

RG-50.120 #108
YOSEF MORGENSHTERN

- 1.01 My name is Yosef Morgenshtern; people called me Yossi. I was born on July 8, 1922. My mother, Charlotte, was born in Subotica and my father, Bernard, was born near Mitrovica. We lived in Sremska Mitrovica. My family, at first, was very poor. My father opened a store which was not successful. Later, with financial help from a man named Schloginger, he started a scrap metal business, adding feathers, old rags and
- 1.03 even horses. The business prospered and before the German invasion we employed forty people at four locations. As a young boy I helped in our Sremska Mitrovica location, going to school in the morning and working in the store in the afternoon. In the evening I had a tutor for 3-4 hours to help me prepare for school the next day.
- 1.04 That is how it went until April 6, 1941, when the Germans entered Yugoslavia. A few days earlier my father was called up for military service. I remember one evening my father came home for dinner and announced that he had a buyer for the business and that we should sell and go to Palestine. Everyone agreed except my mother; so we didn't sell.
- 1.05 A few days after the Germans entered Mirovica Yosef's father was arrested, by the Ustashi, explaining that the Ustashi were the Croatian Quislings and that the Germans used the Ustashi to do their dirty work. Yosef's father was taken to a camp near Osijek. The family hired a Croatian lawyer who, for a fee of 10,000 dinars, promised to obtain Yosef's father freedom; however, the lawyer himself was arrested
- 1.06 shortly thereafter before he was able to accomplish the task of getting Yosef's father released. Within a few days Yosef and his family lost track of the father. On April 22, 1941 Yosef and his brother Shmuel, while in process of moving someone [for hire] were themselves grabbed by the Ustashi and imprisoned.
- 1.07 To fill in some details on their family, Yosef tells that there were six children; two of the children died, so Yosef's childhood memory was of only four. The father, although
- 1.08 not very observant, constructed a building for a 'ken' for the Revisionist Zionist organization. Yosef and his brother used the attic of that building to hide some documents which the Ustashi discovered and gave the brothers a good beating. Now that they were in prison, the two brothers got another terrible beating, so bad that Yosef lost almost all of his teeth - only 3 remained. In the same prison the Ustashi brought about 7 or 8 religious Jews...
- 1.10 Yosef doesn't know how many Jews lived in Sremska Mitrovica. All Josef remembers is that there was a synagogue and a cantor who also provided the religious education required by the Yugoslav school system. A visiting rabbi, on his monthly visits, would also test the school children.
- 1.11 Yosef tells that during his early prison days he was beaten up mercilessly by a 'friend', a young man who sat next to him in the public school. The Jews in town were required to give up their homes to the Germans. Josef tells that his family was

- fortunate to have a 'home' made up of these buildings. They gave up the upper floor of the main residence, which was then occupied by German officers, including a doctor in charge of the nearby hospital. Yosef remembers that one day the Ustashi came to take the family's radio. Just then this doctor, the German officer happened to be nearby so he came to see what was going on. When the Ustashi informed him that they wanted to take the radio, the German officer spat on them and chased them away. There are several similar anecdotes.
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- 1.14 The German officers were very pleasant in dealing with the family. They were aware that the family was Jewish since they all wore yellow arm bands with the word 'zidov' on it. Yosef tells that the arm bands were mandatory immediately after the German takeover. The Jews had to perform hard labor and carry heavy loads. Yosef remembers seeing his mother being required to wash the German automobiles, not withstanding her pulmonary inflammation. Yet, when the Germans were overseers the Jews were forced to work fast ['loss', loss'] but there were no beatings.
- 1.15 He tells about a dog they had whom the German officers got to like. One day, when the Ustashi came to take straw the dog barked at them and the Ustashi killed the dog. The German officers, when they found out, were infuriated and told the Ustashi that any Ustashi again approaching the house while the Germans lived there would be shot. Yosef tells of another instance where a bunch of Ustashis drinking in a cafe decided to go to Yosef's house to rape the women. It happened that one of the German officers who lived in Yosef's house heard their macho bravado. The Ustashi drove to Yosef's house and started molesting the family. A few minutes later came the German officer [from the cafe] with another friend and chased away the Ustashi. Yosef tells that they had a hidden pistol which they would have used, were it necessary.
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- 1.18 On April 22, 1941 the family was taken to Zagreb and put in prison. He adds that before the war, in 1940 or there about, when Hitler chased the Jews from Germany, several German Jews found shelter in Mitrovica. Two of these German Jews lived in
- 1.19 Yosef's house. Later on, one of them found his way to Israel and helped Yosef a great deal when Yosef arrived there. In Mitrovica there were two distinct Jewish groups: one group were the ultra religious and the other was more secular, siding with the cantor. Yosef's father, although not very observant, sided with the religious group.
- 1.20 Nonetheless, when it came to Jewish activism _____
- 1.21 together in the ken, actively participating in Jewish endeavors.
- 1.22 Yosef tells that on the Sunday after he and his brother were imprisoned, the mayor of the town, a friend of his uncle, came to the prison, gave them a pass and instructed them to go home, take their mother and sisters and immediately leave without losing even half an hour ['go to Siberia!', he told them]. The two brothers went home but his mother again refused to leave because she wanted to wait for her husband's release.
- 1.23 Yosef adds that the family did move to a nearby village, Lacerak. They had two trusted employees: one was the manager, a Hungarian; the other was a carriage driver, a Serbian. Before the family left, Yosef's father gave the two employees the

