United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Cornelius Loen
May 11, 1991
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Cornelius Loen, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on May 11, 1990 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.

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.

CORNELIUS LOEN
May 11, 1991

Q: Would you tell me your name please?

A: My name is Cornelius Loen. It's spelled L - O - E - N.

Q: Where were you born and when?

A: I was born in uh Yugoslavia, town Novisad in uh May the 2nd, 1922. A long time ago.

Q: Tell me about your parents and your family, before the war. I want to know about your childhood.

A: OK. Uh my father was Jewish of course, and my mother was gentile, and uh he was director of a large insurance company. Had a very nice childhood, lived in a beautiful home, uh had uh two brothers...I was the younger...was uh born in uh, my brother Otto was born in 1920 and my older brother was born in 1914. (cough) We uh...let's see...went to school of course. High school later and college in Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia. In 1939 war broke out...

Q: Let's not...let's stop...let's not go quite there. I want to know a little more. Tell me, tell me about your home life. What was it like? Did it make a difference to you, being part Jewish and part non-Jewish? How were you brought up?

A: Not really. Not really. As a matter of fact, uh I would say that uh most of uh my friends were Jewish. Uh my father being Jewish uh we were raised uh more or less...my mother, of course, converted to Judaism and uh so therefore we were raised in uh Jewish spirits. And uh I would say most of my friends were Jewish boys. (cough)

Q: What kind of things did you do as a as young as a young boy, as a child...uh the school you went to. Tell us something about the school you went to and the friends you had?

A: Went to school, as I say, went to high school in uh my home town, in Novisad and uh in summertime, vacations we used to take of course every year. We went to the Dalmatian coast uh and uh Switzerland uh in the uh 1930's as a kid, uh which was beautiful of course. And uh we had a governess in uh my home so uh at an early age we were uh taught speaking German besides of course Hungarian, which was my uh sort of mother tongue. My mom spoke Hungarian. My father spoke Hungarian and then of course in school we started uh learning Yugoslav uh language, Serbian or Yugoslav, so as a kid we spoke uh three languages and then uh we had a governess in the house to...French...we learned French from a Russian tutor. We had a lot of Russian immigrants from the Czar times in Yugoslavia and they were teaching French. They all spoke French fluently so we spoke French also. English I hadn't spoken as a young kid and I started much later in my 20's. I had a teacher in uh Budapest. As a matter of fact, an Englishman... took my first lessons. Later on, of course, I

learned more and then came to the States, of course.

Q: Did you...what what was it like being a Jew in Yugoslavia?

A: Uh, I would say you didn't really feel it, being a Jew. There was uh in in Novisad itself you...there was no anti-Semitism to speak of. We had a beautiful temple. Matter of fact uh the synagogue was uh one of the nicest synagogues I've every seen. Old synagogue, which incidentally was uh built by my mother's father who was an architect, gentile. Indeed, it was beautiful. It was separated for women, _____(ph). It was just a beautiful, beautiful building. It was never destroyed by the way during the war. The Hungarians came in. They never destroyed it. As far as I know it still stands. But, of course, there's uh...now there's there's no, hardly any Jewish left in...I don't know what they're using the building for, but it was beautiful. And as I say, as a child we didn't know what it meant to be uh Jew or non-Jew...they're all mixed and uh it was really a very normal life. A very healthy and beautiful life.

Q: When did this start to change?

A: Well, of course, it started to change as a matter of fact even...let's see...in school when Hitler started, you know, in '36 and then '37. We had in my class in high school we had some uh native Germans, you know. They called them schwabs (ph). The German minorities and they already started, you know, uh sort of uh secretively first uh German sympathizers and uh talking loud and proud, you know, about the Germany and Hitler and you started feeling a certain extent already uh but uh even then it wasn't too bad, but of course when the war broke out...let's see...in '39...I would say...let's see...in '39...then in '41 it was not too bad in in my town, but when in '41 the Hungarian army came in and occupied uh the territory...there was northern part of Yugoslavia where I lived...Voivodina, and uh then uh of course when they came in they started uh...we were, as I...well...as I said I was half-Jew, right. But they were, regardless, the half-Jews and the Jews uh had to go to camps, to labor camps in uh the surrounding areas. Just working every day, but we came home at night. The real trouble started in 1942. In 1942, we heard some rumors...it was in January. It was a very cold winter, one of the coldest we ever had. If I recall it was like uh...with the celsius now, twenty-three below zero which was terrible. The Danube River was frozen and we heard some rumors that uh Hungarian gendarmes are murdering Jews in the neighborhood cities. We couldn't believe it. We said it's just, it's just rumors. Nobody took it very seriously. And on the 23rd of January, there was a proclamation over the radio that no Jews or half-Jews can leave their homes. Everybody has to stay home. Still didn't realize what this all meant, but of course we couldn't leave. Then sometime in the morning uh my neighbor's, maid came over. She was a Hungarian girl. She walked across the street and she come to my house and she said that she heard some rumors. They saw some vans, some big trucks, and they saw blood in the trucks. So we still didn't realize. We still this...this is rumors. Must have been cattle or something. Then I remember around eleven o'clock in the morning, the doorbell rang. If I recall I opened the door...there was three Hungarian gendarmes and uh...OK...they opened the door. They came in. The first thing they did...uh we had a maid also...first thing they asked the maid -

