

I'm Donna Chernin. Today, we're interviewing Dan Pavlovitch, a Holocaust survivor. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, the Cleveland section. Mr Pavlovitch, we were talking about what happened when your family was suddenly uprooted and sent overnight to a camp.

OK, I think--

We're in Yugoslavia at this time, Belgrade.

What I would like to do is before I tell you some of the things about the camp, because of things that happened during and afterwards, I'd like to tell you a little bit more about my mother. As I mentioned before, it's thanks to her that we are alive today. She was born in the States. What had happened, her parents were from Romania, and somewhere around the turn of the century they came to Chicago. And her father opened up a store on Maxwell Street.

What kind of store?

Dry goods, something like that. And she was working there, and she was-- I remember some of the story. She was keeping books for other stores. I'm talking as a young girl of 14 or 15. And eventually, he made enough money where he felt he wanted to go back and live the good life back in Romania. You know, everybody's got their own reasons for going.

Is that unusual, to return like that?

I have no idea. I mean, I have no desire to go back.

So she returned as a teenager back to Romania after having spent most of her life?

Yeah, her adult-- young adult life in the States. And then she met my father. I know they were married in 1925. And again, some of the things that happened, for instance, one of the things that I happen to think about, how we survived.

I mentioned before that my mother had had a dress store. So she had taken for her own use some of the nicer dresses which, of course, we never-- she never had a chance to use in Yugoslavia because of what we were doing or not doing as the case may be.

You said you had no money then.

Right. And there were a few pieces of jewelry which were being doled out a piece at a time. And then I remember her going to-- this was already the country was occupied. This was in Belgrade. And she would go-- there was a cabaret the name of [NON-ENGLISH], and she was selling these dresses to the girls working in the cabaret. So in other words, this is how we survived.

She took that with her in the suitcase when you were allowed the one suitcase?

Right. This was not for any idea I don't think-- I think it was just as personal belongings. Anyway, we got into the camp. The camp was situated across the Sava river from Belgrade. The Germans called it Zemblin. The Serbs called it Zemun. It's a small, I suppose, village.

And the reason they had chosen this space was that one, or two, or three years before that, they had had some sort of affair. They had three very, very large buildings with very high ceilings that were used for God knows what. So what they did, they had built in three of these buildings what they called blocks. Now, what the block consisted of was a wooden structure with three tiers, probably,

about three feet between each tier. And this is where people were living and sleeping.

So what you had, you had just a room, you know, what you had for your bed roll if you happen to be fortunate enough to have a bed roll or a blanket. And most people had something because by that time you get to know what you try to have at least to survive. And,

the more desirable space was on top, the third tier, only because there was some fresh air up on top.

Would you climb their little ladders to get up there?

Yeah, there were some steps that were made out of wood. The whole structure was made out of wood. I remember my grandmother, because she was elderly, she could not climb the steps. She was on the first tier. We were in the same block up on top.

And the toilet facilities as such, which were not even footprints in the ground, they were outside. And, of course, at night, they were not allowed to go out. So people had buckets. That kind of a thing.

And I remember we probably, or my mother, we brought a little bit of food into the camp, which went fairly fast. I mean, how much stuff could you bring?

Yeah, it would go real fast.

So what my mother tried to do in order to survive-- now, my kid sister wasn't much more than a year, year and a half old. And-- no, she was two years old at that point. She was not weaned yet deliberately. And this is how, probably, that she is alive today because the food there was nonexistent, although they did try for the infants to give them a little bit more-- something a little bit more nutritious than the stuff that was available for the other people-- that is, for the women and the children. I'm not talking about infants.

So what my mother did, I don't know how she did it, but she got herself appointed as kinder kommandant.

What's that?

That is, like, in charge of the children. Kinder, it's the child, and kommandant is commander or something. And she made herself an armband out of some piece of something, and she put a double K in it. And she was involved in trying to do things for the kids.

