

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Ivo Herzer
September 13, 1989
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Ivo Herzer, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on September 13, 1989 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC 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 interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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IVO HERZER
September 13, 1989

Q: Ivo, would you tell us your name please?

A: Ivo Herzer.

Q: And where and when were you born?

A: Uh, I was born Zagreb, Yugoslavia, on February 5, 1925.

Q: OK. What is, tell us something about Zagreb and what it was like to grow up there.

A: Zagreb is the capital of Croatia. It is one of the six republics in today's Yugoslavia. Uh, it had a population, Jewish population of 10,000 out of 200,000. Uh, and uh, it was uh, it's a city that resembles Vienna to some extent in its atmosphere because it was in the Austro-Hungarian part for so many centuries.

Q: Tell me about, what was it like for you. How, where did your family live, in what part, and was it a Jewish quarter? What was it like?

A: There was no Jewish quarter.

Q: OK.

A: There was no ghetto. There had never been any ghetto there. The Jews lived, uh, all over. Uh, we lived downtown in my grandfather's house. My parents were born in Yugoslavia already, but not my grandparents. The Jews of Zagreb were strongly Zionist. And as far as the religious preference, they were...they practiced conservative Judaism. We were Ashkenazi, as opposed to the Sephardic Jews of eastern Yugoslavia--in Serbia, in Bosnia[-Hercegovina], in Montenegro. The total Jewish community of Yugoslavia before the war was about 70,000. As I said, with very strong ties to Eretz Israel at that time.

Q: What about your family? Who made up your, your family?

A: I have no brothers or sisters. And uh, I never met my, uh, grandparents, except one grandmother. So it was just my parents and I. My father was, uh, an employee in an insurance company. We were middle-class, comfortable. There were no signs of overt antisemitism there. There was antisemitism but it was kept more or less under the surface; and especially in the main part of Yugoslavia--in Serbia--there was no anti-semitism, because the Jews embraced the idea of Yugoslavia rather than separate nations. And so there was no government-sponsored antisemitism. However, a Jew could not become a professor in the university, or get a government position or a high government position. This was

understood. Unless you're baptized himself or herself. But otherwise, we were left alone. There was inter-marriage, and there were friendships with the, uh, gentiles. It was quite a comfortable life for the middle-class.

Q: What kind of a schooling did you have?

A: I went to the Jewish elementary school. We had in those days four years of elementary education which was sectarian. So I went to the Jewish elementary school and then it was followed by eight years of high school, of European high school. I only finished six, because the war came. The Germans attacked when I was just finishing the sixth...uh, sixth year or sixth grade.

Q: What was that high school like? This was a secular high school?

A: This was a secular high school, which had a very strict, fixed curriculum embracing all fields of science, at least three languages, uh, including Latin. There was Latin, French and German were obligatory, besides Serbo-Croatian. Religion was taught in separate classes to the Jews, the Catholics, the Moslems, the Orthodox, and so on. So religion was actually the main subject; and if you didn't pass religion, you didn't pass that whole year. It was typical European, the educational system. No mercy, no promotion--unless you really passed.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: Yes, I...I enjoyed it; because I...I was lucky. I was a good student, so it wasn't too difficult for me. But this wasn't really a public education where everybody participated, like in the United States. Most of the population did not participate in this type of high school. Uh, there was a high rate of illiteracy, and, uh, education was not at all wide-spread in Yugoslavia of those days. So this was somewhat of an elite group that went to this type of high school.

Q: You talked about there not being official antisemitism but that antisemitism was sort of felt. Did you encounter any such incidents when you were growing up?

A: I really didn't encounter any incident, except in sometimes perhaps a remark, uh, by a teacher who would meet us Jewish children going to our religion class, to another classroom. He would say something. "Here come the chosen people." It was sort of sarcastic, but it was...it was that sort of thing. Or, uh, if, uh, in the streets sometimes children would shout, "Jew, go to Palestine," and so on. But I personally did not encounter any strong antisemitic, uh, incident. However, there was at least one group, and it's the main group. There was a political party, underground, a fascist party which was antisemitic. And they did write graffiti and publish slogans, and so on. And they were the Croatian Nationalist Separatists, who didn't want Yugoslavia at all. They wanted independent Croatia, Catholic Croatia; and they were fiercely antisemitic. But they lived mostly in exile. In the inter-war years, they lived in Italy and Germany--which countries gave them asylum hoping that someday, as it happened, they could bring them back into Yugoslavia and install them in this Croatian state,

which would then be a satellite of the Axis powers. So there was always the underground; and it's a feeling of impending antisemitic, uh, doom. But in everyday life, it wasn't felt as much as it might have been in other parts of Europe.

Q: What happened when the war broke out?

A: When the war broke out in 1939, Yugoslavia was neutral. And uh, in 1940 Italy attacked Greece, and could not achieve a victory there. Germany wanted Greece out of the way. In fact, Germany wanted the Balkans secured; because Germany planned to attack the Soviet Union. The Germans pressured the Yugoslav government of the time to let German troops go through Yugoslavia, so that they can then attack Greece. The Yugoslav government agreed, but there was a coup which overthrew that government. This was in Serbia. An anti-Fascist, anti-Nazi coup; and they installed a new government which was openly anti-German. It was in defiance, direct defiance of Hitler. And in response to that, in April 1941, he ordered that Yugoslavia be attacked. Germany and Italy and Hungary and Bulgaria all attacked Yugoslavia, and defeated its army in about fourteen days. And that Croatian state was then established under the name the "Independent State of Croatia." And the exiled nationalists, antisemites, came back to govern that state. They called themselves "Ustaša." That means, uh, "Men of the Uprising." And immediately, within the first week, they began to introduce anti-Jewish legislation. Not only Jews, but also the Serbs. Orthodox Serbs were really on their list of destruction. And Gypsies.

