there -- were there ever any -- what was it like being Jewish in that setting? Were there ever any problems, did it ever come up? Was it just not an issue?

A: No, it was -- it was just not an issue. It -- it was too much of an issue before and during the war. See, before the war, when I -- I was in the academy as a student and we had a competition and I won the competition as the best student of -- of the first year of --

of the course, of academy. And -- and they had some bad demonstrations before and during. After that, I was coming down with the violin that -- that I just won, who -- where the director of the academy handed it to me and as I was coming down the st -- the steps, some of them were screaming about the girl who didn't win, that was not Jewish. They said, "Never mind, you have your violin in your hand, but she is the winner anyway." S- Stuff like that, there was -- there was numerous clauses that was a -- the 10 percent what do you call it?

Q: Quota?

A: Quota system in the universities and the academies counted as university. But I was in before -- before the -- became worse. And at the end there was no-nobody who was Jewish who -- who could play publicly. We had to play concerts in the private homes. This is during and -- during the war -- before, during the war, basically. Because the war started in 1939 and ended in '45, so it was six years and in -- during that time, I finished the academy and got my -- my diplomas, etcetera. There was no -- no anti-Semit -- open anti-Semitism after the war, basically, because there were too many Jewish people who -- some -- some survivors basically, but the -- on -- on -- in positions, because they came in with the Russians or the Russians put them in, so as I -- as I mentioned, this friend of mine, who became a -- a high -- high official officer of -- of the Hungarian -- well, it's police - sickel -- sickel police, whatever it was, I don't know exactly, but there were many of those who were put in. So no open anti-Semitism e-existed.

Q: In the camp, you said, in a way, you know, being able to play the violin saved your life. I'm wondering if there is any way -- but then you went through long periods where, I guess you didn't have the opportunity to play at all?

A: That's right.

Q: I'm wondering if -- what do you think the whole experience, did it have -- do you think it had any affect on your musical development in any way?

A: Well, it might have, I don't know. A-All I know is that I had -- had to practice a lot to make up for all the time that I didn't see a violin, when I came back to -- to Budapest after -- after the war. And it -- it took quite a while to get back to normalcy. I don't know if -- if the development had -- had anything to do with -- with the experience. I mean, yo -
- yo -- my -- my musical development -- I was pretty well developed, I think, because I wasn't a youngster any more when I came back. It might have had some influence.

Q: Maybe, but you're not sure?

A: Maybe, I don't know. No, I don't know.

Q: Mm-hm. You know, there's always that -- that thought that gets raised often when people talk about the Holocaust and they talk about the Germans and it's -- it's sort of this notion of, you know, the Germans, you know, a people with such a high culture, with such, you know -- you know, wonderful things to their culture, such amazing music and how could -- how could a people capable of all that, also be capable of the monstrosities of the Holocaust, you know?

A: Better minds than I couldn't answer this question. It was the most organized disorganized kind of life. When I tell you that they -- they took transports -- the camp -- Neuengamme was basically a -- a transit camp. They had -- I got sick when I -- in -- I think two or three weeks into -- into the camp life, I got -- I think pneumonia and they -- they put me in the hospital barracks, that they had a hospital barracks, where they took care of you with medication and then from the hospital barracks, they took them to Bergen-Belsen, on the transport, to -- to put them in -- in gas chambers, so if that can explain anything, it's organized disorganization, it's impossible to -- to -- to get an answer.

Q: I-It's not a question you dwell on very often, or --

A: No, no, no, absolutely not. That "Schindler's List" shows you basically what -- what went on behind this -- behind this scenes of -- of themselves. So the -- the officers and -- and some of those people who -- Schindler himself was -- was a Nazi, basically, to begin with. That's -- some -- some -- some of them had better human feelings than -- than others. No, it was -- it was something that -- that nobody can understand.

Q: Is there any piece of music that makes -- brings up any memories or -- or recalls anything to you, in particular?

A: Not -- not really, I -- I don't -- I don't think there is any specific piece, no.

Q: Nothing you associate with those times?

A: None. No, no, absolutely not. The times I -- I associate with this -- is probably my -- my youth, when I -- when I learned certain pieces and then later the -- when I played them again. But has very little connotation.

Q: What about -- you mentioned in the camp where this guy gave you --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- a violin and that saved your life and you played folk songs.

A: I played folk songs. I don't know what I played and how I played them.

Q: Do you remember them any more?

A: No, no, absolutely not. They were singing and I was trying to -- to emulate what I heard. But there was -- you know, lots of Polish non-Jews in that camp -- in that barracks where I was and Austrians and Germans and Czechs and Hungarian -- very few Hungarians, by the way. And it wasn't a -- a -- a Jewish barracks at -- at all, it was all mixed. And so we had blackouts, because the bombers were going over Hamburg, to Berlin and Leipzig and all the other places that they were bombing. This was right in the middle of the last winter of -- of the war. And so the blackouts, th-they turned off the lights and there was nothing else to do, either -- either you -- you -- you were sleeping or you were singing. Yeah, it was a strange, strange world, but I was lucky that -- I don't know how I would have survived, probably never -- I wouldn't have survived. But th-this -- playing helped.

Q: Have you ever in any of your trips to Europe, gone to some of the concentration camps?

A: Well, my wife went -- went to Dachau when we were in Munich and she was very, very touched and impressed by that and -- and she will never forget it. And, as I told you, I went -- went out with -- with this guy to -- to the memorial -- to the memorial at -- in Nice-Nicestadt, which is in Lubec Bay. And I went out to see the old camp once when I was in Hamburg.