But the whole idea was so that she could get a little extra food for her own kids. And I remember, again, maybe it's because I was aware and being able to recognize some things even though I was only 13. But I remember some of the grown-ups-- not the children so much, but the grown-ups-- doing things for the sake of getting maybe an extra piece of cornbread. Because the meals consisted of in the morning, and everybody would line up in lines--

Oh, they would line up in the morning to get--

Yeah. And all you got was some tea and a piece of cornbread, but you had to say-- it was-- I'm trying to remember. I think it was around 150 or 200 grams, which in terms-- it's not quite half a pound. Less than half a pound. And that you ate a little bit with your tea, and of course, there was no sugar or sweeteners except for those people who had brought some. I remember we had some saccharin which lasted for a little bit.

Soap was a problem because there wasn't any.

How did you bathe?

Cold water.

So they gave you no soap at all?

No.

One of the things that we're doing for the young infants, they would take some flour with very little grease, burn the flour to give it a little taste, and then add water to and make some sort of a soup. It was considerably more nutritious than the tea for the adults. Then for your main meal, it was a soup of sorts which was basically some frozen cabbage without anything else. It's literally just some boiled cabbage, and I don't even think it was even salted.

And you were metering out your piece of cornbread, and then the same kind of a thing, or like a potato soup in the evening. That sort of a thing went on.

Was this a labor camp or a concentration--

Pardon?

Was this a labor or a concentration camp? Well, let's define what was what. It was a labor camp insofar, like for instance, I went out on labor details every day. Either we were lugging things, or sometimes for periods, I would chop wood for 10 hours a day. And look at the bright side. It gave me tremendous shoulders.

[LAUGHS]

The women were not forced to work.

What'd did they do?

Just sat. There was nothing else to do. So the camp was referred to just as a Jewish camp. It was a juden lager Zemlin, so I don't know if one would call it a concentration camp or a labor camp.

One of the things that I remember,

again, vividly, ever since I can remember, I tended to be, I suppose, what it's referred to as a lone wolf attitude. I do things by myself. And while out on labor details, I remember taking things and trying to contact some of the people on the outside to trade for just food. I remember having some fountain pens, or--

Where'd you get them?

These are things that we had brought with. Like you had a fountain pen, or you had a mechanical pencil, or--

Just thinks that you would have taken.

Just anything that you would trade or barter for some food. And then I remember one day, we came in and so on. Then over the loudspeakers, everybody had to go out and lined up. And the long and the short of it, what happened, there were a few boys who were also on labor detail. And they exchanged some things for food.

One of them felt that he didn't get his fair share. And stupidly, he went and he complained or said something to the SS guard. And just for that, meaning for having gone and just bartered something, they knew none of these kids, or when we went out, that we would escape because they had the rest of the families in the camp. So they felt secure. So you knew you couldn't do anything stupid.

But just because they traded or they bartered for food, they had them dig a mass grave, or a hole in the ground. And in front of these 4,000 or 5,000 people, they machine gunned these kids into--

Just for bartering.

Yeah, for that. So the thing is I know it happened. I know I was there. I still, to this day find-- I don't know whether it's

part of a defense mechanism or not-- I find it very difficult to understand. I mean, I can see if you do something to me that I find hurtful, or distasteful, or something, I would react.

But for this, I can't find a reason. In other words, if you had food and I needed food for myself or for my family, and that sort of thing. If I couldn't work for you to get it, or barter, or something, I would hit you over the head and steal some. I mean, I can understand that. But this thing for just having done this trade, to kill people for that--

Oh, it's so awful.

I cannot accept, at least by definition, human beings doing that to other human beings. There's no-- well, there is no--

Was just by virtue of being born that way.

I think it goes beyond that. I don't think that it had to-- they could have been anybody. They didn't have to be Jews. They could have been political undesirables. They could have been, as they had in some of the camps where they had the homosexuals, and lesbians, and Gypsies, and political undesirables. In this camp, they happened to be Jews.

But this is the kind of thing that I know went on. And this particular case, I was there. I witnessed it.

Was that horrifying for you to see that? Were you living in terror all the time?

I don't think that it made an impact. I mean, there is, I suppose, the initial reaction, the ahh kind of a thing. But I don't think the implications and the full impact came until probably later.