Q: Tell us what was in that legislation and how did it affect you?

A: The legislation was sweeping. The Jews, there was a curfew. The Jews had to wear a yellow, uh, piece of cloth on the shoulder and in the back with the, uh, word, with the initial for "Jew" in Yugoslav. They were, of course, thrown out of all jobs; and even out of apartments in a certain section of the city. They had to surrender cameras, radios, and so on. It was a preliminary, it was a set of measures to isolate the Jews and completely, uh, cow the Jewish population into numbness. Because it was very sudden. Almost upon arrival of these...of the Ustaša. And, selectively, they took certain groups--such as some lawyers--and executed them as being Communists. And they began some deportations. There...those were times, they were somewhat chaotic. I mean, it was a new state. There was chaos. The Ustaša were not that organized. There was a struggle between the Germans and Italians, diplomatic struggle, for the control of that state. And the Germans won that control. The Italians, who had banked on that, lost even though the Italians also got a piece of Yugoslavia. In other words, it is important to understand that after the victory over Yugoslavia, the Axis powers dismembered Yugoslavia. There was no more Yugoslavia as a state. There was the Independent State of Croatia; Serbia was occupied by Germany; western Yugoslavia--that is, Slovenia--was divided between the Germans and Italians. And most important, for my story, the Italians occupied that Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia and most of the islands. They also annexed part of that coast--the best part, the richest for tourism--Dalmatia, and made it part of Italy. So that was the situation. The Jews in Croatia [were] being slowly herded together, and taken to various camps. At one time, there were some thirteen or fourteen camps

operating in Croatia. The Germans were not in these camps. This was all...they were all run by the Ustaša. The, uh, savagery that was practiced in these camps was such that even the Germans were horrified. In their internal memoranda, they called it the "Balkan bestiality." At one point--I don't remember the exact date, in July that same year--a transport was being formed. In other words, again Jews were being arrested, to be transported to an island where they all perished. I was arrested on a certain day. And I was then sixteen at the time. The agent detective who came to arrest me, the Croatian, had my name on his list and not my father's name. This was unusual. And my father protested and said that it must be a mistake. He wanted to substitute himself for me, saying that "You probably mean me, and not my son." The detective insisted, "No, it says Ivo Herzer and I have to take him." So my father said, "Well, I'll come with you." Of course, he couldn't go into that transitory camp; and so I was taken there. This was on the outskirts of the city of Zagreb, where fairs were held usually. And there were several hundred Jewish families with babies, complete families, pushed against the wall. And machine guns--heavy machine guns--were manned by the Ustaša, aimed at this mass of Jews who were...we had to respond to a roll call about every hour. We didn't know at all what would happen. Now we know what happened to that transport. As I said, they were taken to the island of Pag, P - A - G; and they all perished there under horrible circumstances. I was just lucky; because during the evening roll call, when my name came up, the Ustaša officer in charge said, "Are you here alone?" Since they had families. I said, "Yes." He said, "Take your things and go home." Just like that. He could have easily said, "Bring his family." He didn't. Now this was past curfew time. I had no paper in my hand to prove that I had a right to be anywhere. And so I ran home; and I wasn't...no patrol found me. I was lucky. And my parents thought they had lost me already. And they couldn't believe their eyes when I just burst in upon them. It was then that my parents decided that we must do something. Try to escape. But escape where? The partisans were not yet active. Yugoslavia was surrounded by countries that were already under German domination. How could we, ordinary middle-class people, escape? And then the decision was made. Let us try to somehow escape to the Italian zone in Yugoslavia. Maybe the Italians will let us in. Maybe they're not as bad as the Germans. Because we didn't really know anything about Fascist Italy. Since the Jewish community in Zagreb was oriented toward Austria and the German-speaking Europe, Italy was the place to go for a vacation maybe. But the fundamental difference between Fascism and Nazism, as far as Jews were concerned, was unknown to us. To us, this was a gamble. And my father obtained some sort of pass which could be gotten for some money. It was just a pass that said that we could be let out of Croatia, but didn't guarantee any entry anywhere. With this pass, without the yellow signs--which was a great risk--we left in July 1941 by train for the border. We wanted to go actually to the city of Split--Spalato, in Italian--which then was in Dalmatia, which then became Italy. And we thought if we reached that city somehow, as many Jews did, we would be safe--provided the Italians don't turn us back. On the way to Spalato, however, some troubles developed to the railroad. It seems that some guerillas must have blown up the tracks. The train was turned back; and we landed in a city which was the worst place to be. And this was the city of the Croatian Nationalists, where the Ustaša movement was born--the city of Gospi_--in a desolate part of the country with curfews, patrols, and a concentration camp for Jews just outside of Gospi_. We didn't know that, but there it was. The three of us,