Q: Which camp?

A: Neuen-Neuengamme, my camp. And that is just a -- a big obelisk and -- and names of all the countries that were represented by -- by pro -- prisoners and how many from -- from which country. I didn't see any of the -- the -- I saw an interesting thing when I was in -- we were in Brussels and we took a -- took a sightseeing bus with my wife. And next to the highway, the -- the driver slowed down and he said, "This is the place where they kept the Jews before they were sent to -- to Germany, and this is Belgium." So that's -- that's the other place that I have seen.

Q: Mm-hm. What was it like -- I guess, so you went back to your camp, but the -- the camp itself really wasn't there, right?

A: It wasn't there, no, it wasn't there at -- many, many, many years later, it was just a -- the mem-memorial to the camp and s -- fields, I think.

Q: Yeah. And you haven't felt any desire to see any of the other ones?

A: No.

Q: Why is that?

A: Because I know what it is like, or what was -- what it was like. There were barracks everywhere, but what was interesting that -- that we saw in Paris, there is a -- a memorial to the -- to the French -- it doesn't say Jews. It -- it is behind the Notterdam, sunk in the -- in the ground. You ge -- go down many, many steps and the sign outside says, "To the memory of deportees" and then the number, hundred some thousand. And you go in, downstairs, underground, there is lights and every German concentration camps name, because there's a lot of French Jews who were in different camps. But it has nothing to do with Jews, it -- they don't want to have anything to do with it. And so that's -- you can cut this out if you want to. It -- that -- that's another place where -- where we saw a memorial. It's -- it's a very touching scene because it's underground, it's like a cellar and it's like bars and lights, little lights. And Yad Vashem, of course, we saw Yad Vashem. That's -- when we were in Israel we went to see Yad Vashem and that's the first time my wife saw the name written, Neuengamme. So it -- it wasn't fictitious, it was real for her, you know?

Q: After the war, did you ever think about going to Israel? Moving to Israel?

A: No. No, for some reason, I didn't. I was brought up -- we were never really -- really religious. We were Jewish and that meant all the troubles that came with being Jewish, but -- and we went to -- to -- my uncle went every Friday to -- to service, but my parents only went to -- to high holidays. And I was Bar Mitzvah, but I wasn't brought up religious. So that was one of --

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Francis Akos. This is tape number two, side A.

A: -- to -- my uncle went every Friday to -- to service, but my parents only went to -- to high holidays. And I was Bar Mitzvah, but I wasn't brought up religious. So that was one of the reasons, probably, that I never sort of go into Israel.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Yeah, I have to mention -- I have to mention that my wife was always much more Jewish than I was. I mean, in her life. And she went to -- to -- after school -- she went to a Jewish school. She know -- she knows how to read and write Yiddish, so she's much more into Judaism than I was. But she enjoyed it when she went -- went -- after school, she went to this school and she enjoyed it and she still knows how to write and read.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: How to talk -- how to speak Yiddish.

Q: I'm not sure if this is covered in any of the other interviews, but what -- what eventually happened to your parents?

A: Oh my -- my father was deported, but my mother somehow got -- got him out. They were in a -- in a open air, giant -- not a stadium, but it -- it's a -- the factory kind of thing. And my mother got him out, he -- he was sick, too. And they survived in the apartment where -- where we lived. And my father died in the end of the revolution in '56. And I brought my mother out in '57. I paid -- paid in for -- for those wonderful Russians who --

who were doing this humanitarian deed, to bring people out of Hungary, into Austria, across that little bridge that was ma -- named in one of those books, for good money -- good do -- good dollars they got f-for their humanitarian act. And she came out here and she died here. She was 94 and a half and she died. And that was about six years ex -- I think it's six years ago.

Q: You mention your father died in '56, during the uprising, was it -- did it have something --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- to do with the uprising, or --

A: No, no, no, no, no, just -- it was very difficult times, but they couldn't get a doctor and they couldn't go anywhere and it was very bad. Now, unfortunately, when I went -- when I was back in -- in Hungary -- in Hungary, I didn't have a chance to even look for where he was.

Q: Wh-What were the names of your father and mother?

A: Carway, which means Charles in Hungarian. And my mother was Rosa.

Q: Mm-hm. Okay. I think that -- that's about it for any questions I have. Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you would like to talk about?

A: No, I -- I think I brought up everything, but even if you didn't ask, I brought it up. I think it was very good.

Q: Okay, well then, thanks for taking the time out to do this.

A: Thank you.

Q: [indecipherable] I guess you have a rehearsal soon, so --

A: No, I -- I -- not today. I have to go home, because I have a rehearsal in the evening here. Oh, Highland Park Strings, I didn't mention. I am conducting the Highland Park Strings, which is basically an amateur music lovers group and this is our 20th season starting. I'm going to start the rehearsal today -- tonight. 20 seasons we have been playing string music and we have been going to -- we were -- we were once in Italy for a few concerts and we are supposed to be going to Israel this December.

Q: And that group again, is called?

A: That group is called the Highland Park Strings and it's a nice group of people and I'm having all kinds of soloists with -- with them and we have always -- mostly -- five concerts a -- a season.

Q: Okay, well thanks again for taking the time.

A: Good. I thank you.

Q: This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Francis Akos.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Conclusion of Interview