On the other hand, and then here is where the thing comes that I can only think of things and react in terms of on a one-to-one basis, my kid sister was only two years old. And I mentioned that one of the things that I did, I was chopping wood for the guard house. I spoke a little bit of German, not much, and there was a--

You spoke English, too--

--German soldier. Pardon?

You spoke English, too, didn't you? Is that why you have no accent?

English, French, and Romanian. Eventually, I picked up four other languages later on, and this is also part of the thing of trying to survive and become part of the background, not stick out as sore thumbs. Because as we're moving from place to place, we did not want to have people wonder, who are these people, or where are they from?

So you had to fit in.

So you try to blend into the background.

Interesting. Talk about that. It's really interesting. So you spoke German?

Very little at that point. But there was one German soldier who had the regular army, the Wehrmacht uniform. And chronologically, he seemed to be old enough, I guess, to have had a family and so on. And I have no idea why I talked to him, why did I talk to him, but I found myself talking to him and telling him about my kid sister, who was 2.

And I'm sure he was aware about what the food situation, and so on, and he gave me a fresh egg. Now, nobody had seen an egg for three, four months. So then what I did-- now, had he been caught in giving me that egg, I don't suspect that they would have machine gun him, but I would have been, as they say, his tail would have been in trouble.

So he put himself on the line by doing that.

Yes, he did. And then I remember finding some sort of a container that was like a community stove inside these buildings. And finding a container, I filled it with ashes from the stove in the water so that they couldn't see that I was cooking an egg because people would have wondered what the hell did I get the egg.

And you could have gotten in trouble for that.

I suppose, although my main concern was just to keep it cool and keep it hidden. And then cooked it and gave it to Dolly, my kid sister.

Dolly was her name?

Yeah.

Well, did he ever do this again for you, this man?

Mm-mm, no. But the important thing is not how many times he did it.

But he did it.

It's that he did it.

That's a very good point I think you're making. That's right. That he did it that one time, it took--

Considering I am sure that he was aware of consequences.

You know, what's interesting, too, it's like we take--

I cannot think of anything other than on a one-to-one basis.

Yeah, because here he was good to you. You know, we take for granted food. We just offer people, do you want this? Do you want that? Or we throw it out. And here, one egg that a man gave you--

Right.

German, stands out in your memory as having helped your sister.

It was not so much the egg, which of course, was important. I think the gesture in itself was, to me, far more important than the egg because all of the thing that went with it. I think it was trying to do something nice, and I'm sure he was aware of consequences. And yet he did it.

Did you find that the Jewish people were helping each other, or was it more like each person trying to survive?

Some did, and some, it was everybody for themselves.

Were you making some good friends at the time?

Not particularly.

Because you were kind of a loner.

Yes.

And also it sounds like you were protecting your sister.

I remember seeing some people doing things for the sake of a little extra food that I am sure they themselves would not have thought themselves capable of.

Like what?

Oh,

if they would see anything-- there were people who worked, although they were Jews, but they were working for the Germans. And they were sort of in between. They would go and tattletale and do things just for a little reward, and putting these other people into difficult, or problems, that kind of thing.

So it really brought out--

I think what it boils down to--

--the best and the worst of people.

--we really don't know what we will do until we are faced in that particular circumstance.

Amazing. So what was your mother doing through this time?

Well, one of the things that she was doing, and trying to, as I mentioned before, she sort of appointed herself as kinder kommandant. And then, somewhere along the line, she realized that we had to get out, or try to get out. So she devised a plan. Here's the plan. Like anything else, in retrospect, it seems very simple, but it built.

But now wait one minute here. At this point, did you feel your life was in jeopardy?

Well, you knew that something was going to happen.

And so you had to get out because it could get worse than any moment.

Right. So she went to the German authorities and said that she was not Jewish. She had been married to a Jew. See, they knew, because they had the records of my father, he was born in the area and so on and so forth. They didn't know anything about her.

But she was, in fact, Jewish, wasn't she?