plus perhaps six or seven other Jews whom we knew who tried to do the same thing, we coalesced into a small group, milling around at the station and then trying to go into town. It's a small town. On the way, we just knocked on a door--the first peasant house we saw. Fortunately, this was a house owned by an old Serb woman. And the Serbs were, at that time, again persecuted by the Croats, just like the Jews. So she understood our plight. But she was afraid of harboring us. She said she could keep us only for so many hours. We sat there. We...we stayed in the house not knowing what to do. We couldn't go back to Zagreb. We couldn't go forward. We had false documents. We were lost. To all intents and purposes, it seemed a completely impossible situation. But again, we were lucky in that there was an Italian garrison in that town--as there were Italian garrisons all over the region which was not far from the sea, from the coast. At...we just ...we saw three Italian soldiers, or maybe four. I spoke a little Italian, almost nothing; and my father a little, because he took Italian in his high school days. We just approached these soldiers, just on the wild chance that they might help us. And we told them two words: "ebrei"--which means Jews, [and] "paura"--fear. They immediately understood, because they knew what was going on--as we now know. And they told us to quickly go back to the house, "calma"--calm, and they would bring their sergeant. Their sergeant came. He spoke some French, and uh, we...we knew French. It was easier to communicate. He said, "Stay here. I'll see if I can get maybe a pass for you, to get you into Italy." And he left. We didn't believe him. We thought he just said nice things. How would he, who is he, didn't want any money. He never knew us, but he came back. He said he couldn't get a pass for us; but at midnight he will come with a few soldiers and he will put us on an Italian military train. And there...and doing that would be enough to smuggle us into Italy proper. Again, we were quite skeptical. Why would he do that? But he did. And this was unforgettable. Uh, at night Italian soldiers carrying our bags and rucksacks, marching us--protectively--to the railroad station with this sergeant, waiting for an Italian military train. When the train came, he told us to get in; and he himself boarded the train. Now, the train was full of Italian soldiers who immediately gave room to the...to my mother and other ladies in the small group, offered us some food. And I think he just said, "These are refugees." And as soon as you heard the word...he said the word "refugee" to Italians, they immediately...their hearts melted. Whether it was an Italian refugee or a Jewish refugee, didn't matter. They didn't protest. After all, we were civilians. We had no right to be on that train at all. Then, at the border, there were difficulties. Now, I'm talking about the border with Italy proper; because that whole scheme of getting to Split, in Dalmatia, had to be abandoned. He wanted us to go to the city of Fiume [**Croatian:** Rijeka], from where we could go Trieste--which was then Italy--and we would be safe. He got us across the border. They didn't know what to do with us, so they put us into the Customs House. He went to the authorities and said, "Here are these refugees; they haven't had anything to eat or drink. They've got to be given something." And some women's organization came, and they gave us orangeade and sandwiches to eat. And we stayed there almost a whole day. He left us, because he was assured by the authorities that we could stay. He shook hands with us and left. We never knew his name. However, at night, we were surprised. The authorities really did not allow us to stay. They put us back on a train and pushed us back into Croatia. We pleaded with the, uh, Italian military police, the Carabinieri, to give us back our documents, such as they were, so the Ustaša would not see that we are being pushed back as Jews.

Maybe that way we could escape, go back and try again. And the Carabinieri complied with our requests. So we made it back again, and we went all the way to Zagreb. We were totally exhausted. It was the most foolish thing to do, but we didn't really know what to do. And when we came to our apartment--this was only a few days later--it had already been taken. In the meantime, they came to search for us, to arrest all of us. Not having found us, they gave the apartment to a functionary of the Ustaša, who lived there. And the neighbors told us to just run away, because they were looking for us, as they were for other Jews. So we went again, and tried the same thing again. This time we made it across the border.

Q: How did you get across the border?

A: We got off the train just before the border. We went to a village--again at random--and knocked on a door. And a peasant woman opened up. We actually told her who we were, that we were looking...we had money, we were looking for someone to smuggle us across the border. We knew that near the border, there were always smugglers. That is, there was always traffic from Italy into Yugoslavia and back; and that possibly the peasants would know some secret path. And it was true. Uh, this, uh, woman knew some people who took us across the border. We were not alone. We were also again in a group maybe of ten, twelve people. Not just the three of us. This time we made it. And we lived in a town near Fiume,¹ in Italy, for one month. Hiding. But the Italian police found us after one month. They arrested my father and myself, kept us in for one night. The Police Commissioner was very embarrassed. And that was after the sergeant, the experience with the sergeant, which told us something about the Italians. Now the Commissioner of Police, when my father and I were brought to his office, he got up and he shook hands with us and asked us to sit down. This was not the Commissioner of Police that we expected to see. And he told us that he has no power to do anything, but he will leave our cell door open-- unlocked--as a symbol that we are not really prisoners. In the morning, we will be reunited with our wives and mothers. There were other Jews in that same town. They were all picked up. And so there was a sizable group of us. We were being marched to a bus. And we thought, "My God. Again they're going to push us back into Croatia." But they didn't do it. By that time--and we know this now--their policy has changed ...had changed. The policy of returning Jews or not letting them stay lasted only in the very first weeks of the Ustaša regime. Once the Italians grasped...understood what was going on with the Jews and the Serbs, and the Gypsies, they did not push anybody anymore across the border. They engaged in intense activity as to what's to be done. But we have documents today that clearly show that neither the Governor of Dalmatia nor the Italian General [Vittorio] Ambrosio in charge of the Second Army on that territory had any intentions to return us into the Ustaša hands. So the bus took us to former resort town of Cirquenizza--C-I-R-Q-U-E-N-I-Z-Z-A [**Croatian:** Crikvenica]--where, uh, we used to go for summer vacation, as many others. It was the headquarters of the Fifth Corps. By that time there were some fifty or sixty, a small group of refugees. We