how is your boss? How are they treating you? And she said, oh, very fine. Then they came into the house. They spoke to my father. One of the officers went in to the library. We had a big library, a lot of Hungarian books. Oh, he says...you are Hungarian. He said yeah, you know, we're not Hungarian. We read Hungarian literature and as a matter of fact I have uh a cousin in in in Budapest who's in the Hungarian army, which happened to be true. Not that it meant too much, but uh...and I still didn't realize the danger. I didn't know what's happening in the city, you know...what's going on. And they asked a few more questions. They talked to my mother. Dadada. And they left. So that was all. So we didn't know. A few minutes later my aunt, my mother's sister, who's also gentile but her husband was Jewish...she came over crying. They took her husband away. So, so we didn't know. We still...you start worrying but you still don't know what's happening. And in the evening, that evening, we heard rumors that people were getting killed and actually those trucks were carrying people and the blood was human blood. Well next morning we found out what happened...about uh fifteen to two thousand Jews were murdered, including...my uncle across the street was not murdered. He was saved luckily. He was already down on the Danube River being ready to shot and at the last minute came an order from Budapest, from Horthy's uh headquarters, to stop the the killings. But another uncle, another aunt...uh two uncles matter of fact, two aunts, their daughter, everybody was killed. They were taken down to the Danube River, shot and thrown into the river. They had to dug a hole because as I said it was frozen. Then it was frozen so they had to dug a hole and throw the bodies into the river. The only survivor was the dog. Their little dog was crying the next day...we went over there to see what happened and the table was all set for lunch. The food, everything was on the table...it was terrible. The dog crying. And then you heard the stories. Then you heard, this was killed, who was killed, what was killed. Some people were not taken to the Danube like down the street there was a house, a good friend of mine who was my teacher at one time...they were killed in the house. Shot from close range. And then, you know, we heard that this friend and this friend was killed and we didn't know about the Serbs (ph) yet. Then we heard that the Serbs were killed also. A lot of Serbs, a lot of Serbs were killed. It was horrible. It was January 23rd, 1942, but that was only one day that they did the killing in my town. And then everything stopped. Then a few days later we decided to leave my hometown, Novisad, and we went to Budapest, the capital of Hungary, and there life was still quite normal. We lived in an apartment. My aunt lived there, who was gentile and uh my uncle of course and her family and we uh uh rented an apartment house in Budapest and uh lived there oh quite normally for about uh I would say nine months, ten months. Then uh one day they said...again it was in the papers... everybody who is Jewish or half-Jewish, you know, has to register...police department I remember. And I went down. I registered. They said that uh in a few days we have to leave. They didn't say exactly where in a certain camp and then when we went down there we got a white band so that distinguished you from a full Jew, from a hundred percent Jew...the white band. No star. Just a white band. And then we were taken, we were transported to uh a Hungarian town, Hajduhatasza (ph) was the name...about uh oh hundred kilometers uh south from Budapest. Was a camp sort of. We worked there. Hard work, unloading uh railroad cars, building railroad tracks, you know, and uh just work everyday. We had food. We had food. It it wasn't really bad. I was uh I can honestly say that at that time we were not really suffering there. However, uh in the very beginning as a matter of

fact we were even permitted to go back to Budapest on the weekend, you know, to see our parents and ...

Q: What was Budapest like at that time...when you went back?