Of course. She was an Ashkenazi Jewish. My father was a Sephardic Jew. And then, of course, the Germans are always then, and I suppose to a certain extent now, very impressed by officialdom. In other words, you have to have papers with signatures and stamps. So he says, where are papers?

Said they were lost in the bombing. We were bombed in Belgrade. And of course, they didn't-- they said, let me write to Romania, and they can send--

She said this?

Yes. So what she did, she wrote to friends and gave them, in essence, what she wanted, saying, I am in the camp. They don't believe that I am so and so born so and so, and so on, and so on, and so forth.

So that's how she gave the information.

Right.

She didn't say write--

So what they did--

She didn't say write this for me, because then if somebody--

She did. Says, can I write in once, and these friends are going to get it. So she sent the information saying that they don't believe I am so-and-so born so-and-so, and gave her certain dates. And in Romania, like in a lot of the Balkan countries, with a little money, with these people, these friends of ours did. So they went and they got affidavits signed by people, witnesses, that my mother was so-and-so, which proved that she was not Jewish-- that she was an entirely different person, therefore making the kids half Jewish.

If she had written a different kind of letter that said, I'm trying to get out. I'm trying to say that I'm not-- they could have interrupted that because they could have opened the mail.

This was the thing was, no, no, she wrote and she gave it to them, because we had no access. Post offices we didn't have. I mean, the only mail that would have gone out would have had to be mailed by the German authorities.

So they checked it. So she had to write in a way--

So she actually did give the information the first time around. And this thing came, and they were still hemming and hawing and that sort of a thing. In the meantime, what they had started doing, taking the people out of the camp, about 100 to 120 twice a day. They would have a huge van, like you see these 40 foot trailers, and they would put 100 to 120 people in twice a day.

And then rumors started that these people-- nobody knew where they were going.

How long till the rumors? A couple weeks?

That they were killing them.

But did the rumors start pretty quickly, like after a couple of days?

Yeah, because nobody found-- nobody was able to find out anything. And to this day, again, for sure, nobody knows what happened. I, at least, I don't know. The only bit of information that we found out later in Turkey in 1944 or something like that, that these people were being gassed. That there's no doubt about it that as they were put in the vans, they were being gassed, and then they were dumped in mass graves.

But I don't know. And up to 1944 or '45, nobody had found these mass graves.

So they were gassed in the trucks?

Yes.

And were you not picked because of this--

Yeah, because we were still in limbo.

I was going to say limbo.

My grandmother, there was no way they could do anything. She was put in one of these vans. And I mean, that was the end of her.

But was she-- was wasn't she your mother's mother, or was she your father's--

No, my father's mother.

Oh, so he was considered Jewish, so she couldn't get out.

My mother's mother died in 1935.

So then your grandmother was taken in that group and gassed.

So eventually, it was the end of July 1942.

And about how old were you then?

14. We were out of the camp.

Out of the camp?

Yeah. We were let out. They let my mother and the kids--

Did they say we've seen that you're--

Well yeah, because the affidavits had come, and they accepted them. They were signed, and stamped, and that sort of thing. So they let my mother and the three kids out.

And OK then, of course, other problems. How do you exist? So my mother found a room on the outskirts of Belgrade,

Probably smaller, about 2/3 of this room. And we bought two old mattresses, and that was it. I mean, that was the furniture. And in order to survive, now, my mother still had a few pieces of jewelry that she was selling and trying to survive. And then I became a young entrepreneur.

We had Dolly's little carriage, little stroller, which I dismantled and attached to it a basket. And I would go into the villages and buy whatever was in season, also milk. The profits, quote-unquote-- that was, a portion of whatever I had bought-- would be left at home on the way to going into the city to sell it and develop customers. That was-- we literally ate the profits.

And then with whatever I sold it for, there was enough money to then go buy something else the next day, then take part of it, leave it at home for us to eat, and then sell the thing.

So you had food and a little bit of money that way?

Not money. There was just a little bit of food. And it was very, very little.

Were you going to school at this time at all, or did you just totally forgot about it?

No. As a matter of fact, I only had six years of so-called formal education. And then later on in 1948, I went to Roosevelt College in Chicago.