¹ In an article published in Midstream in June/July 1983, Mr. Herzer identified this town as Sušak, a suburb of Fiume.

settled there and we had, of course, representatives. My father was one of the oldest among the refugees. He spoke some Italian, so naturally he represented us. He went to the Major in charge of civilian affairs. He received him as if he were a friend. He said, "You are protected, and you are under Italian protection. Give us your names, your addresses. The Ustaša, who have the civil authority, won't be able to do you any physical harm." As an example, the Ustaša did not want to give us ration cards. The Italians forced them to give us ration cards. The Ustaša said we have to wear those signs--again, yellow signs. The Italians told us, "Well, let them have that. We must give in on some point. But physically, they will not be able to harm you, deport you, or put you in jail." Now, our numbers increased; because my experience roughly speaking was repeated in many cases. Between four and five thousand Croatian Jews--almost all that survived--found their way to the Italian occupation zone in Yugoslavia. Either to the zone--we were in a zone, not yet in Italy--or to the annexed part of Yugoslavia, which was much safer. There were no Croats there at all. But we were safe. All came and started a very extraordinary period in my life, because we developed close relations with the Italian army. Italian officers started dating Jewish girls. Uh, the Italian major came to play bridge with my parents and another Jewish lady. He brought me dictionaries. They brought us food. Uh, there were two things that stand out. One, that two weeks roughly I think after our arrival in Crikvenica was Yom Kippur. And, uh, somehow the Italian major--whose name was Cipolla--learned this high holiday was at hand. He called my father, and told him that he had reserved a school room for the services. He abolished the curfew; because this was a war zone, due to guerrilla activity. He abolished the, uh, the ban on assembly which they had. You had to special permission if you had... As you normally have to have, in areas of martial law. And so we actually could celebrate Yom Kippur. And he sent a lieutenant as his representative, who gave a little speech. It was incredible.

Q: How many people were there? And describe the scene. We're talking about Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre in a school house?

A: Yeah. This... (PAUSE) I don't think there were more than thirty, forty people there at the time. The numbers increased, but this was very early. This was somewhere in October '41. It was still early. October '41. It wasn't an elaborate service, but... And I don't even know and remember who held the services, who actually led; but there is always somebody you can find, among thirty Jews, somebody who would be able to do it. We could read, after all, Hebrew. We... somebody had, uh, the prayer books. And this was, of course, morally and psychologically, a tremendous boost. And shortly thereafter, we had another proof that they went--the Italians--beyond accepting us, or receiving us, or protecting us; when they invited all of us to a performance given for the Italian troops by an Italian military group of entertainers. And they gave us the place of honor, the first row. And, uh, it was really, I must say, uh, a...a moment that I can't forget. When, uh, we stood up. The Italian national anthem was played. The anthem of an Axis power, of the closest ally of Germany. And here are twenty, thirty Jews as their guests of honor. We couldn't understand it. It was just like a dream. This situation existed until November '42. Almost a year. We studied Italian. We felt safe. We, of course, wrote furiously to those who survived the initial deportations to come to the zone in...in whatever way possible. The connections established with the Italian officers--

that is, the connections we establish with them--were very productive. Because these officers were able to go, of course, anywhere in Croatia. Wherever they wanted to. And they would go by trucks and cars; and bring the parents, bring the sisters and bring the relatives of the Jews who were already in their zone.

Q: And they did that?

A: And they did that. They even used armored cars, in a fake exercise, military exercise; and they did it at first on their own and spontaneously, without informing too much their very high authorities. So that the evidence is episodic, it's in anecdotes. But it is known that so many, that today there is no question that this was... It started from the lower ranks of the Army, just as our sergeant and many other such sergeants or lieutenants. But then it became a policy. It... it received complete approval by the highest levels of the Army and the Italian Foreign Ministry; which we, of course, did not know then. But we know today. Now, we could guess that the pressure on Italians that the Germans and Croats exercised for our extradition was enormous. What right do they have to protect Jews who are not Italian citizens? Because we really had nothing whatsoever in common with Italy. And they fought back diplomatically until November '42, when they felt they have to do something--otherwise, they would have to yield to the Germans or the Croats. They decided to put all the Jews in the Yugoslav zones under the occupation into a camp. Plus several hotels, those regions that were very far from the camp. Tell the Germans we are in a camp. Tell the Germans that a census is being taken to see if any... any one of us might have some claims to Italian citizenship, because Italian citizens were protected. Jewish are not, all the time, at the time. There were even some Italian Jews living in Germany, and the Germans would not touch them. So the Italians used that as a pretext. This was part of a plan, of a consciously designed plan by a so-called rescue committee headed by the highest officials of the Italian Foreign Ministry--Pietromarchi,² D'Ajeta,³ Ducci, several other names, all known today, in the Foreign Ministry⁴--decided that the Jews would not be turned over to the Germans anywhere the Italians had control of the territory. The Italian Army cooperated with this whole-heartedly. In November '42, the Italians arrested all of us, put us on trucks, and we were taken to this camp--still Croatian Yugoslav territory, but under Italian flag. We didn't know again; we thought maybe this is just a stage before our being turned over to the Croats. And, unfortunately, there were two people committed suicide; and the morale was very low. And the Italian commander of...of the Second Army, which is a very high official, he came personally to the camp to give us a speech to reassure us that we would be

² Count Luca Pietromarchi was head of the Occupied Territories Department of the Italian Foreign Ministry.