keys to the business saying that if the family did not return, they would own the business. The Hungarian gladly accepted, but eh Serbian said that he would stay with the family,

- 1.24 whatever the outcome. The family later did return; the men were immediately arrested and taken in chains to a Zagreb prison, guarded by 10 Ustashi with drawn bayonettes. The Ustashi kept them in the prison courtyard for about three weeks, without guard, but there were afraid to escape for fear of repercussions on the rest of
- 1.25 the family. After three weeks they were transferred to Gospic. At the Gospic train station there were some Italian soldiers barbecuing a bull which they apparently had stolen. The Italian jumped in, cut the prisoners chains and insisted that the Jewish prisoners share in the feast. Later the Ustashi took the Jewish men to a prison where
- 1.26 Yosef and his bother were assigned the care of horses [as drivers]. Yosef speculates that the Ustashi had either chased away or killed the Serb population and now they needed people to harvest the crops. The two brothers were in Gospic for about 20 days, but were kept separated. On one occasion the Italians invited Yosef to get on one of their trucks and escape, but he was afraid that his escape would endanger the rest of his family. After about 20 days the Jewish inmates were taken to Jasenovac II, which was in the woods. MUD! The barracks were constructed of
- 1.28 boards, separated by about 5 centimeters one from the other. The inmates had to cut down huge trees, in gangs of 3 inmates. They were given mandatory quotas, no rest, or you get shot. Yosef remembers one group made up on an old cantor with two of his sons. They had just cut down a large tree and one of the sons sat on a tree trunk while the other was standing by. Within a minute the Ustashi bullets hit one of the brothers in the head and the other in the heart.
- 1.29 Yosef tells about an Ustashi commander who instructs his troops not to waste bullets on the Jews. "A bullet is more valuable than a Jew! Use your knives or butts of the rifles!" Jewish inmates were ordered to sing upon returning to the barracks at night. Who could sing: mud to the knees, cold, hungry, the daily food ration consisting of three rotten potatoes. Yosef tells that they had a Jewish capo, a very good man, but he couldn't do much for the inmates. His job was to assign work and supervise; the Ustashi guarded and meted out punishment.
- 1.31 Yosef talks about Jasenovac II, that it was a temporary camp in the woods, built on a flood plain about 15 km from the main camp Jasenovac. Yosef Tells about the atrocities at the Jasenovac camp. He remembers an old man who, upon returning from work noted that his two sons did not return. The old man asked the others not to comfort him with false hopes because, he said, he knew what had taken place. Yosef saw later the inmates being made to bury the old man; sometimes they were forced to bury people even while they were still alive. Yosef was held at Jasenovac II for about two months. For a period of time the Ustashi would permit the inmates who had money to purchase food from the peasants who would bring their produce to the
- 1.33 camp fences. However, one day the Ustashi had a special line-up and ordered the inmates either to hand over all valuables [money, jewelry, watches] or be shot. Yosef and his brother were transferred to the main Jasenovac camp where at that time the Ustashi commander was a man called Ljnbo Milos. Milos was the most blood thirsty

man known to mankind. Example: He had a family - a man, his wife and their child -- brought into a room. He forced six inmates, Yosef included, to hold the young family, now naked, while the Ustashi repeatedly raped the woman, then put a flaming crown on the child's head, and all the while the husband had to watch. When the woman and the child were dead, the Ustashi shot the man.

