

Hello. I'm Dr. Jack Porter. This Thursday, May 28.

Stay impersonal.

OK. All right. Fine. OK.

One, two, three, four.

Hello. I'm Dr. Jack Porter. I'm the director of the Holocaust Survivors Project. Today is Thursday, May 28, 1992, in Newton Massachusetts. We're at the Jewish Community Center, Board of Jewish Education. And the purpose of this project is to interview not only survivors, but child survivors, children of survivors, liberators, rescuers, non-Jews, and other groups often overlooked, such as Sephardic Jews.

My guest today is Charles Lorant-- I call him Charlie-- from Yugoslavia. Welcome.

Thank you.

Let's start off, Charlie, with some questions about the pre-war conditions before the Holocaust. Why don't you just start off in what year and when and where you were born, probably just as simple as that.

Well, my start was kind of slightly complicated. My mother was born in Czechoslovakia in what's been referred as Sudetenland. And, of course, at that time that was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My father, on the other hand, came from Slovenia, which at that time was part of Austria too. And they got married in Yugoslavia.

However, because my mother wanted to be home, I was then born in her home town, which is Zatec, Czechoslovakia. And as soon as I could manage the trip, I went to Belgrade. So it's kind of meaningless the fact that I was born in Czechoslovakia. My early years, my formative years-- well, really not my formative years, but my youth up to the age nine was spent in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

And what year were you born?

And I was born in Zatec, Czechoslovakia, in 1932.

1932. Describe those who comprised your household before the war.

Well, before the war my house-- well, I was the only son. So I had no brothers and sisters. So it was a small house, household, in Belgrade, my mother and my father. And we had also part of the household a woman, Josephine, who was both cook and my caretaker and so on. So she was really as part of my family.

I might mention that the fact that since both my mother and my father came from an Austro-Hungarian environment, their common language was German. So I grew up speaking German, not Yiddish, by the way, because Yiddish was really not part of my family's tradition, if you will. Because they both, my father's and my mother's family, were what you would call Middle European part of-- I don't know the early history. But somehow by 1850 or thereabouts, they were really assimilated. They spoke the native-- the languages of the country, mostly Germany, but some spoke the local languages, but no Yiddish.

No Yiddish.

Of course, they were Ashkenazi. And I think they were primarily influenced already at that time by the reformed community, I think Rabbi Mendelssohn. I don't know when he started. But I think-- they certainly were not--

Moses Mendelssohn?

Moses Mendelssohn, which started the reform movement. And he must have spread through Austria, certainly in the communities that my family grew up.

Would you say your social status was middle class, upper class?

Oh, definitely, middle class. In fact, I have an old lithograph of my father's grandmother and the whole family. And, you know, you can see that-- and that was taken-- they came from Brno, Czechoslovakia. And you can see that they were really middle class family from the dressing, the very fact that they took the family picture, which, you know, that was in the early days of photography. You know, the whole family, the father, mother, and seven brothers-- and seven offspring, one of them being my grandmother's on my father's side.

The mere fact that they could afford a photographer meant that they were of the middle class.

Yeah. I might explain about my name. Now, my grandfather--

Yes.

My grandfather originally came, I believe, from Temesvár, which is Hungary, though I think right now it's part of Romania. Temesvár I think it's called. And--

You mean that your name is spelled L-O-R-A-N-T--

Right.

Today.

Right. And he as a-- I don't really know for what reason and how come, but at an early age, he moved to Ljubljana, Slovenia, Yugoslavia up to recently. And so he settled in this town, which really had a very small Jewish community. But apparently-- and his name was Levi. And apparently, there was another Levi in the community.

And now I don't know whether he was a crook or just careless with his accounting, but apparently he bounced a lot of checks. And somehow my grandfather got blamed or at least he got some of some of the letters or communication from the banks or whatever. So he got tired of that situation, you know. And as I remember my grandfather was, of course, very proper, proper gentleman. So he decided to change the name to Lorant.

Back then?

Yeah. Back then we were calling it Lorant. Over here, just because it makes it easier, I change to Lorant because people naturally came to that pronunciation.

So what was your Hebrew name complete? It wasn't Charles.

I guess they-- we really didn't-- I don't think that-- I probably got it when I was circumcised. But I really don't remember the name. I think I was told it's Caliph is--

Caliph. So your name originally was Caliph Levi?