³ Count Blasco Lanzo d'Ajeta was Bureau Chief under Foreign Minister Ciano.

⁴ Including Vittorio Castellani, who served as liaison officer between the Second Army and the Foreign Ministry.

protected. "As long as that flag flies there, nobody can touch the camp." And we were told that we were free within the camp to organize ourselves; which we did. They gave us the possibility of having a school--elementary and high school--synagogue, social hall. Medical facilities were in...in the camp were primitive, but all serious cases--and there were many--were taken outside the camp into the Italian military hospital. So that, while the camp itself was an ex-Yugoslav, uh, military base for the cavalry--so that we really lived in stables--but it...conditions were harsh but quite tolerable. There was no physical threat. There was no outright hunger; even though the rations were quite small. But we had opportunity to buy food, extra food. There were people with means who were allowed to contribute, and then someone would go to Italy and bring food. The Italian Jewish organizations helped us, because they were allowed to function under Mussolini. So that while we didn't have the ideal nutrition, nobody really starved. After all, we did go to school. I studied English; besides, many other people studied the chess. Our evenings were free, and it wasn't the worst way to spend your days in World War II. Without there, you had the storm of the Final Solution not so many miles away from us. To think today that there were one million children perished; and here, under the Italian flag, we studied Latin and history and the Italian language and philosophy.... It's still incredible that it happened.

Q: How did your family manage in this, under these sparse conditions? What did your parents do? What did you do? Did your father work, for instance?

A: No. My father owned a third of the house where we lived. Two sisters and my father, and we sold the house about two weeks before the Germans attacked. And so we had some capital. My father was near 60, at the time; my mother, much younger. So there was no work. There was only... In Cirquenizza, before we were in the camp, we lived from...from the money that we got for the house. And in the camp, we had some extra money; but there was no work. Everybody had to do something only to maintain the camp. The main thing is that my...my recollection is that there was no fear, because we didn't see any maltreatment, any mistreatment of anyone, any torture, any beating. I...because I went to school, I was detailed to the ...to clean, to the cleaning of the grounds--as were other students. But Italian soldiers also had to work doing the same tasks. So I had a broom; and the Italian soldier had a broom. We worked together. It was this kind of thing that it's hard to imagine. It was a concentration camp, in that it was surrounded by barbed wire; but one where we did not want to leave. In the country, there were people still--late arrivals--who petitioned the Italian authorities to send them to the camp, because it was the only safe place to be--for Jews. (PAUSE) I was also growing up, in a sense, in those years; because I was sixteen when the whole thing started in 19--at the end. I tried to continue living sort of as a goody-goody student; because it was tough to study Latin and so on under those circumstances. But as I say, the feeling of security was such that it compensated for all the hardship. For example, we celebrated Passover 1943. I found a document where the Italian command approved celebration of Passover in the camp. But we had the camp commandant and the other officers as our guests; and they sat in the first row of the social hall, where there were chairs. We had musical entertainment. There were many people in the camp, of course, who could play musical instruments. There were some singers. The Italians were starved for this; because they were

generally...the officers were quite well educated. And here they had an opportunity to listen to Italian opera and Italian songs. And so, it wasn't really a relationship of captors to captured. It was quite close. Again, it would not have been a bad thing for us or anybody to...to...to live the war--as terrible as it was--in that way. Unfortunately, there were always other events pressing that rendered our situation precarious. 1943--just to give a quick overview, in January '43 was Stalingrad. Great reverse for the Germans. Not much later the loss of Africa, North Africa. The Italians realized that the Allies would invade Italy. The Italian army might be pulled back. And they started to worry what would they do with us. They decided to then concentrate all the Jews, not just in the camp where we were--which was one of about two thousand people--but there were also other smaller camps. Not really camps: there were Jewish groups in hotels around the Dubrovnik in the south. To concentrate all the Jews in one camp on the island of Arbe [**Croatian:** Rab]. This island was Yugoslav island. It is still Yugoslavia today; but then it was annexed to Italy. To remove us from the Croatian authorities completely. They proceeded to do this in July 1943. And that camp--again the numbers, they still... No one knows how many there were, because the Italians always quote ...quoted lower numbers to the Germans than the turnovers are the Jews. Said no there were more of us; but I think it was something like three to four thousand in this one large camp in Arbe. July '43 was also the month when Mussolini fell; and September 8th, Italy surrendered to the Allies. And that was the moment of the great danger for us, because the Italians surrendered. The camp now was free. The Italian Army did not manage to arrange for our transfer to Italy proper. The soldiers just threw away their weapons and left. We were free; but the Germans and the Ustaša were not so far. And that was the moment of great danger for us. Fortunately, Tito's partisans took over that island for a while. And in that interim period, most of the...by far, of the camp inmates either went to the mountains, to the mainland; or, as we did, went south toward Anglo-American-occupied Italy. Some are trying to reach Italy in December on the Adriatic, which was pretty fool-hardy to...to try. But we did. Two hundred people could not make it. They were old and sick; and they were found by the Germans and taken to Auschwitz. But, as I said, the great majority of us--almost three thousand-- survived, thanks to the Italian intervention and protection in the years '41 to '43. Which they practiced in the south of France, and in Greece, too.

(Technical Conversation)

TAPE #2

(Technical Conversation)

Q: Ivo, let's pick up, uh, with your story of moving south. Uh, the camp had been opened and you were free. Did you have any contact with Tito's Partisans yourself?