A: Normal. Normal life. Budapest was still normal life. And uh the Jewish were still living, you know, in pretty normal circumstances. And then I uh recall one time when we went home on a weekend, I saw a train coming from Budapest and it stopped at the station next to our train...see, and...let me see now...that was the year after, I'm sorry. Now the year after, when I was still going home and this train was coming, and it was full of people, and at first we didn't know...it was all locked up, the train...you know, those cattle, cattle cars. It was locked up and we saw people in the windows and crying and asking for water...then we realized...Jews from Budapest, transported, you know, to Poland. We didn't know where they were going, you know...we found out later. They are taking them to Auschwitz. It was a horrible sight. Uh and as I say, then after one year we couldn't, of course they stopped us going back. They said we couldn't go back any more to Budapest, and I was in the camp and from then on...that was...let's see...from '42 to '44, but uh we you know, we were moved from that area to another area which was near the Romanian border. Also same type of work. Luckily we had a pretty good commander. Our commander was a pretty nice guy so uh we were not uh really suffering too much. Some camps were worse off than ours. In uh...let me see now...this is '44. Yeah, and then one day of course I heard uh the the German troops, of course, the German troops were going through our village and uh one day uh a German train stopped and I was talking to this uh German officer...spoke German, of course...and uh asked him what's going on and he told me he just heard that uh the Americans landed. It was June 6th, 1944. But he says we aren't worried. He says, you know, we are very confident, he said. And of course he didn't know who I was really so he was talking to me like nothing was going to happen, you know. Was in 1944. Uh now uh about uh...let's see...a few months later, see as the Russian armies were getting now closer already to that area, I had a friend of mine, an older...about seven or eight years older than I was...told me that uh one of these days now, Cornel, he says we are going to escape. We cannot stay here any longer, because eventually they're going to take us from here to some place else and, you know, we don't know what's going to happen, so we cannot stay here. You know, his plans where to take me with him to his hometown, escape and go to his hometown and, of course, he knew that I spoke Russian. And uh in fact the Russian army was coming. He, he .....for selfish reasons but more that he knew that I'm going to be able to communicate with the Russians and which is going to help him indirectly.

Q: What was it like for you at that time in the camp _____(ph)?

A: No. Not really. Not really, because I think that the commander knew that the Russians are...of course, he knew, he knew that the Russians are coming. It was obvious. And he figured if he is nice to us, it's going to be better for him you see. So uh, which was true in a way. But anyway, so this uh friend of mine, one day uh we were told that the train is going to

pull out, oh in about three or four hours and go to some other destination. Didn't know where but anyway we're leaving this this place. So he told me...he says, Cornel - the train pulls out - we're going to stay here and escape at night. And uh the train started pulling out...for a moment I was hesitating because I tried to stay with my younger, you know, friends, with my own age friends, but he pulled my arm. Stay. And we stayed and the train pulled out. We, of course, left the place right away and we went in to the countryside. Yeah, sure. And we took, of course, the bands off but we still didn't look like Hungarian farmers, so uh, you know, you were not a hundred percent safe. Anyway, we went to the country side and we went off the road, off the highway because the highway was dangerous because, you know, the the German troops...they were already retreating and the Hungarians, but they were going on the highways. And besides uh Russian planes were coming and bombing the highways, so we went off the road and uh we were hiding somewhere, you know, in the grass and I remember, at one time they said these troops, the Hungarian troops...they stopped on the highway and the Hungarian...some of the soldiers were coming towards us because we were near a little lake or something, and they were coming closer and closer. So my friend said now let's act very normally and calm, because uh...and they came, they saw us and they said uh, what what are you guys doing here. I said we missed our train. We sold them a bill, bill of goods, you know, and they believed it, fortunately. So later on at night when the sun went down we saw a Romanian...there was a a part of Romania see at that time...we saw a Romanian farmer and we called him closer and said uh please...we didn't speak Romanian but he understood...and says, you know, try to hide us. We have to uh get away, and he did take us in, fortunately. We were lucky. He took us in and we were hiding in his little farm there for about uh three days. He was feeding us ____OK and we heard the Russians, you know, the cannons, getting closer and closer and uh he says when when...today...tomorrow, you know...and he told us that the Russians are celebrating a few miles away, but they're not coming yet. They're still not here, so he can't let us loose see. And oh I think next morning he comes up. He says the Russian and the Romanian soldiers are here so we are safe. It's OK. So we came down from our hiding place and the first thing, the first Romanian soldier I met took my watch, took my shoes, which were not too good but obviously looked better than his...oh yes...you know...we figured liberated, you know, they're going to put their arms around us...anyway, but we were free. We knew we were free. So then we started walking back to his hometown, which was as I say from there perhaps about eighty, ninety, hundred miles. But this guy had these shoes with a nail in his shoes and (laughter) it was not easy to walk but there was not too much transportation and uh as we were walking, of course, we passed Russians and at one time we came to a crossroad and uh some Russians soldiers standing there. And I saw an officer and he looked sort of like could have been Jewish...I wasn't sure but I talked to him, and he says, I'm Jewish, he says. But he says don't say anything because the soldiers don't know that I'm Jewish, said the Jewish officer. The Russian soldiers don't know and doesn't want it to be known, and you don't say anything either. And uh another time also I met some Russians and they they asked...first thing they asked, they said who are you. I said Yugoslav. Oh. Says well how come you're not in Yugoslavia fighting? How come you're here? See, they didn't know what was going on really. So I told him...I said I was in a camp and I was in a forced labor camp and you know, I I just ran away. So we managed and later on as a matter of fact we were lucky enough to uh