- 1.35 Another instance describing Ljnbo Milos which Yosef also saw with his own eyes: On December 25, 1942, they brought to Jasenovac a group of 80 Jews from Daruvar. Ljnbo Milos made all inmates gather around him in a circle. Then he ordered the 80 Jews from Daruvar to come to him, one at a time, place their heads on Milos' knee, and Milos would just chop off their heads. When he finished killing all 80, he got up, all bloody, and declared that now was the time to go celebrate Christmas.
- 1.38 Yosef describes the death machine of the camp. The Ustashi assigned to the inmates the grave digging jobs. The grave diggers had dug a deep hole, as deep as a house, ten meters long and 5 meters wide, where they would drag the bodies. They would line the bodies one next to the other, then cover them with lye; then start a second layer and cover it with lye, and so on. There was so much death in the camp. Yosef
- 1.40 believes that maybe a million people came through Jasenovac -- Jews, Serbs, gypsies --- but the camp was built for about 4,000 inmates. Whenever the number of inmates exceeded the camp 'capacity', systematic killings were the order of the day.
- 1.41 After the killings the inmates had to go back to work. There was so much mud, and Yosef and others had to load the horse carts and pull them - no horses, instead, men. Luckily, Yosef's brother worked in the bakery, and he recommended Yosef for the bakery job. Yosef worked in the bakery [in the town] for about two months, until
- 1.43 the current bakery boss was replaced and Yosef was sent back to the camp. Rosenberg, the Jewish capo, died or was removed and the new commander capo was a fellow by name of Salamon. These guys were good to the inmates but the Ustashi were still in charge.
- 1.44 One day a wagon overturned [a muslim in charge wanted to punish the jews. Salamon requested that he be allowed to administer the punishment to avoid the harsher Ustashi treatment. Salamon then slapped each prisoner once. One day Yosef was reassigned to be an orderly to a muslim Ustashi. The orderly job got
- 1.46 Yosef frequent beatings, but at least he had sufficient food to eat. Yosef recalls one occasion when the Ustashi found a cigarette butt on the floor which had escaped Yosef's notice. For this he received a horrendous beating, which crippled him. And the molestations increased: "Go to the frozen Sava about 10 meters toward the center, break the ice, and bring me back a glass of water". Yosef finally got himself
- 1.48 reassigned to the mechanics shop which, among others, had the responsibility for the maintenance of the rail line. The Jewish capo there took Yosef under his wing and soon Yosef knew everything that had to be done. Unfortunately, when the Ustashi saw that Yosef was capable they killed the capo and put Yosef in charge.
- 1.50 Then came a new Ustashi chief, Major Pecili, who took a liking to Yosef and permitted

- him and a few others to go once a week to the food warehouse and help themselves to some food. However, after a short while Yosef's group was taken to another work station where the life was okay because the Ustashi chief was sympathetic to the Jews. Somehow, Yosef became very sick [lungs]. He was delirious for a long time and was taken to the hospital where he stayed several weeks. After
- 1.53 his recovery, Yosef was transferred back to Jasenovac. Jasenovac, under the command of Mestorovic the monk, was hell on this earth. Beatings, torture, and killings all over the place. Yosef recalls two Jewish brothers who were driving
- 1.54 tractors, somehow made contacts with the partisans in the nearby forest and were able to escape. The Ustashi went wild! They released the Ustashi soldiers incarcerated at Jasenovac to help them in the rampage. The Ustashi armed themselves with digging shovels and came into to the barracks. They ordered
- 1.56 all Jews, not Gypsies or Serbs, to step out. As the Jewish inmates stepped out the Ustashi beat them with the shovels. Many died as a result. Yosef was beaten so badly that they dragged him outside and left him for dead. Initially, Yosef had not stepped out, but he was denounced by a fellow inmate named Fogel.
- 1.57 When the Ustashi wanted to kill people they did not exactly inform their victims what they intended to do. They would come into the barracks in the middle of the night and declare that they needed a work detail. One night the commander of all concentration camps came for a visit. Yosef was awakened to fix the commander's vehicle which
- 1.59 had jumped the track. Yosef was certain that this meant he and his crew would be liquidated. It turned out that it was an easy job. As a reward Yosef was offered a
- 2.00 drink of what he was told was sljivovitz but in reality it was ethyl alcohol. He was half dead. His brother told him later that he became rambunctious, cursing all Ustashi, Pavelic [head of Ustashi 'Independent State of Croatia' set up by the Ustashi] in particular, and refused to obey Ustashi orders. The Jewish commander
- 2.02 secretly brought in a doctor who examined Yosef and stated that Yosef might survive because he had a strong heart. Yosef was hidden in a huge pot until he recovered. Yosef, at this point, remembers what he had forgotten earlier: When they were in another camp, Yosef was assigned to carry wood with two horses. The horses were tempermental. One time when the horses were loaded up, instead of starting slowly, Yosef whipped the horses and they jumped and dropped the load. The man in charge
- 2.05 - a Jewish guy named Diamant - saw this and started beating Yosef nearly to death. Yosef tells that Diamant was later killed by the Ustashi, which made Yosef happy.
- 2.06 The interviewer does not understand the reference to the Jewish person as commander. Yosef explains that in the camps the Ustashi appointed a Jewish person as a go-between, to execute their instructions, and this person would be called 'komandant'. Prisoners feared some of them, such as Diamant, but liked others, such as Salamon or Rosenberg.
- 2.10 Yosef now tells about their short stay in Stara Gradiska where he and his brother were assigned to work at the 'economy', farm work. One was given the job to care for the pigs, the other the corn crops. The inmates lived in large bunkers isolated from others, and they ate the same food as the animals. One day a pig died and they were told to bury it. The inmates figured out that they could kill a pig every so often