A: Uh, very, very little. Very little.

(PAUSE)

(Technical conversation)

Q: The camp is opened. Some of you went north. Your family now is heading south.

A: Yes.

Q: OK. Tell us about it.

A: We, we knew that the Allies had landed not only in Sicily, but also southern Italy. So that the line from Bari, the major city on the Adriatic coast, was already in Anglo-American hands. Now to get there, one had to go quite some distance--uh, island-hopping, so to say, because there are many islands, in the midst of uncertainty. Who is on the next island? How is the population? Are they pro-German, pro-Ustaša, or what? Everywhere we went, we saw white flags. The poor people on those islands who suffered hunger anyway, they wanted to say they surrendered to whoever comes. They're not going to fight. They were small islands, and I think that helped us. We didn't come as...we just came as a small group. And it's not clear to me how my parents and other, uh, grown-ups managed to arrange. I know it was money to pay someone to take us in a small boat to the next island. The conditions were bad. It was December, and the Adriatic was not, uh, a very calm sea at that time. But this was also good, because German patrols didn't go out very much. So we managed to reach a large island of Vis, V - I - S. On that island there were some British torpedo boats and Partisans; but at that time, the Partisans were Stalinists. Did not allow any contact with the British, so that we could not contact them. Fortunately, there were other refugees--not Jewish refugees, but just refugees. People from...running away from the horrible conditions of the multiple civil wars within Yugoslavia. There were Quislings, the Partisans, the Chetniks and all the other groups fighting each other; and many people just couldn't stand it anymore. So that island was full of refugees. And all I can remember is that at one point all of us were picked up by a British ship military ship. Actually, it was a passenger ship which they requisitioned. And it brought us to Bari. But the British would not let us off the ship in Bari. They directed us to Taranto, all the way in the south of Italy. And from there, we were taken to camps again. The British had camps at the very heel of Italy. And so we landed again in camps. We were fed. We were safe. And the fate that the British ordained for us was to transfer us to Egypt, to some camps...tent camps outside Cairo. The problem is...was that we were then surrounded by refugees; and among those refugees were also former Ustaša and elements. Because the war

was coming to a close; and those days people would then run simply and cross and defect from one side to the winning side. And we decided to get out of that camp in Italy now. And that was possible. We had to sign some papers; and then by train came to Bari, Italy--which was under the British Eighth Army. So that this was really then the liberation, in a sense, for me. We were then safe.

Q: What did you do in Bari? You were _____ in Bari?

A: In Bari, the British Army employed masses of refugees--and later also Italians, who were only considered co-belligerents--for all kinds of duties, from menial to duties of translators. I got a job within one week with the British Field Security as translator and typist; because I knew English by that time, having studied very hard in the Italian camp. I didn't know what it sounded like, but I still knew it. But by that time I knew Italian and Serb-Croatian and German; and there were always questions and documents and, uh, interrogations of...of prisoners. And it was chaotic, to say the least, also in that time. And they needed somebody to do it. So that was a job which then paid and gave us rations. It was very easy, in a way, it seemed, to make a living. My mother got a job. She worked for a British outfit called Toch-H(ph), which served tea and crumpets to the British officers and commissioned...non-commissioned officers, too. So she got a job there because she knew English from before. And finally, my father even found employment in censorship. Uh, they had a vast Censorship Office; uh, and he would read all these letters. And sometimes letters by people that he knew. And he would just say, "Hello, here are my greetings," and "Why are you writing so much?," or whatever. Those were very good times. Now we were in Italy. Uh, all I thought of was to resume my life somehow. But as I say, there was, of course, physical safety. And then the gratitude we felt toward the Italians, and the way the Italians even then received us. I, uh, studied for my high school, for Italian high school final exam--which is not very easy. So I studied at night with a professor while I worked. And, uh, again, they ...in the test, the test they gave me, the oral test, they chose questions that they knew I would answer with greater ease than some others. They didn't ask me obscure questions about Italian history, but something that they felt I could answer. So their attitude toward refugees are people in trouble carried through. Even though at that time, for example, there were great difficulties with Yugoslavia; because Yugoslavia wanted Trieste. And we were...Yugoslavs would have been enemies of Italy. And they never were very friendly, because the two countries have always had a great deal of difficulty because of Dalmatia--coveted by Italy, and so on. And yet, on a personal level, I never experienced that. I spoke very good Italian, which helped; because if you speak Italian, the Italians generally will feel this is quite an honor to them. Somebody took the trouble to study the language. So my difficulties were over. But I didn't yet quite realize how rare the Italian gesture was, because the full impact of the Holocaust was not known. I'm talking now about 1944, '45. It wasn't known. It came out differently and slowly; and gradually, one realized what...what really happened. And what could have happened to us.

Q: Bari. You stayed in Bari for how long?

A: I stayed in Bari from January '44 'til 1946, somewhere '46.

Q: Where did you live?

A: Lived in the middle of a city, in an apartment. The apartment was assigned to us by the British military authorities that assigned empty apartments to refugees. Because many Italians had fled. Fled the bombing; or many Fascists fled, thinking that they would be punished if caught. So there were many apartments free. So we lived there in this assigned apartment. I'm sure the rent was almost zero. I worked, in the beginning; and this was enough to feed us, because I got rations plus money. And I then got another job. After the job with the Field Security, I got a job teaching English to Yugoslav partisans who were in hospitals all around Bari. So I worked for the British Council, which is like the Voice of America. It is a similar organization. Uh, and they paid quite well. So I...we were able to really be independent.