Oh, that's great.

Which was the only school-- no, there are two schools, that and a military school, that accepted me without having had the equivalent of a high school diploma.

Where was this school? In New York?

No, no, in Chicago. Roosevelt College became Roosevelt University.



Well, you know what I'm just wondering about, I would think a lot of Jewish people would try to do what your mother did. Wouldn't Germans become suspicious of that and say, well, everyone's trying to pose as--

Nobody-- oh, I'm sure that-- but again, they had-- I think it's approach is so important. I think the only reason that this thing worked is because of the positive but devious way that she took in having this information passed.

Positive but devious, that's right. And then having the friends that could do this for her. Because they had to be official.

The friends that did it, they were not Jewish.

So there again you're talking about Christians helping. They were not Jewish, these people. That's really nice.

They were friends who happened not to be Jewish. And again, that's priorities.

That is something that they--

OK. So at this point, what my mother tried to do is for her and the children, the three of us, to go into some neutral territory. So she wanted to go to either Switzerland, which is-- I think that was her main thrust. I have to remember now. It's 1942.

The,

Germans were fighting the Russians. They were moving an awful lot of equipment going from west to the east. The other place that my mother thought would be if not Switzerland to Turkey, which was neutral. So again, how to do it?

That's right, yeah. There were probably, excuse me, not many Jewish people in your situation at that time. They were all having been killed.

I didn't know of any. At that, once we got out, we didn't come across, and we didn't know of any other Jews. So she wanted to go-- and figure, go to Turkey. But how are you going to do it?

Forget about money, forget-- but how? You need travel permits. You need visas. You need all sorts of things.

So she goes to, again, to the German authorities saying, I'm a Romanian. I got to go back with my children. I have no money here. I want to go back to Romania, which was the last thing in the world that she wanted to do.

But she said that she wanted to go there.

Of course. But the only reason she said that because there was an ulterior plan. There's alternate plan B. And she said, no, you can't go because everything-- all the transports and trains are being used for military purposes. And she said, what am I going to do? And says, I have no money here. And, you know, they said, nothing you can do.

And then my mother said, well, if you'll give me papers and visas to go, maybe we could go to Bulgaria and then go up North into Romania, which made some sense. So,

one other thing, again, a little ingenuity. There were still, I think, one or two rings left. And the way she was transporting them, she would have a little jar of something like preserves and put it in there and put it in Dolly's pocket, who was two years old, or 2 and 1/2 years old at the time.

So the official thing was give us papers, or visas, or something to go into Bulgaria, and then we could go up north because traffic-- there wasn't much military traffic going north. And they said, that was OK.

And she knew full well she didn't want to go to Romania.

Of course not. So we got into Bulgaria. And then shortly after we were there, she decided to take the bull by the horn. She went to the Swiss consulate and probably the reason was to visit Switzerland or something as a reason to talk to him. And then she made a value judgment that he seemed to be a decent sort of a person, and she told him, but then again, with reservations.

She told him that she had been born in America. She didn't say that she was Jewish.

That was smart.

Well, it's a question, how much to give. And that she wanted to get to neutral country, neutral territory. And what happened? He put us on a Swiss protection pass.

Interesting.

And then plans were made to go into Turkey.

But did she want to go to Switzerland at first, or Turkey, or she didn't care? Because as long as--

First of all, geographically, you were just--

Nearer to Turkey, right.

--nearer to Turkey.

So she talked with him in order to get the protection-- his protection, kind of official.

So we had a Swiss traveling document. And then my mother told him that we were leaving, and again, this was still war time. There was curfew. So if you were to catch the train, you had to-- in the morning, you had to go there the night before because you couldn't leave if you had an early train. because of curfews, and transportation, and so on.

About what year was this at this point?

This was Spring of '43.

So we were planning to take a train the following morning, meaning that this particular evening we would go and sleep at the train station. And the Swiss consul came to our little flat that we had, and he said that he had information that they were very, very careful at-- they were stopping an awful lot of people, and they were-- in other words, there seemed to be some action-reaction at the border. And his advice was not to go and wait for maybe a few days or a week that things cooled down somewhat.

