

RG.50-120 #073
KAYON, JAKOV

- 1.01 Jakov Kayon was born in Sarajevo in January 1905. His father, Alexandar, died in 1915 fighting in the Great War [WWI]. He had a difficult youth. There were four children and his mother and it was difficult to make ends meet. The situation started improving when, as a war widow, his mother received a permit to open a special 'tobacco store'. Also, his aunt was married to a captain and they helped them a bit.
- 1.03 Jakov graduated from a business school in 1924 and obtained a job in a bank [Jewrejska Centralna Banka - Jewish Central Bank] where he did well.
- 1.04 In 1926 he was drafted into the army for 14 months. He had to serve an extra five months because he failed the officers reserve test.
- 1.05 After his release from the army, Jakov went to Prague and with help from his aunt living there he obtained a job at the Czechoslovakian Agrarian Bank. He returned to Sarajevo 2 1/2 years later and joined [blank] where soon he became the main bookkeeper. He says that he is a hard working person, good at what he does, and cannot tolerate having someone over him. As a result he went into business for himself. In 1931 he opened a business importing sport textiles, and was rather successful until the start of the war [in 1941 in Yugoslavia].
- 1.07 The interviewer asks about Jakov's early childhood: In his early days before going into the army, Jakov had many friends, both Serbs and Moslims, but he did not relate well with the Croats. He liked all sports and was very active, both as a participant and in organizational leadership. He especially liked hiking and skiing. He had many friends, some very high-placed. [He mentions many and shows pictures.] He was a secretary of a major sports' organization. He claims that he was very happy with his life in the

sports' arena.

- 1.11 At the time of this interview, Jakov was living comfortably, particularly since he started receiving the reparation money from the German government.
- 1.12 Jakov comments that he would classify himself as a somewhat assimilated Jew - never denying his Jewishness since there was no need to deny it - but that he traveled mostly in non-Jewish circles.
- 1.15 Right before 1941, Jakov found himself mostly in the company of the 'left wing', which enjoyed a high popularity among the young people. Once, he was even arrested as a communist although he states that he was not one. His brother and his sister were active members of the Party. Jakov dismisses his arrest as a minor event in his life.
- 1.17 Right before the war Jakov, as all Jews, followed closely the developments in Germany. He was alarmed when the Yugoslav gov't started precipitously leaning to 'the right'. the leaning to 'the right' was evident even in private and financial circles. At that time, [1938] Jakov was a member of a banker's association but, as a Jew, he started feeling uncomfortable in their midst and he resigned.[The interviewer asks about specific examples, but he could not provide them; he just remembers the poisonous atmosphere. The interviewer asks for details about other issues.]
- 1.22 Many Jews did not believe that the Germans were as bad as they heard and they thought that they would not be harmed. At the time Jakov had been in the banking business for about 10 years. Even before the war, Jakov felt that Germans were occupying Yugoslavia 'economically' by selling their goods at lower prices. After the occupation some Jews were still retained in the banks because they were needed for continued operations. This created a false security.

- 1.24 At the beginning of the occupation, Jakov describes his situation. He was keenly aware of the events taking place and their implications. They [Germans and/or Ustashi] had killed 10 Jewish community leaders in the public square and this made an effective impression on the Jews of Sarajevo. Jakov constructed a hiding place in the cellar of the building with piles of coal and wood for the heater. He built a passage behind it and with the help of a lady-friend who lived there, hardly ever left during the daytime. At night sometimes he would go to a nearby 'secure' house where he would meet some of his friends [he mentions names which the interviewer recognizes].
- 1.28 Jakov states that he had opportunities to escape but didn't want to leave his sister who was active in the underground. One day his sister told him of a major 'roundup', and this convinced them to leave and escape to Mostar.
- 1.30 Interviewer asks for details. Jakov tells about his 6 months of hiding [April to October]. His lady-friend was a great help. Although he was lucky that during all that time nobody came near his hiding place, he and the friends he visited at night lived in constant fear. [He describes his plan for escape.] Most of the time the friends would talk or read the Holy Scriptures. The interviewer expresses surprise. Jakov explains that although he was not a practicing Jew, they found passages promising hope and end of evil.
- 1.34 Interviewer asks about escape to Mostar. Jakov tells how he and a distant cousin for some time had been planning their escape to Mostar. They hired a Moslem man who, for money, was helping Jews escape the Ustashi. Jakov describes how this Moslem got Jakov's sister to Mostar by pretending she was his wife. The Jakov narrates the scheme they used to get Jakov on the train for Mostar [somewhat embarrassing].
- 1.40 In Mostar they stayed only 3 days and then, with the help of a Jewish guy they got to Dubrovnik. Jakov tells how in anticipation

of going to Dubrovnik he had shipped some of his goods [from his store?] and by sealing it the life in Dubrovnik until the Italian military rounded them up and sent them to Kupari and later to Rob.

