

RG-50.120 #0195
MENACHEM MARKO

- 1.01 Marko begins the interview talking about his family. My father [Moishe] and my mother [Lea, nee Israel] lived in Turkey where my mother was born. Before WWI my father was taken prisoner in Yemen. He was freed by my grandfather, Yom Tov Israel, who was at the time the chief rabbi of Istanbul. My father married and came to live in Skopje [Macedonia] where his mother, Rachel, lived. My mother had a married
- 1.04 sister who lived in Belgrade. They didn't have any children and they loved me like their own son. Later, during my studies in Belgrade, I spent much of my time with them.
- 1.06 Marko was born in Skopje in 1920. He remembers his early youth as being rather peaceful. He didn't think of himself as being an obedient child. He remembers an
- 1.07 episode when his father took him to cheder [Hebrew school]. The teacher had a stick which he used on Marko for the entire day [!] when he caught him disturbing the studies. When Marko came home and complained to his father about the teacher, he received another beating.
- 1.08 Marko's father worked as an 'import expediter'. He would, for a fee, help expedite imported shipments, run them past the duty points and facilitate delivery of goods to the importers. Marko had a sister, named Rachel, who was 1 1/2 years younger than he was.
- 1.09 Their mother passed away when Marko was about eight years old. Marko remembered that his mother always complained about her heart. When Marko was about five years old the family went for a visit to Istanbul, where his mother's younger sister Zelda was engaged to be married. Using her heart condition as an excuse, the
- 1.10 mother was able to break the engagement and convince her father to sell his business and move the entire family to Skopje. Reasons for this became clear to Marko only later.
- 1.14 Marko states that he was not religious, not observant, but that his grandfather was, and he would take Marko with him to the synagogue everyday. Marko then describes
- 1.15 an event which took place on the day his mother died. His father took him into the room to kiss his mother and explained to him that she was dead. A little later he heard loud voices coming from the adjacent room. He opened the door and saw his father, normally a mild mannered person, screaming at the rabbi and several other prominent persons for the Jewish community. It appeared that the grandfather had incurred a large debt to the synagogue by making pledges [outbidding others for ceremonial honors]. Marko's father was disturbed that the request to pay off the
- 1.23 pledges was being made at this particular time. And this even reinforced Marko's religious cynicism.

The interviewer asked what language was spoken in the family and did they live in the Jewish section of the city. Marko responds that they spoke mostly Ladino. They lived just outside the Jewish section of Skopje. Later they lived in a very nice house with a large garden and had several Jewish neighbors.

- 1.28 Marko further responds that he participated in the Zionist organizations, such as 'Ken' [Zionist youth]. Ken was near the synagogue. The young people did not wear
- 1.33 any uniforms - they just had scarfs. They had many activities, and much learning about Zionism. The young boys and girls were being prepared for Aliya and life in Israel, if they chose this path. One of his friends went to an agricultural training center where the work was back breaking. After the agricultural training the young people
- 1.34 were sent to the Adriatic coast to be trained as sailors. Then, finally, they had to apply for a visa from the British authorities. Marko chose not to follow that path.
- 1.36 Marko tells how his father controlled all aspects of Marko's life. Marko loved to read but his father insisted on approving everything before Marko read it. One day Marko borrowed from a local bully several books on romance and, while he was away, his father took the books and threw them away. Marko had to keep paying the local bully from his weekly allowances for a long time to pay off the books. The summer after graduating high school, Marko spent with the 'Ferial Institute' roaming through the Bosnian woods. Upon return he started preparing for university. He was
- 1.39 interested in psychology and because he was a good student he was often encouraged to pursue this study. One day his father asked him about his plans and Marko told him of his interest in becoming a psychiatrist. His father expressed a concern that Marko would be unable to contribute financially to the family for at
- 1.41 least 12 years. Marko never even thought that the family might need any support from him. Then his father told him about a man at the Dept. of Tariffs who collected full
- 1.44 pay by working a few hours at three different jobs. And the study required for a chemist was only four years. Marko later spoke with an uncle about his father's concern for financial assistance. The uncle informed Marko that Marko's father had
- 1.45 guaranteed a loan for a business friend who later defaulted. As a result, Marko's father lost the two houses and all his worldly possessions and half of his current
- 1.49 earnings to satisfy the lien. Next day Marko signed up at the Belgrade University to study chemistry.
- 1.50 The diploma for chemistry required four years of study. This involved attending lectures for four hours each morning, then about six hours of lab work in the afternoon. As a good student, Marko was about to obtain residency in the Student Home, a beautiful hotel-like facility, with food and all other amenities. From a
- 1.52 Jewish organization Marko obtained a stipend [a form of student loan] which enabled him to pay for all his school and living expenses and even to send money to his family in Skopje. This continued for about three years and then the war broke out.
- 1.54 The interviewer asked about student life. Marko studied hard. For entertainment he would go to a Russian cabaret to watch the performers or listen to Russian music.