So he warned you.

Yeah. But my mother said no, we were going to go. And we did go.

Did you have trouble? Was he right?

Well, here's-- this is, I think I mentioned to you before, probably to me the most perhaps frightening moment of this whole thing up to that point.

We got off the train at the Bulgarian-Turkish border, and there was supposed to be a train coming from Turkey, come across the border, pick up, and then it was going to go into Istanbul. We went through customs-- Bulgarian customs. There was nothing other than my mother still has, I said, a couple of rings and a little jar of preserves in my kid sister's pocket.

And it was in a little wooden building perhaps 100 yards or so away from the railroad track. Two civilians come in. They were German. They were speaking German. They were obviously Gestapo.

They opened up everything again. And among my mother's things, there was a notebook with names of people from Romania, and other people that we have met, and that sort of thing. Because a lot of the people that we knew in Romania, they were American and British. There were a lot of Anglo-Saxon names in this book.

That had been born there?

No, no. These were friends. People that we knew, like you have--

Why didn't they have Romanian names? Were they born originally in America?

If they were Americans or British, why would they change their names?

So they were working over in Romania?

Sure, that's all. So they take the book, and they tell my mother that they'll be back, or we're to stay there, and so on. And then this is like a B-grade bad movie. We hear the train-- we see the train come in.

It leaves?

No. My mother said, let's go. We get on the train, and this is like really milking it, but it's true. Waiting God knows, it seems interminably, but waiting might have been five minutes, might have been 20 minutes. I have no idea, really. And then finally, the train starts moving, and I was sure that they were going to stop the train and take us off the train.

And finally, we knew we were OK when we saw the red Turkish flag with the-- so this is how we got into Turkey.

You could have been stopped. If she hadn't said, let's get on the train, they could have come back and said, we are not letting you go.

That's right.

Like that. Or by saying, let's go on the train, you also run the risk of them chasing you and gunning you down.

As I said, this is, to me, that moment from the time that we got on the train until I saw the Turkish flag, meaning that we were physically across the border.

Were you helping her out much, or were you kind of thinking-- were you like the man of the family at this point?

I think probably more than anything else,

sure. I remember I had all sorts of little jobs as a kid of 13.

That she gave you?

No. I went out to earn.

Oh, as an entrepreneur.

Oh, sure. Besides the business of selling vegetables, and milk, and that sort of a thing. I even had a job at UFA, which is the German film agency, as an office boy. This was in Yugoslavia. I also had a job at a confectionery store where I remember my main job was turning an ice cream machine by hand.

So,

basically, what happened, everybody did whatever we felt we had to do. And even later on, and I haven't thought about this in many, many years, there were four of us left. It was my mother, my sister Coca, my kid sister Dolly, and myself. And I'm talking when we were in Turkey and something. At least physically, we were safe.

But even before that, we developed a rather close relationship from necessity, maybe, if nothing else. But the funny part about it is if there was a discussion, or an argument, or a fight, it was never three against one. If, for instance, Coca and I would have an argument--

Coca?

Yeah, that's my--

Cute name. Sister?

--sister that's three years younger than I. And then Dolly would come in and she would take somebody's side. If mom came in, automatically she took the other side, so there was always two against two, never three against one.

That's nice.

Yeah, that kind of thing.

Was your sister-- the younger sister maybe was too young to be aware of what was going on, but Coca had to know.

Yes, she knew.

So was she--

As a matter of fact, when we got to Turkey, we lived as non-Jews. Because this was 1943. The country was pro-German because of economic ties to Germany. They were selling an awful lot of agricultural products in exchange for industrial machinery, and that sort of a thing.

And there was very much concern that Turkey would get involved on the side of the Axis. And there was only-- as things were winding down in 1945, I think 24 hours before the Germans signed the surrender, that rather, Turkey declared war on Germany so they could be on the winning side.

Crafty.

We were living as non-Jews.

Now, did your mother feel guilt about that, or did she try to give you any education at home?