Oh, you mean how originally in Yugoslavia?

Yeah, Yugoslavia.

Well, as I was told, by the time I was born in 1932, there were already the-- you could see the storm brewing up. I mean my mother and father, speaking German and so on, were certainly aware of what was going on in Germany. And there were relatives in Germany and Austria. And there was already fear that something bad might come.

And so my mother told me that they wanted to choose a name that was usable in most countries in the world, that there was a direct translation. And so that's what I got the name Charles. But originally, I guess I was referred to as Karli.

Karli?

Yeah, Karl or Karli. In Serbian was Drago.

Drago? You're called Karli Levi originally?

No, no. I was never called Levi.

Never Levi?

No, no, my grandfather changed his name. No, I was born Lorant. No.

So it was Karli Lorant.

Karli or Drago.

Drago.

That's the Serbian name. And then when, as we will see later on when I went to Italy, it was Carlo. And over here it was Charles.

You have a grandson Carlos, which is interesting, your grandson Carlos. What about your family's level of religious observation or cultural observation, assimilation and relationship?

Well, my normal family life really lasted from 1932 to 1941 when the war started in Yugoslavia. And there were two synagogues in Belgrade. There was the Sephardic synagogue and the Ashkenazi synagogue. And we were part of the Ashkenazi synagogue.

So I remember going to High Holidays and religious school. And at home, we were observing Jewish holidays and certainly fasting on Yom Kippur and so on. But I don't really recall any major observation of the Sabbath and so on.

And my father was in business there. He had a bottling company for wine and seltzer water and so on. And, you know, he was integrated in the community. He was a musician and my mother as well. And with friends, their spare time, they played chamber music and had a busy life. But it was not a very-- it wasn't heavily oriented, I would say--

Did you go to Hebrew school or any--

As I recall, yes, I must have started in-- I mean, if I went to the temple, which I remember, I must have also studied some Hebrew. But I--

But you were not bar mitzvahed, were you? The war--

I was not bar mitzvah because--

The war came, didn't it?

I was not my mitzvahed simply because things happened before age 13. And as we will see, at age 13, it was no time for bar mitzvah. But--

Did you ever have a bar mitzvah--

It's an interesting question because--

Were you ever bar mitzvahed now?

No. And which-- I still think about it sometimes that maybe it's not too late.

No, no, it's not. We can work on that later.

Yeah, it might be something to talk about.

To have a-- did you encounter any antisemitic experiences before the war?

In Yugoslavia? Before the war?

Yeah, when you were growing up, you were a young boy, eight, nine, seven, eight, 11, or whatever.

No, I don't recall. I mean, as I said, we were integrated in the society. But from all I know-- and I may as well mention that my wife happens to be Yugoslav too. And her family stem out of--

I was going to ask about that. Your wife--

--Belgrade, except they weren't--

They were Sephardic. Yeah, your wife was Sephardic. Did you know each other when you were growing up?

We are told that we might have met in the park.

At what age?

Well, you know, I was then at age-- in park, I don't know, anywhere from age three to age--

In Belgrade.

--nine when I left. And, you know, OK, she's two years younger. So I don't know. And my mother might have known-- well, actually knew my wife's aunt because they apparently went to the same physical education classes or something. Well, that's-- but the families didn't know each other. And the two communities were reasonably separate. I mean, you know, there were two different temples or synagogues.

So your mother did not know her mother--

My wife's mother, I don't think so.

They were two separate communities.

Essentially. But going back to the question of antisemitism or anything, from what I hear both on my mother's side and from my wife's family, the Jewish community there was an old community, which-- well, of course, going back to history, they came from Spain and settled there. I don't know whether they settled in Yugoslavia directly, but certainly around Eastern Mediterranean region.

And the Jewish community in Belgrade and Sarajevo and so on were long-standing community. And they were prominent in business and medicine and so on. And they had a very good relationship with whatever the ruling classes were, you know, the kings of Serbia and so on. And so they had a very good relationship. And I'm not aware of any antisemitism.

And even going further on when the Nazis invaded Yugoslavia, at least on the Serbian side, they certainly helped the Jews as much as they could. And then we go to the Croatia, that's another story.

That's the Croatians were another-- you're talking about the Serbians.

I'm talking about Serbia. Slovenia-- all right, Slovenia, actually also, there was no overt antisemitism that I ever heard of and not during the war either. They were helpful. But, of course, they were part of Italy, in the Italian occupation zone. So that's--

Slovenia?