- 2.11 and report that it had died. Soon they were trading some of their pig meat for milk.
- 2.12 The life was bearable but unfortunately it did not last very long, maybe 4-5 months. Yosef had to go back to Jasenovac to work on the rail tracks. Now the tracks were often bombed by the partisans and the Ustashi wanted the tracks maintained. The life was not bad. One Saturday, April 22, 1945 Yosef and some others were transferred to the brick building surrounded by the walls which the inmates had built for the
- 2.16 Ustashi soldiers. That night the Ustashi took away all the women and killed them. Yosef remembers that as the women were passing near the building they yelled to them: 'brothers, we are going to our death, but you be strong!'. Then the Ustashi took
- 2.17 about 20 men from Yosef's group, Yosef's brother one of them - poured gasoline over them and set them on fire. Yosef watched his brother and others burn to death, while an Ustashi held a gun to his back. This was the beginning of the liquidation of the camp. Among the inmates was a captured partisan, Bakotic, who was organizing
- 2.19 the underground, assigning duties for the future break-out from the camp. One morning, as Yosef went to see his bunk mate who had hanged himself during the night, he heard Bakotic saying 'brothers, the time has come'. Some of the inmates
- 2.20 climbed to the ceiling and started throwing logs and killing some of the Ustashi guards. As this was a Sunday most of the Ustashi were in church [they were very religious]. The inmates started escaping, some jumping into the Sava River, others who couldn't swim ran into the woods. The Ustashi guards took up the machine guns and started firing on the inmates in the river, killing all or most of them [about 400].
- 2.21 Yosef with 37 others escaped into the woods. After much running and hiding they came up to a Serbian village. The villagers were good to them, giving them at first
- 2.23 clothing -- the inmates were naked -- then food. Yosef tells about the Ustashi posse which they had to evade. Yosef hid in the attic of a house in the hay, and had a scare when the Germans came to get hay from the attic. The following 4-5 days they moved from place to place until they came to a village now occupied by the partisans. The
- 2.29 partisan commander told them they could go to their homes or they could join the partisans. Yosef chose to stay with the partisans. He tells how he was given a
- 2.30 machine gun which was heavier than Yosef. On his first night with the partisans Yosef was a foot soldier. Since Yosef had some higher education he was given the charge
- 2.32 of 500 soldiers to take them to a location where the partisans were forming a tank unit. Yosef tells about a friend in the camp, Franjo Resman, with whom had shared many sad experiences. Yosef, the optimist, would tell Franjo that life would get better and that Yosef would before long come to visit him in his home in Zagreb to have a
- 2.36 coffee. Now, on the way to the tank unit, Yosef made a surprise visit to Franjo Resman's residence. There was much happiness and joy and tears. On the way out
- 2.38 Yosef found two 5,000 kune notes [the monetary unit issued by the Ustashi, very low value] in his pocket which had been placed there. Yosef never heard from Resman
- 2.40 afterwards. While in Zagreb, Yosef went to the Jewish community office. He was asked to return the next day. When he came the next day, he was mobbed by family members of people who were with him in Jasenovac. This was the hardest thing for Yosef, knowing that the men were killed but having to lie so as not to give the relatives the sad news. Later Yosef received reproaching letters from these people.
- 2.42 Yosef responded to each letter stating that he was a coward and did not have the courage to be a bearer of such awful news for them. Yosef's family was taken to