I knew it. Coca knew it. Dolly did not. And because first of all, she was too young.

How old was she then? About four, five?

Let's see. 1943, she was probably all of four.

Well, did you or your mother feel guilty or bad about it? I mean, you had to do it to survive.

It was just there was no question of guilt about it. One little thing that was-- and she started going to school there. And I think this is about maybe a year or so later--

Dolly, this is?

--might have been five or six-- no, Dolly. And Coca went there to the American College. I was working for the Office of War Information as a translator. Because in the meantime, I had acquired these other languages.

But in the case of Dolly, she came home one day and asked mom. Says, mommy, what are Jews? And I remember my mother's answer. Said, they're very nice people.

Oh my God.

Now, she-- Dolly did not know that she was Jewish until much later, about 1950 perhaps.

Really, not until she was until 12 or so?

My mother and she were in Israel trying to make their way here. But that's a different story.

So interesting.

Until-- in other words, because until '45, there was concern that, as I said before, that Turkey might end up on the side of the Germans. So then we lived as non-Jews.

Did she ever say to you I feel bad I have to do this, or she just-- it was survival, it was just a matter of had to do this. People that didn't were killed.

First of all, really, I don't understand your question. Why should one feel bad? What one was trying to do was just survive.

Well, at home was she saying--

There was no guilt. I don't understand.

Well, some people would die because they wouldn't do something like that. I mean--

I think it's a matter of priorities.

Life is more important, then.

I think so.

I would think in a similar situation, I would do the same thing.

I think so. I mean, I think perhaps to some people, that might have been more important, but I think that's stupid.

Yeah, they aren't alive at all.

I mean, that's a matter of priorities.

Were you doing anything religious at home?

No.

So you were just kind of-- were you actively going to a church, or just doing nothing and just saying we're Christians?

As a matter of fact, apropos of this, while this was in, well, Belgrade, I believe, yes. My mother pretended she was Christian. And because-- and again, you have to understand her thinking.

This before the camps? Is that right?

No, no, no. This was after the camp when we got out, or she was a Christian, quote-unquote.

Before you got to Turkey?

Yeah. But she chose as her brand of Christianity that she was a Catholic. And there is a reason for it. In Romania, 99% of the people are Greek Orthodox-- the Christians.

But she chose to be a Catholic because most Germans are Catholic. Therefore, she thought there might be more empathy that they would help a Catholic more than they would a Greek Orthodox.

Oh, is that interesting. But did she feel that she'd have to know about Catholicism that they could question her?

I'm coming to that. The thing that it's funny, occasionally, because of the circumstances, she would have to cross herself on occasion. Yet a priest, a Catholic priest, she was crossing herself the opposite-- the Greek Orthodox crossed themselves one-- in other words, this way, and the Catholics do so, it's the reverse. And he, for some reason or other, called her attention to it in a very nice way.

In other words, he may have suspected something, but I think, again, it was a question of another human being helping another human being.

Now, was he German-- a German priest, or--

No, this was in Bulgaria. I have no idea what his ethnicity was. We did not inquire into it.

But he kind of let her know that she--

That she was doing it wrong, yes. So again, this is--

Interesting little things that happen.

--where you pick up little things and where-- where you find humanity in a lot of different places and a lot of different levels.

So then when you were in Turkey, you were working.

When I got into Turkey, my mother went to the American consulate, and she got work as a translator.

Now, what languages did your mother know? I was--

My mother spoke English, spoke Romanian, spoke German, a little bit of French.

That was basically it. So she started translating things from Romanian into English, and English into Romanian, working for the American consulate. I remember I got a job working at the-- they had a YMCA in Istanbul. I worked there for a little while.

After that, I got a job. There was an American Hospital, and I was doing a little work in the supply room. And then I got a job as-- I was 15 already-- at the Office of War Information as a translator translating from Romanian into English. And what the job, as such, consisted of listening to broadcasts in Romanian, and translating them, and turning them.