Slovenia, yeah. So they were really in a different environment than Serbia, which was under Nazi control and Croatia which had its own Quisling government that essentially out Nazi'd the Nazis in what they did to the Jews as well as to Gypsies and other Serb minorities there.

Before we get into the heavy part of the war time, is there any one light, little story you remember from childhood before the deluge came? Is there any thing that--

That I remember in particular?

Happy times before the war.

I think I just-- no, I can't remember, say, any specific event. I had a very happy childhood.

But do you feel--

I traveled to see my grandparents in Ljubljana and on my father's side my grandfather in Czechoslovakia and went on vacations. And we had essentially a very normal, middle class life. And I enjoy playing piano, which I was taught. And in retrospect, I wish it would have been a violin, which was my father's instrument because that could have been lugged around during the war, rather than a piano, which then I had to discontinue.

And you still play a little?

No, not really. I mean I enjoy music. But I given up the piano. It's been interrupted too much. And I got too critical of what it should be like to try to learn it.

As the prospects of war became imminent, what options were open to you and your family? Did you see the war coming? Did you make any decisions, any plans about as you saw the war coming?

Personally, obviously, I was too small to make any decisions or even participate in the decision making. But I know there was a lot of agonizing about what to do. The war already started in '39, or for practical purposes, I guess already in '38 when the Germans invaded Austria. And the situation there got in Yugoslavia, you know, it felt very threatening.

But I think like in many places, Jews felt that their country was safe and there was no outright reason at that time for Germans to occupy Yugoslavia. But as we will see, that certainly changed. But--

You were only six or seven when the war broke out.

Well, yes, six or seven when the war broke out, right.

And how did you first hear about the war? Through the radios? Newspapers?

Well, at home, I got an old Serbian newspaper which declares. I think we got it-- I just knew it from the news. I mean,

obviously the events in France, first Austria, then France, and Poland, and so on were known at that time. And I think the invasion of Russia started still while we were in Belgrade, and there was no war.

But there was a lot of political turmoil. There was a regent. The king of Yugoslavia was too young. And there was a regent, Paul, that apparently was pro-German. And eventually, there lots of there was a lot of agitation against him. And I think that was actually fueled by the fact that the Germans demanded the right to go through Yugoslavia in order to help the Italians in the war effort against Greece. And so there was a question whether to let the Germans come through. And--

Well, that leads to--

That's what really led to the war.

Right. When did-- now we get into the heavy part. When the war started, you went into hiding, I understand. Is that right?

Well, let me--

Why don't you--

--say how it started.

Let you say how it--

As I said, there was a lot of agitation. And the Yugoslav, or at least the Serbs, did not want to grant Germans any right-- you know, they felt very strongly about their independence. And the regent government was overturned. And there was a government came in that was opposed to Germany-- to giving carte blanche to the Germans to go through. And indeed, things started getting very uncertain. And one nice day-- well, I shouldn't say nice day.

What year was--

--one day in April, and I'm not sure exactly what the date was. It was sometimes in April 1941. At 6 o'clock in the morning, we were woken by what seemed like an earthquake. But, in fact, it was the Germans bombarding the city.

And this is the way the war started. Most people didn't even know about it. And as I understand it, Hitler declared war on Yugoslavia sometimes like 6 o'clock or 5:30 in the morning. And no sooner did he say that that the German planes were all over Belgrade bombarding.

Wow.

And that's how the war started. We were kind of ready. As I said, because of all the agitation, people did expect the worse. And I remember we had some rucksacks already packed and ready to do something if an air raid came. And we went down in the basement where there was a shelter.

My father, by the way, was a reserve officer in the Yugoslav army. So he'd donned his uniform. And after making sure that we were all right, I guess he started finding out where-- starting deciding whether to join his regiment. My mother, of course, said, no, it's useless. Just stay with us.

Did he join the regiment?

Well, he did. But before that, we left the house during a lull in the bombardment. And I remember buildings burning all around. Our house did not get hit. But everywhere else, it was burning.

And by chance, my father saw that there was a horse drawn cart from his company that was going out. That was what

they used to transport wines and seltzer bottles to distribute. And apparently, one of the men had the cart. And I guess he, himself, was trying to escape. And so he hailed him and put us on it. And then he joined his regiment, that's the last time I ever-- we ever saw him or even heard from him.