- 1.57 Then there was walking, reading or just hanging out with other students. There were
1.58 about ten Dalmatians in the Student Home, including Marko's roommate, and they all
played various musical instruments. Here Marko tells a goofy story about the
Dalmatians and their weekly bean eating contest.
- 2.02 Marko tells a story about how one day when he returned to his room he found a
stranger forging through his desk. His roommate introduced the stranger as an
Austrian who hated the Nazis. For a while thereafter the man was a frequent visitor
until Marko's roommate had a falling out and he stopped coming. Marko next saw this
man [Egon was his name] during the huge protest against Yugoslavia's signing
2.09 of the non-aggression pact with Germany. The Serbs were very unhappy that the
Regent Paul ['Better war than the pact', was the cry of the masses.] The next day
2.12 Peter II proclaimed himself of age, took over the reins of the government and broke
the pact. The following Sunday [April 6, 1941] waves of Stuka airplanes started a
2.14 systematic carpet of bombing of Belgrade, which had been declared an 'open city'
which lasted for 6 1/2 days until the German troops arrived.
- 2.16 Within several days the Germans issued their first anti-Jewish orders. 1/ All Jews had
to present themselves at the Zemen Bridge; 2/ Those who did not comply would be
shot with their entire family; 3/ Any non Jews who knew of any Jews and did not
report them would meet the same fate. Marko complied with the German order. After
several days they again had to come to the same site where the Germans separated
the men of 15-50 years from all others. Marko later learned that all others [the non-
workers] were shot. Marko again saw Egon, 'the Austrian anti-Nazi', only now he wore
a German officer's uniform and wielded a big whip. The men were formed in working
groups of 20 each. Egon stood on the small platform and barked orders about
discipline and hard work. He also informed them that if any individual attempted
2.24 to escape all 20 men of his work group would be shot. Each day they would be
marched to a bombed out section and ordered to clear out the street of the debris
[rocks and cement blocks from the buildings]. Egon forced them to dig a shallow
grave and told them that if they didn't complete the assigned work by 6 p.m. they
would have to lie in this grave and Egon would personally put a bullet in their head
and leave them to be buried by the next work crew.
- 2.27 Marko tells of an old man in his group whose entire family was killed by the Germans
except for his two sons who were in the work group. Everyday the old man would see
his sons and by facial expressions they would acknowledge each other. Then one
day the old man saw only one of his sons. The man was going out of his mind
because he knew that the other son was killed. The other men of the work group tried
to console him but to no avail. Within several days the man's other son
2.30 was not in the formation. The man was frantic. As it happened, the task that day was
to demolish a domed tower of the bombed out king's palace which was now
dangerously tilted towards the main street. It appeared to be an impossible task.
2.31` Marko had figured out that the only way to accomplish this was to insert a plank in the
crack and apply sufficient pressure to force the dome to fall to the other side. But
this would entail sacrificing the life of the person with the plank. Marko decided,