And that was not only broadcast from Romania, which was German occupied. There were three basic things that I was listening to-- the Romanian broadcasts from Romania, Romanian broadcasts from Russia, and then there were some clandestine stations which, obviously, they were supported by the Russians, the communists. Their whole thrust was directed to people who worked in the oil fields that every time they would go by a pipeline and it had a valve, give it a little turn so there is less and less fuel available for the Germans. That was the thrust of that whole thing.

And sometimes, those were mobile broadcasting stations because many a night, they were not there. They were probably shuttling or running back and forth, and that sort of thing. And I remember within about a year, a year and a half, something, again, because of having lived in the various places, and perhaps of the observations of what I felt made people react,

one other department in the Office of War Information, what they did, they were taking news of the world, or news from the States, or war news, and that sort of thing, translating it into various languages of the countries that were occupied by the Germans, and broadcast them in the appropriate languages. And it occurred to me that with the same-- obviously, all these things besides information we were trying-- or the Office of War Information was trying-- it was a propaganda. Let's face it.

But it occurred to me that it was more receptive and more sellable by either overemphasis or by withholding things. And again, from having lived a little bit of time in Bulgaria and having spent some time in Romania, and in Yugoslavia, that I felt that the Romanians would probably be a little bit more receptive to romanticizing it a little bit, perhaps a little sentimentality as opposed to the Bulgarians. They were very pragmatic, and therefore, appealed to them from a just simple,

what is the word I'm thinking of, just that it would be to their economically-- it's better for them economically to accept certain things. In other words, be more materialistic, perhaps.

Who would be more materialistic?

The Bulgarians. And the-- his name was Moore who was the head of this department, he bought the idea. And then I did some broadcasting from Radio Ankara.

Where you would actually do the broadcast?

Yes. And even I was doing my own writing, a kid of 17.

That's amazing. How long were you in Turkey all total?

From 1943 till September '48.

So that's a long time.

Yeah, about five years.

You must have picked up Turkish, too.

No.

No? What language were you speaking in Turkey?

I always found somebody that spoke either French, German, or English.

How did you learn those languages, French, German, and English?

Well, at home, we spoke French, and spoke English and Romanian, and picked up German along the way. So picked up

Serbian, which also a little Bulgarian, which is very similar to it. Picked up a little bit of Greek while we were in Turkey, and a little bit of Turkish.

Now, was there any desire to go to Israel, or would that have ruined your plan?

None whatsoever.

That would have made you look like you were Jews.

Apropos of that, I have never had any desire then or now to ever visit Israel.

Weren't you there, or was it--

No, my mother and kid sister were there.

So then at this point, in a little while, we'll talk about what happened after that. Did you just have a-- looking back, do you have a good feeling about Turkey, those years there? Did you feel a foreigner?

Some parts I have made-- I still have my best friend from Turkey lives now in Paris. And we visited them. We took our kids in 1974 with us to-- to a trip in Europe. And we spent, I think, a week or so in Paris with them.

Is he Turkish originally?

Yeah, he was a Turkish Jew. And that's, again, it's very interesting. This group of friends in Turkey, again, considering time and place, there were people of not only different nationalities or ethnic backgrounds, different religions, and even more importantly for Turkey, from vastly different economic strata.

For instance, Michel's father was a day laborer, and Mimi's father owned half of the real estate in the city of Istanbul.

Now, did they get married, this couple that you're just talking-- these two people, Mimi and--

No, no no. Michel is a man, and Mimi was a man, too.

Oh, Mimi was a man? Oh, really? OK, so these were two friends of yours.

It's a group of seven boys.

Well then, did you hang out with some of the Jewish people in Turkey?

Not as such. I mean, as it happened, Joe Mitz was Jewish. Mimi was Jewish. His cousin, Shep, was Jewish. The other three were not.

It sounds like it was really good. Must have felt so relieved to be out of a camp.

I don't think I thought much about it-- about the camp. Maybe it was a defense mechanism. It was the acceptance that the thing with the camp was done. The war was over, so there was the euphoria that happened after the war was over.

So I never thought much about it to that point.

Or you had gone through? Well, let's take a little break and we'll pick up from there.

OK.