get on a Russian truck and uh they took us to his hometown. So we wound up in his hometown which was a small, Hungarian town. It was like normal times. Food, everything. Plenty. Plenty. There was no problem. Of course his wife, she was gentile and they were still all there. Everything was fine and I stayed uh there for about two, three months I believe. And then I heard...somebody came from Budapest and I found out that my parents who lived in Budapest are still alive. And everything is, you know, it's OK there. And about a week later I uh, with a Russian transport, I went to Budapest and as I arrived in Budapest, it was one day after liberation. People were still on the street of course. People are uh dying and smoke all over and they came to our truck and they said give us bread for anything...gold, you know, jewelry. They are starving. People are starving on the street. You could still hear the cannons and everything because the Germans just left Budapest, you know, the day before (cough) and then uh, of course I went to my parent's house. I found out where they live. I came to my parents. You can imagine the reunion. Fantastic. Because you know my mother didn't know exactly you see what happened to me. My uh...then I found out of course about my uh older brother who was in Yugoslavia, in in Serbia, with the Mihajlovic army, that he was killed the year before, uh May 8th, 1944, yeah...he died. Uh let's see, then uh...

Q: Tell us about your mother.

A: Oh, OK. I want I want to tell you some more incidents here in Budapest. It was quite interesting. Uh the Russians, they...I uh I...they fortunately didn't happen, but it could have happened they were surrounding people on the street... surrounding...just people, you know, and taking them in some...I think the church yard or something...and I I I smelled something wrong. Something is fishy, so I asked one of the Russian officers there, what's happening. He said, oh nothing. They're just going to interrogate people. I didn't like the idea so I asked him...I said can you do me a favor. I'm a Russian uh interpreter and I'm working...which was true...I'm working for a Russian officer and he's at this and this address. Would you please tell him to come over here and pick me up. Fortunately he went, and he did pick him up and the Russian officer came and he told the commander in the yard that uh he needs me very badly and he has to release me and he did release me. He saved my life. The rest of the people were taken to Russia. A lot of them never came back. Yeah...horrible. Now you asked me about my mother, because my mother during the war...as I said, she was in Budapest. She was gentile. Her sister was a full Hungarian, a full-blooded gentile. My mom lived with my aunt and she had a lot of Jewish friends in Budapest. She managed to save them. She took those friends to my aunt's house, and they were hidden in the cellar which was, of course, a very dangerous thing to do. If they would have found out, it would have been, meant, you know, the end for everybody. But uh...there was one place and she saved some people in another place also and she was commuting between those two places...yeah...and giving the news. She heard the news over the radio and giving messages and food for several months it was. Because of course as you know, as you remember in in Budapest it was the last two months when the Jewish people were really taken to Auschwitz. I can't remember how many but it was the last four or five months of the war, and she saved uh quite a few uh families, my mom. And of course after the war uh we had uh, it was a big affair in in Los Angeles in uh I believe it was Century Plaza and she was honored as a righteous Christian. George

Pottman (ph) was the MC at that time, I remember.

Q: Dark days (ph).

A: Yeah. Dark days. Dark days in our history. Now of course Mom died a few years ago. She lived to be 94 years old.

Q: Did you ever meet up with the families, any of the people she had saved?