- 1.43 The interviewer asks for description of life in Dubrovnik. In Dubrovnik the life was comfortable. There was this Italian Lt. Colonel who befriended the Jewish community there and protected them from the Croats, who wanted to take the Jews to their concentration camps. There were many Jews who were now located in Dubrovnik or the nearby islands. This life continued until March 1943 when the Jews were rounded up, loaded on a very large ship [Cita di Tripoli] and transported to the island of Rob. When the ship docked in Rob they had a rude awakening. The internees were met by the Italian fascists with whips in their hands. Rob was known as 'death island'; many thousands of Slovenians had been brutally murdered here by the Italians. The Slovenian prisoners were kept in wooden barracks which were full of vermin. The arriving Jews were placed in cement houses and to Jakov's knowledge the Italians never used their whips on them. But there was this high ranking officer, a colonel, American of Italian descent, a volunteer, an anti-semitic.
- 1.50 The interviewer interrupts, asking what they did to pass away the time. Jakov tells that he passed the time mostly in reading. There were also the nonsense affairs of the camp. The internees were always complaining about something or other, mostly minor stuff [bad food, no newspapers, no radio]. Once they even went on 'strike'. An Italian brigadier general came to talk to them and told them that they were petty, and ingrate, not appreciating all the Italians did to keep them out of the hands of the Croats. 'Noi Italiani siamo stufi di voi Ebber' he told them [We Italians have it up the here with you Jews'.]
- 1.54 Jakov tells about how after Italy capitulated [Sept. '43] automatically sprung a council [Nat'l Liberation Council] for Camp Rob. The leader of the council was a Jewish guy by name

of David Hayon, a tailor from Dubrovnik. The leadership was totally communist, not all-party as the partisans were proclaiming. Jakov was opposed to the communist line and he was told more than once that his life might be in danger. Jakov seems to remember another instance of a political fight, Jew vs. Jew where a group of Jewish residents coming to a public meeting carrying the Jewish flag were attacked by the communists at this meeting. Jakov insists that he vividly remembers this event, although many deny that the event took place.

- 1.58 After the Italian capitulation Jakov was ordered by the council to take over the financial records of the internees' money. He soon found out that there was no money, only records. The money was deposited in the Fiume branch of the now defunct Banco Commerciale Italiana.
- 2.01 Interviewer wants to go back to Dubrovnik. Jakov's brother-in-law [a Serb] told him that someone had denounced his sister as a communist sympathizer. Jakov and his brother-in-law could do nothing to save her at that point, and she was taken away. Later Jakov learned that she had been killed. Jakov was asked why he left Dubrovnik? Jakov explains that they had no choice. The Italian authorities just rounded them up and transported them.
- 2.05 Jakov tries to clarify for the interviewer the Jews vs. Jews fighting, discussed in 1.56.
- 2.14 Jakov shows pictures of Jewish military units formed on Rob after Italian capitulation.
- 2.15 Continuing the saga. Forming of new councils and sub-councils. Jakov is instructed to lead a group of 405 people to a liberated area of St. Juray. When the group arrived at St. Juray they were told by the local population that the Germans were nearby and would return to reoccupy St. Juray. Jakov's group [405 people] left everything and escaped into the mountains. Only later did

they learn that they had been deceived by the locals, who also robbed them. For 8 rainy days they [mostly women and children] wandered through the mountains, hungry, wet and often sick. On the ninth day they reached Otopac, where the Zavrnoh high comand was located. Jakov's group was housed in the vacant school buildings. About eight days later the Ustashi made a surprise attack on a nearby island and killed some people. This created some panic and Jakov and the remaining of his group of civilians were ordered to leave Otopac. They left in a hurry, going towards Pljacka. It was difficult to know where it was safe to go since various towns and villages were held alternatively by the partisans or by the Ustaski. Jakov's group further disintegrated. He found himself almost alone and decided to join the partisans. [a] 'Lemaljsko Antifasistievko Vgece Narodnog Oslobodenja Hrvatske' or 'Antifascist Council for Croatia'.

- 2.24 The interviewer asks about any help provided to the Jews by the partisans. Jakov explains that the Ustashi were trying to convince the population that the partisans were led by the Jews and for that reason the partisans helped the Jews only on an individual basis. Soon after joining Jakov was given the job of going around the countryside and organizing local units for administration [non-political]. And that is how he spent his time with the partisans until the end of the war. Regarding the relations between the Jews and the partisans, Jakov narrates two events which he remembered vividly.
- 2.27 A Jewish individual, a veterinarian, came to the area and wanted to join the partisans. A few days later he was called and asked to treat a very sick man [a partisan]. The Jewish man refused, stating that he was a doctor for animals and was not trained to treat humans. The next day the man was executed [killed]. Jakov cannot say for certain whether this was an act of anti-semitism but he has strong suspicions.
- 2.28 Another instance of possible anti-semitism involved a Jewish

group of people who had made contacts with British Jewish organizations and requested some assistance [financial/material]. A Catholic man named Solomon, an anti-semitic, denounced these Jews calling them saboteurs and saying that there were many spies among them.

- 2.31 Some time later Jakov learned that one of the leaders of this group, Dr. Pinto, was shot as a traitor.
- 2.46 Jakov tells how his wife who worked in the same office as he did looked up his personnel file and found that it contained high praises for his abilities and performance but on top, in red, stated 'former capitalist'. Jakov talks in detail about the trials and tribulations of his job in the Ministry of Chemical Industry where he is now working.
- 2.56 Jakov tells how he feared for his life because he knew too much of the corruption by the party elite. He went to Opatija [which was now held by the Italians] and heard for the first time about the emigration of Yugoslav Jews to Israel. [He casually mentions that he married a lady from his former group of 405 people.]
- 3.01 Interviewer asks about the rule of terror by the communists. Jakov talks more about the corruption and black market. One example about a huge chemical factory that received two car loads of coal daily but kept no records of it. General manager was Jewish. Jakov showed him what to do, but after every visit the general manager still refused to keep records. Jakov slapped him twice across the face. Later Jakov learned that this man was assigned [forced] to spy on him. This terrorized him so much that any noise at night he would think that they were coming to get him. At that point he and his wife decided to go to Israel.