

Summary of Oral History Interview with Edmund Berger March 27, 1989

Edmund Berger was born in Osijek, Yugoslavia in 1922. His parents divorced when he was eight years old, and he then was brought up by his grandmother, who died when he was 14. In that region of Croatia, there always was latent antisemitism, but there were no particular excesses, and people learned to live with it. He had a bar mitzvah and a general Jewish education. A rabbi, who was an employee of the state, came twice a week for one-hour lessons in Hebrew and Jewish history. In the town, of perhaps 40,000 people, there were about 1,000 Jews. He often spent his vacations with his grandparents in a nearby small town, where there were few Jews, but the young people made active preparation for aliyah. He was a good student in high school but was expelled for the remainder of the year for playing pool, which was against the rules. He continued school in Zagreb. After that, he never returned home, which was lucky for him because it saved him from the fate of his mother and friends who were lost after the Germans entered the town in 1941. Following his parent's divorce, he saw his father, a traveling salesman, during occasional visitations. His father disappeared, and his fate is unknown.

When the Germans occupied Zagreb in 1941, they created an independent Croatian Government under German control. He decided to leave but could not travel legally. Jews had to wear not only the Yellow Star but also a patch on the back to be recognizable from far away. He managed to get to Fiume (now Rijeka) under a false name and then met an uncle in Susak just south of Fiume. That area then was under Italian occupation. The situation was relatively better at first but gradually got worse because of nearby fighting between the Germans and Tito's forces. There was only a small Jewish community in Susak, and his uncle got documents to travel to a concentration camp in Ferramonte (?) near Cosenza in the Province of Calabria at the southwestern tip of Italy. He arrived there in early 1942 and stayed for about one-and-a-half years until the Allies arrived. Life in the camp was relatively good, there was no repression or suffering, because the Italians respected the international regulations for internees.

Most of the about 15,000 people in the camp were Jews; the few political internees were soon taken to another location. The main problem in the camp was a shortage of food, as was the case also outside the camp. For a while, he worked in the kitchen to earn some money for extra food on the black market. He kept himself occupied in the library and studied Italian, French and English.

The situation was entirely different in the concentration camp in Croatia where there were Jews, Serbians and political enemies (communists). They did not have the "facilities" of the northern concentration camps, and people were killed by hand and their bodies thrown into the river. He lost his family there after receiving letters from his mother until 1944, but these details about the camp he found out only after the war.

After liberation of his camp in Italy, he was free to travel and went to Palermo with his future wife Sultana. She got a job as a secretary for the Allied Command, and he began to study chemistry. They were supported by the Joint Distribution Committee. In 1944, he and others had a chance to go to the United States at the invitation of President Roosevelt as a temporary guest before eventually returning to Italy. However, he decided to stay and continue his studies. He went to Rome where he received a doctorate in chemistry in 1946. He married there in 1947.

In 1949, he came to the United States and found a job within a few weeks. He liked Italy, but there was no reason to stay there because he could not have become a citizen and could not have worked as a foreigner.

He does not know much about the resistance movement in Yugoslavia. One of Tito's most important collaborators was the Jew Moshe Piade. These people fought first against groups who still were loyal to the former King and then against the Germans. To work with Tito was the only way for Jews to survive even if they were not communists. Many of them perished in the rough country and harsh climate.

He does not know how his family originally came to Yugoslavia, and there is nobody left to ask. After the war, he visited several times, and he still has a cousin there. The country has political difficulties, many because of tensions between the various ethnic groups.

People greatly depend on tourism in a country that has many beautiful areas. They are very friendly toward visitors, and there is no apparent antisemitism.

He has no particular final comment to offer but wished to express his thanks for the opportunity to tell about Yugoslavian and Italian Jews whose history is less well known than that of other Jewish groups.