Q: It sounds as if you lived really fairly comfortably.

A: Yes, I...I think we...we did. Because with two of us working, and then three of us working, surely. Then came the end of the war; and then the British Council closed its doors, and I went to Rome. Someone told me go to the American Joint Distribution Committee. I went there, and it was early in the formation of the Joint. I'm using the word "Joint" - it's the American Joint Distribution. Was...and they said, "Yes, you can. You'll work for us. If you know these languages, fine." So I moved to Rome; and my parents then moved later, a little bit later. And I worked for the Joint Distribution Committee from '46 until '48. I was an administrative secretary in the HaSharot Department. We dealt with the refugees of the, of the Brichah, the...the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust who sought to go to Palestine--later Israel. They reached Italy from Poland or Russia, from all the other camps; but before that, they were housed in various places in Italy. And then they would generally secretly embark and hope not to be intercepted by the British and taken to Cyprus. Well, I worked in that department, in an administrative capacity to somebody; and did translations and dictations and so on, visiting those HaSharot, listening to...to what they needed, their needs, their requests, making out requisitions and so on. This was until 1948.

Q: Tell me... Talk about the Joint during this period. You were really in the middle of all this. What was the organization itself like during this period and what kinds of things did you do? Let's talk about the organization first. What it was like? How big was it? How active were the people who worked for it?

A: The upper management came from the United States; and, uh, the, uh, middle management and support staff was all recruited from refugees. Not so much locally, not...not the Italians; but refugees, uh, who came from various countries of Europe. The Yugoslavs were very numerous, because obviously there were many Yugoslavs who found themselves in Italy. But there were Poles, and Germans and Austrians, and so on. There was a very mixed staff. The activities that had to deal with the actual illegal immigration were not known to me.

They...I mean, they...they kept it well hidden. I mean, I did not overtly have you know anything. I...I only surmised that something was going on; when suddenly, two HaSharot were closed and nobody was there. But it had to be done this way, because the British of course didn't just want to intercept the immigrants or potential immigrants at sea. But they pressured the Italian government to use their police surveillance to prevent the embarkation of Jews bent on...on breaking the blockade to Palestine. So it had to be really kept very secret. And I know it was because none...none of the co-workers that I remember knew anything about it. There were a few individuals, I remember, who were Sabras; and they were, I think, in charge of that. And they did not have a clear job. It was never clear to me what they were doing; but they spoke perfect Hebrew, and they looked to me like the kind of guys who could and would organize and had no fear. Very decisive men, who could not only lead a meeting but also lead people at night through a mine field. That much I...I still remember; but I didn't have direct, any direct work. I didn't take part in that. (PAUSE) The question was for everyone, when the war ended, what do to, where to go. We didn't want to go back to Yugoslavia--which was at that time not just Communist, but Stalinist Communist. And we just couldn't. Certainly my father would not go, and I would do whatever he said. At that time, I wasn't on my own; and I never had any desire to go there. The question was Palestine or Israel on one hand, or the New World. But out of Europe. Many people wanted out, just out. And, uh, I received a Hillel B'nai B'rith scholarship in '48, which then decided. And the decision was made then for me, obviously, that I could go and study, make up the lost time. Because somehow, in the narrow vision, that's all I saw--that I lost these years, and I had to make them up. That was the main thing. Especially after the shock--which was a big shock to me--that now that I survived, I really couldn't go back. Because I always wanted to go back. I mean, in my dreams or in my feelings and hopes, that if I survive, the war is over, we're only a few miles from Zagreb, we will go back. And I'll find some friends; and, uh, somehow you go back. I never thought of really leaving while I was under the Italian control. But then afterwards, it became clear that there was no back, that there were no friends. Because Croatia, that independent state of Croatia we talked about, the Ustaša Croatia, contained about thirty thousand Jews. But no more than, uh, fifteen percent survived. So really, even apart from the regime, there was no real going back.

Q: It must have been very hard.

A: This was very hard. It was very, uh...in a way it was, to realize that you're in exile, in a sense. Because it is, after all, we couldn't go back. We could have. But in 1948, when Tito broke with Soviets and allowed the Jews to leave, practically all Yugoslav Jews left for Israel. Not all, but practically all. They just weren't happy there. But not because of any antisemitism, but just the conditions. After all, the conditions were just the way they are today in Poland or East Germany and so on.

Q: So you had this B'nai B'rith scholarship?

A: Yes.

Q: To where?

A: To the University of Illinois. I said I wanted to study engineering. And, uh, then they gave scholarship to quite a few individuals who had to prove that they knew English, and so on and so on, and finished high school. Which wasn't easy in Europe to achieve. But they choose...they chose the school; and they sent me to the University of Illinois in 1948. And I, uh, studied electrical engineering, and I graduated in 1951 because I had some courses. I...I went to University in Bari and took some engineering courses also. So they recognized that. And I went summers, and speeded up.

Q: Did your parents come with you, and how?