- 2.44 Auschwitz where they all perished [gassed]. He was told of that by an eye witness
2.45 who described how his mother and sister died. Interviewer asks about Jasenovac, its
entrance, appearance, etc. Yosef tells that Jasenovac was a former brick factory. At
the gate was the Ustashi guard house. The Jews were transported there, in locked
box cars, without food, water or hygienic facilities. Many died during this trip After a
day or so they gave them some rotten beets. At one point the Ustashi decided to
2.46 test how long people could live without food or water. They selected about 200
people, put them in an enclosed area, and fed them only salt. When some of these
2.47 would die, the others would fight for the body - a leg or an arm - and soon the body
would be devoured. Yosef says he saw all this. Yosef narrates other experiences from
Jasenovac. Once, while with the partisans, the order came for all the former inmates
to report to the command. Yosef went reluctantly. The partisans held many
2.49 Ustashi prisoners and Yosef was asked to identify any whom he could recognize.
Yosef recognized his former oppressor who wanted to kill him after a few words,
Yosef identified him to the partisans. Yosef tells another situation where the
2.52 partisans had captured 600 German SS Waffen members. Yosef, who by this time
was a unit commander and asked for the right to avenge the death of his family.
2.53 Every SS member said that they were cooks or clerks. Yosef at that point took the
2.54 rifle and killed one of them. [Afterwards, he could not take it out of his mind.]
- 2.58 Interviewer asks about other stories, including the book by Frane Tudjman [the
president of Croatia after it broke off from Yugoslavia in 1992]. Yosef tells her that
most of the stories and philosophies expounded in this book were lies.

Yosef talks about his life after the liberation, during the three years with the partisans
and the various jobs he held after he left the army, the people he met and the various
episodes and incidents. He continues his story after we went to Israel in 1947.

Some other events which Yosef remembers:

- 3.04 -All Moslems were Ustashi.
-There was a barge docked on River Sava used by the Ustashi to kill Jewish mothers
and babies. They would throw the babies in the air and catch them on the bayonettes,
then drop them in the Sava.
-One of the Ustashi came with bloody knives and forced him to lick 'the blood of your
brothers'.
- 3.06 -On another occasion, in the field, he needed to defecate. They let him, then made him
eat it.
-One Ustashi took a beautiful Jewish girl from the women's side of Jasenovac, spent
the night with her, and killed her in the morning.
- 3.07 -Some names of more blood-thirsty Ustashi.: Trinusic, he would kill as easy as smoke
a cigarette. Mile[?], chief of the bakery. He would always beat up Yosef, then give
Yosef a small bread roll.
- 3.11 -Once there was a plan for escape, but one of the people involved was deceived into
spilling the beans. As a result, 25 people were hanged. Yosef had all of his toenails
burned with matches.
- 3.12 -Later they had a lineup and the commander executed every third person [pistol].

Yosef was saved because they needed him.

- 3.14 -Partisan airplane would frequently bomb the Ustashi buildings. Jews had to stamp out the fire with bare hands and feet.
- 3.15 -Once an American airplane bombing another site was downed. The next day the airplane disappeared. Yosef thinks the American helicopter removed it during the night.
- 3.20 -Once when an Ustashi stole a German officer's motor bike, the German officer, speaking Russian came to look for it. Yosef, at first could not understand that there were Russian collaborators.
- 3.24 -Yosef returned to Sromska Mitrovice [after 3 years in the partisan army] to recover his house.
- 3.26 to .46 Yosef talks about his life in Israel. He tells about meeting other Yugoslav survivors, some of whom he had known, or seen in Jasenovac. He talks about his jobs and experiences in Israel.
- 3.31 He remarried in 1947 with a woman from Mitrovica who convinced him to go to Israel. They had to board the ship [Petalost?] at night, 2 at a time, like prisoners. The trip took 15 days to Haifa.
- 3.43 Yosef revisited Jasenovac. He tells that the Croatians destroyed everything to cover their tracks.
- 3.47 Responding to interviewer's questions, Yosef tells that there is no listing of people who died in Jasenovac. He was not interviewed by certain people who made attempts to compile such records.
- 3.52 Yosef tells of various ethnic people whom the Ustashi enlisted into their units. The very worst people towards the Jews were the Moslems. A Moslem told him that they were instructed to go out and kill Jews.
- 3.57 There were four Jasenovacs: Jasenovac I, II, III and Kozara IV, the worst of which was the original, which had by far the largest number of victims.
- 3.59 Yosef recalled the 'liquidation' and how they were required to go pick up the tools from the work station where his father was a prisoner. He saw his father dead on the ground with broken skull and his brains strewn about. A red mallet was nearby. Upon revisiting Jasenovac he saw the red mallet hanging on the wall in the museum, and became hysterical.
- 4.03 Yosef thinks that the worst crime 'today' is that israel is sending assistance to the very same Moslems in Yugoslavia who a few years ago were fully dedicated to killing Jews. [The interviewer challenges Yosef's opinion.]

The worst memories from Jasenovac:

1/ The torture and killing of the young family - see 1.34.

2/ Burning of his brother - 2.1u

Here the video abruptly goes blank.