- looking at the shallow grave which they had dug, that if no other solution was found by 5 p.m. he would volunteer to climb up. But Marko didn't tell anyone about his conclusion. But the old man insisted that he knew how to handle this project. About 4 p.m. the oldman tricked them and climbed the tower. He proceeded to do exactly what Marko had figured out. They almost laughed watching the old man mobilizing enough power and jumping on the plank until the dome started moving. Finally, the dome tumbled down, crushing the old man. The old man had given up his life to save the rest of the group. The German guards were so happy, they gave the workers 2 hours off.
- 2.32
- 2.35 One day during the formation they were asked to form separate lines for doctors and for engineers. The Germans counted off and pulled every fifth person in each formation. [Marko was not one of those pulled.] Marko and others speculated that
- 2.37 maybe doctors were needed in case of typhoid or other epidemic outbreaks. Also, engineers may be needed to help rebuild the infrastructures. Next day on the way to work they saw posters indicating that the Germans had executed 100 Communists
- 2.38 and Jews because someone had killed a German officer. This was meant to be a
- 2.40 warning to the population. That evening Marko and another prisoner decided to escape from Belgrade.
- 2.43 Marko had learned that the situation for the Jews was much better in Skopje than in Belgrade. As a reward for joining the Axis the Germans had given to Bulgaria all of Macedonia [both the Greek segment and the Yugoslav segment]. Marko and friend started walking . When Marko arrived at his father's house in Skopje there was no room for him. There were eight families living in the house and Marko's name was not listed on the official 'inventory' posted at the gate. Marko was hidden in the attic. Next
- 2.45 door to Marko's family residence lived a General Cimeonov, the Bulgarian administrator of Macedonia. The general's wife was dead and he was raising a daughter whom he loved very much. The girl was about the same age as Marko's
- 2.47 sister, and the two girls became good friends. The general's daughter prevailed with her father to help Marko and Marko obtained a Bulgarian passport to go to Sofia
- 2.49 and enroll at the University. Marko found living quarters with a Jewish person who was classified as a WWI hero and therefore not molested. Marko learned from this
- 2.52 man that Eichmann wanted to round up all Jews living in Bulgaria but that the Bulgarian king had agreed to let Eichmann take all of the non-Bulgarian Jews. Marko then
- 2.53 returned to Skopje and informed his father that he would go to Albania. In Tirana lived Marko's sister's fiance, Telo Conforte, whose family operated a money exchange store.
- 2.55
- 3.01 One morning at dawn [3/11/43] soon after Marko's return to Skopje they were awakened by loud yelling and commotion. They looked outside and saw people rushing about with suitcases and bags. They immediately realized that this was a roundup of Jews. Before they could do anything there were soldiers beating at their doors and forcing them out of their house. The Jews were then marched to the train station and placed in one of the buildings of the Tariff Department. Marko's father asked Marko to hide in the basement and wait until the multitude was taken away.

- 3.11 The father instructed Marko to try to escape, then take his sister to Albania and get her married to her fiancé. Marko describes all the efforts to get out, first from the building and then from the compound. Then he went to pick up his sister only to learn that the father had gotten her with the Bulgarian policemen. Marko was despondent;
- 3.18 he wanted to give himself up but was convinced otherwise. With the help of some smugglers he traveled over snow covered mountains for 3 days and nights until they reached a house where the smugglers made their rest stop. After two days of rest they formed a wagon train of 12 mules and proceeded towards the Albanian border. At one point during the night they reached an Italian army bunker with the circling searchlight. Most of the smugglers got off their horses and took fighting positions around the bunker, while the wagon train proceeded with speed [Marko was assigned to drive the 2 horse wagon]. They passed the bunker and soon the others joined them and soon they reached the river Vardar which they easily crossed. They reached a solitary house and Marko was told to go to Tetovo [a border town] on his own. Marko found his way to Tetovo that evening. Next morning he went outside to check out the situation. He was approached by two men who started questioning him in Serbian
- 3.22 about where he came from. Marko could not tell them and they threatened to 'take him in'. Marko offered them the three gold coins which were sewn in his slacks if they would help him and they accepted. They took him to a hotel, locked him in a room, brought him food. The next day they took him to a truck loaded with bags full of walnuts. After a day's ride they arrived in Drac. The truck driver told him that that was the end of the line. Then he took him to a construction site of a hotel where they spent the night. In the morning the guy took Marko to the bus station and, with his own money bought him a ticket to Tirana. Once in Tirana Marko started searching for the clothing store named Zingona where Telo Conforti worked. Because the bus station was in the center of the town Marko knew the Zingone store was nearby. He found the store and Telo recognized him with some difficulty. He took him to the house to meet the family where Telo lived, in what appeared to be the lap of luxury [marble walls and floors]. They made Marko comfortable and wanted to take total care of him. But Marko wanted to work. When they could no longer dissuade him, they set up a meeting with a rich man called Schwartz. Mr. Schwartz took him to another person [Selin Gima] a geodetic engineer who gave Marko a job in his private practice and gave him 15 gold coins per month [3 times the normal needs of life].
- 3.40 After several months he needed to go into the field but couldn't go because he didn't have the legal documents. His employer wrote a note for the important person in the city hall and Marko obtained all the needed documents with his picture and a new name of Marko Mench. After a while Marko rented a separate where he was joined by
- 3.48 Telo and another young man, Sabastal Perrera, who was the son of the man responsible for Marko's father's financial ruin. Every night he would take off his money belt which was full of gold coins. Eventually Marko found another job. Life was pretty good for a while. When the Germans came to Albania the Jews started running
- 3.54 once again. The Conforti family decided to buy a boat to cross over into Italy but it required each person to pay 120 gold coins to make the trip. They did not offer to pay for Marko. Marko remained and eventually was taken in custody [he thinks that somebody denounced him]. He was eventually saved by the father of his new employer. Marko then wanted to hide at a farm in a nearby location but his protector
- 3.56
- 3.58
- 4.01