A: No. That was probably the worst thing, uh, in our lives. That we were together during the war, and could not really be together afterwards. Because they were...applied for, on a quota, for a visa to get to the United States; and, uh, there was a spot on my father's lungs. And an American doctor said this is TB. And from that moment on--no matter what other doctors said or what other tests were conducted showing that it's a dead process, not an active process, because my father was a heavy smoker--that original decision could not be rescinded. But my mother was forced to come here so she would not lose her place. She came in 1949 to the United States. Had to leave him there. In 1949, he was already 66 years old; and he could never get this entry visa, even though later on he came as a visitor. My mother went there from back to Italy. By that time, they had no more money. They had no more way; you know, it was difficult. I was going to school here, and so they were getting some help from, uh, United Nations refugee organization, UNRRA. But we had relatives in Israel, and they told them to come. So they went to Israel in 1954. And I became a citizen here in 1955, and so I was able to then leave and go and visit them. But, uh, those were great efforts. And I tried to... You know, the x-ray pictures were sent to me; and I showed them to doctors here, and they were all unanimous and said, "No, this is obviously not an open process. And even if it were, so what? I mean, the man can be put into a hospital in under observation." But they wouldn't let him in. This was part of a...at that time, of an effort to let as few Jews in as possible; which according to ...which is...which was true according to, uh, research that was done much later. I myself came under the displaced persons law, because I came as a student. Even that was not easy, because for me to come to the United States I had to have a student visa. I couldn't get an immigrant's visa, because I...my...my number wasn't up. To get a student's visa, you have to have a national passport. So that if you commit a crime, the United States can send you back. But I had no national passport. I had to renounce my Yugoslav citizenship. I was stateless. How can you then get a student visa? So again, the Italians said, "Well, we'll give you a statement that we will let you into Italy if the Americans push you out." And that should convince the Consul that he could give me the visa; which they did.

Q: So you came here. You went to school.

A: I went to school in Illinois; and stayed one more year to get a Master's. I almost got it, but I

didn't quite get it. And then I went to New York from, uh, Illinois and started working.

Q: As an engineer?

A: As an engineer. And then got other degrees at night; which was for many years I got the Master's, and so on. And then slowly thinking and rethinking all those events, I became more and more interested in--not only my past, but in this aspect of the...the rescue. The...the Italian story.

Q: Thank you. It's quite a story. Ivo, I'd like to back up a minute. The island-hopping you did in order to get to Bari, from the camp to Bari. Can you describe it in a little more detail? Uh, we don't uh... Did people take out sailboats? Did you do this at night? How was this done?

A: This was mostly...mostly small motor boats and sail boats. Mostly. It's all I remember. There were maybe five or six islands, when I was island-hopping, before the big one. I remember, on one island we were so...we were tired. We somehow found our way to...to the local teachers--a married couple. They gave us their bedroom to use for that night. I don't know how, because I was not involved. It was all, again, in the hands of, you know, my father. There was always a leader in a group; because we were a part of a small group of people. And then there was another group and they came to the same island, and so you have a group, so to say, travelling. And the last big hop to the big island, where the British were, there we had a big boat--70-ton fishing boat. And, uh, the sea was very bad, and there were too many of us. It was awful. What they did is, they left the older people in the hold; and us, the younger ones, they lashed us with ropes on the...uh on the deck, so we wouldn't be washed away by the waves. And the sea was mined; but the mines were much deeper than this small boat, relatively small boat. Seventy tons is not very big. So we were also safe that way. And I actually, again, profited by that; because being out in fresh air, even though there were waves and it was scary, but I didn't get so sick as the people down in the hold. But I don't have any clear specific, you know, incident to relate.

Q: And you have no sense of how this was organized, or how it was done?

A: It was done... No, it was done on a day-by-day. There was no...that we would line somewhere. So the man who, the local fisherman or someone, who brought us there would be paid; and we...we tried to sleep somewhere on the ground, or some house or school. And then, maybe, find somebody else. Again, we have some money or clothes. I remember, we gave some clothes. In fact, my Bar Mitzvah blue suit was given away, I think, on one of these islands--as a contribution which was more important than money; because money really didn't mean much at that rate. People, again, wanted clothes, gold, food and so on. But I don't have any specifics; recollections of an interesting incident.

Q: When the British interned you, as it were, uh, again... How... You never, in fact, got taken to Egypt. You were...you were... what was that like? You were under the British control.

A: We were in a camp.

Q: What was that camp like? The British camp.

A: We were housed in hotels and abandoned villas. We slept on the floor, stone floor. Uh, it was typical refugee, refugee-type situation. You know, if you can imagine the Red Cross... When people are evacuated--the disaster, you know, make-shift quarters. But we were fed. Uh, and I don't know how many people there were; but I think this was a pretty large camp. It wasn't only Jews. In fact, mostly non-Jewish refugees from Yugoslavia. Uh, we heard--but we were not told, we heard-- this is in rumors, that the camp was destined for El Saff. That was the place somewhere outside Cairo. And I remember my father said, "No. Not one more camp. If we can get out of here, let's get out of here. Somehow we will be able to live in Italy." Because uh again, this wasn't something that we knew, but we felt it's...it's possible. It will be possible to make a...to exist, rather than in the camp. Only proved to be true. But we had no contact with the outside world. Although there was... I'm sure that many things were going on; and Jewish organizations might have been active, the Italian-Jewish. I didn't know, I did not know that. I was still a little dizzy. I was...

END OF VIDEOTAPE

... Well, the main thought is that I'm glad now that, uh, that the Italian contribution to the rescue is now becoming known. Even though it involved few people, compared to the tremendous tragedy of the Jewish nation. Still, there were so few positive episodes in the Holocaust that this one had to be recorded, made known. And I'm glad now that I see that books are coming out and articles, research is being done; that this is finally, after 40 years, becoming known.

Q: OK. Ivo, thank you very much.

A: You're welcome.