A: Uh, as a matter of fact...no. No, I did not. I did not. I tell you why...because uh uh after the war I I left Budapest. You see, I decided uh, my brother came to the States in 1938, so he was already here, you know, for many many years, and my plans were to leave uh Hungary regardless...we were told it's not going to be good. He says leave as soon as you can. So...but it was not legal of course, so you couldn't get a passport or visa or anything like that. You had to run away. So I...so this friend of mine, we got together...we were together in camp by the way with this friend, an old friend of mine...we got together and we made up our minds we're going to leave Budapest and we crossed the border at night, the Hungarian-Austrian border, that's right. And then we went to Vienna. And we were in Vienna for a few weeks and then from Vienna we went to Linz, Austria and Linz had two camps...two, two camps for the refugees you see. And uh that's where I met Marsha, my wife...that's right. In one of those camps I met Marsha. Strange coincidence. She came from another part of the world. She came from this part of the world and uh in 19...let me see...in '40...I went there in '46 and I met Marsha in later, later part of '46 and we were married in '47 and then we came to the States in 1949, from from Austria.

Q: Tell us about coming to the States, and about your life here.

A: Pardon me?

Q: Tell us about coming to the States and your early years here.

A: Oh, yeah. Well, of course we arrived here in 1949. As I say, my brother was here so we didn't have to wait too long to...fortunately because he was here so we didn't we didn't need any special permits at that time and it took us just about a few months. Oh, I meant to tell you also that because my wife's, Marsha's father survived and he lived, yes, he lived with us in Austria also, in in Linz. He tried but he couldn't come to the States. He went to Canada with his wife, and uh we went here and came to New Orleans. Uh arrived in New Orleans and we were uh received by a Jewish organization and very well in New Orleans. Uh I want to tell you the trip was very rough coming to the States of course. I mean by rough I got seasick. (laughter) Still better than a concentration camp. And uh couldn't eat too much food on the boat. Uh in New Orleans we were received by this Jewish organization, stayed about two days in New Orleans and we came by train to Los Angeles where my parents lived in Los Angeles already. See my mom and dad, they came to uh California in uh, I think in '47 and they awaited us of course with my brother and my uh his wife at that time. And we

settled down pretty fast. It was a different world of course. A new world. A strange world in the beginning for us but it was freedom. Liberty. It was a new start, a new beginning. It was beautiful. Many many years ago of course...pardon me...I got a job in the beginning. First I worked in a motel on Sunset Strip for a while and then uh my brother had a good friend here and he had a shop with optical instruments and I got a job there and I worked there for a few years working for him and settled down and my wife then had a job also. She worked uh on the Sunset Strip also in a knit shop. She was uh handwork...she inherited from her...her father was a great tailor and Marsha inherited that obviously from her dad and she was great with her hands. She was uh...those times, those days I mean they were embroidering sweaters, you know, in mode and then she was working for this girl Suzie, named Suzie, on the Strip. She had a famous shop and she worked for them. She met a lot of movie stars there too. I think Zsa Zsa was one of them.

Q: Cornelius, how do you think the war has affected you, changed your life?

A: It's uh hard to say. As I say, uh I didn't suffer too much during the war. I didn't go through real hell like uh my wife did, you're going to hear later. The good, uh nice childhood, uh nice memories, you know...they say good home. Even after the war everything was uh in good shape. Well-adjusted so to speak. Family was, like parents, of course were alive, survived. Brother in California. It was pretty normal, pretty normal I would say.

Q: Is there anything you want to add.

A: What I was going to say...I don't know if this is interesting uh but in uh Los Angeles just a few months ago, we uh formed a new society with the Serbs, uh a Serbian-Jewish society which uh because you know the Serbian people had lots in common with the Jews. As you see their their destiny is uh the same and uh the the Serbs went through a lot of suffering through centuries also. So did the Jews, of course. And this society we just formed is growing. It's going to grow more and more and of course we...part of it is in in Yugoslavia also...you see, it started in Los Angeles. We formed it but there is a group in Yugoslavia, in in Belgrade. As a matter of fact uh Professor Tabidge (ph) was here from Yugoslavia with his wife, you know, when we organized this whole committee, so they're carrying it on there. And it's I think a great idea. As a matter of fact...yeah...we have some members from Canada also. As a matter of fact I met a gentleman the other day...he was very proud to show his card. He says I just joined the Society. So it's going to be quite uh, quite interesting. It will grow more and more. Unfortunately we was told uh it was told the other day that uh one of our members, the Prince Andrew of Yugoslavia who is the youngest son of uh King Alexander who lived in San Diego, had a residence in San Diego, and he came to our uh meeting about nine weeks ago and joined the group, and a few days ago I found out that he died unexpectedly. He was 62 years old. We don't know how and why and what happened, don't know the circumstances yet. Sad news.

Q: I thank you.

A: Thank you very much.