- [Vasil] convinced him that it was dangerous because of the many Nazi collaborators. He instead convinced him to work in an alcohol factory near Labinot. Marko noted
- 4.06 excessive quantities of corn [raw material] which was being devoured by some kind of
flies infestation. Marko came up with a solution which increased the production
- 4.08 more than hundred-fold, making the owners millions. While Marko worked there a
German officer started coming to check and distribute quinine [medicine for malaria].
- 4.10 Because Marko spoke German the German officer befriended him. From him Marko
learned that the officer in the past worked at a concentration camp as a chemical
expert. Marko always wanted to know the fate of his sister. One night the German
officer brought many pictures of the concentration camp [showing the smoke coming
- 4.13 out from what we now know was the crematory]. Marko would give the German
officer a drink every time he visited, but this night he make him an extra strong drink.
- 4.16 One of the pictures showed the arrival of a family: mother, father, son and daughter.
After the separation the German officer fell in love with the girl, named Rina. The
officer protected the girl until he was ordered to kill her [which he did]. While the
- 4.17 drunk officer kept drinking and crying 'Rina, Rina', Marko kept thinking of his sister.
Then Marko took the drunk officer to the river and with Marko's hidden pistol shot him
- 4.20 dead and watched his body slowly floating down the river [Skubini]. Next day Marko
was arrested by the Gestapo.
- 4.24 Marko tells about a certain Vasil who had earlier given a 'bashi' [Albanian pledge] to
protect Marko. Vasil was a friend of the German commanding officer. Vasil prevailed
upon the German commander to release Marko, promising to hide Marko
- 4.26 from the face of the earth. Marko was hidden in a spa [then closed] which Vasil
4.28 owned. After several weeks the city was liberated and the Germans left.
- 4.29 The interviewer asked what happened after the liberation. Marko told that all [Vasil, et
al] were arrested by the communists because they were too close to German
- 4.33 occupiers. Marko tells that he started drinking to excess. One day he was
approached by an Albanian from UNRRA who suggested to Marko to go to Israel.
- 4.34 This was the first suggestion regarding Israel. The man obtained a visa for Marko.
- 4.35 Marko was then asked to help in hiding Vasil's uncle, who was also labeled a German
collaborator. Marko attempted to help, but in doing so he put himself in
- 4.40 jeopardy. Because of his contacts with Vasil's relatives, Marko was arrested. Marko
4.46 describes various political intrigues. In a mass trial, Vasil was given 6 years and
Marko was given a four year sentence.
- 4.49 Marko describes his time in jail. After spending the first few days in a bathroom they
learned about his knowledge of several languages, which was useful to them. Marko
was taken out daily to do translation [for which he was well compensated] and
- 4.51 brought back to jail at night. After about one and a half years he was released to help
in the establishment of a school [graduate]. About that time, 1948, he met the
woman he married and later had three daughter. Marko states that he wrote many
theses in varying technical subjects, and many Albanians owe their education to his
publications. In 1948 the Jews living in Albania received visas to come to Israel.

4.53 Marko states that the visas were sent by Golda Meir from Moscow. They got all
4.57 packed. A ship named Transylvania came to take them to Israel, but they were told
to wait. And they waited... and waited, until finally in 1991 Marko was able to migrate
to Israel. Marko describes the various schemes that were used by some of his friends
in Israel and Italy to override Albanian Communist regulations regarding migration
from Albania.