You mean on April-- what was the date? Or whatever you said, April '41, in the morning, that was the last time you saw him.

That's the last time. We never--

You never had a chance to say goodbye to him?

Well, no, we said goodbye then and there, you know. And he decided-- he was a very idealistic man. He felt that he had to join his regiment and do his duty. And he joined.

And, of course, the war only lasted two weeks.

But he said goodbye? I mean he said--

Well, he said goodbye to us. We will see each other. And we will come back, or whatever. And that was the last thing we ever heard or-- we really had very scant news even after the war to find out where-- from the Red Cross and so on-- where he might have died.

But he died in battle somewhere?

Presumably died in battle.

And the body was lost.

And he was missing in action.

Missing and never recovered.

That's right. Because it was a chaotic situation.

And your mother and you are left to do what now?

Well, at this point, the main concern was to get out of the bombardment. I mean, everybody was abandoning the city. And as I said, I remember the chaos on the streets and roads outside Belgrade because everybody was trying to get out. And cars ran out of gasoline. And Germans came strafing down, strafing the populations that-- I mean, it was like an apocalypse. You know, it was really a--

Apocalypse.

And somehow we ended up after one or two days in a small town outside Belgrade and stayed there until things subsided of course. And then eventually, we were forced-- well, we were told by the police that we had to go back to Belgrade. And in Belgrade, we had to then wear the yellow star.

You wore the Jewish star?

Sure. Sure.

On your clothes, you as a child too?

Of course.

Every Jew, mm, hmm.

We went back to our apartment. And it was requisitioned by German officers. So there was a German officer there, who actually was relatively innocuous. I mean he was getting drunk a lot, as even I remember. But personally, he was not abusive.

Well, there was an aunt of mine too, who now lives in New York, who happened to be visiting in Belgrade, who lived in Ljubljana. And we soon realized-- I mean we knew that things would be just-- that you had to run-- that you had to go away.

Did you feel that the Jews were a target-- Oh, of course--

--next in terms of the Holocaust or--

Well, no, I don't think at that time--

--in terms of just--

No, just in the fact that they were abused. And I think they already were situation there where they rounded up Jews when some Germans got killed. And so they rounded up many Jews and shot them and put them on a work details. I mean the final solution part was not known.

Did you personally see Jews beards being cut off or Jews being humiliated?

That I haven't seen simply because there was no-- in Belgrade, there was no Hasidic type community. No. But I mean, you just knew and heard and so on the thing. So everybody was trying to consider a route of escape.

I'm sure some already made some arrangements before the war. Like my father-in-law, I think intended to go to England. And he had some money transferred there. But--

Were you able to--

That was too late.

--when you say escape, I know that you were in hiding. But were there Jews ready to escape possibly the country or to go to England?

Of course.

You still had a--

Well, no, no, those were arrangements made before the war was soon--

Where would you escape to? Which country?

Well, in our case, the clear path was clearly was to try to go to Slovenia. We were in communication with our grandparents. And Slovenia was under Italian occupation. And things were relatively normal for the Jewish community.

So we made arrangement. And that was our objective, to go Slovenia. And there were some specialists that were forging false documents coming out of Ljubljana to go to Belgrade and take people by train.

And Ljubljana is in Slovenia?



Ljubljana is in Slovenia.

OK. So they would go into Belgrade and take them back into Ljubljana.

That's right. And you had to go through German-- of course, there was all kinds of controls. And you had to go through Croatia.

That's what I was going to ask. You had to go through Croatia.

So they had to provide false documents. And at some times, rip your yellow symbol, badge, the Magen David, because you're obviously not--

Sure.

And the greatest fear, as I recall, for us and I'm sure for anybody else, was to be recognized on the street by somebody because it was, I think, under the threat of death penalty then, not to wear the yellow star. So that was the greatest fear.

What if you were caught? You might have been caught by Croatian guards too on the border crossing. That was also a possibility.

I don't know, just be transported to Germany, if not killed or-- I mean they have an extermination camps themselves there. So--

Did you make it to Slovenia?

Yeah.

You got through.

We got--

It was quite a miracle.

My mother, I, and my father's sister, my aunt.

So there's the three of you.

Yes.

Yeah.

I don't even recall whether we made it together or separately. I mean certainly I was with my mother. But so--

That was a liberating experience just to get into Slovenia.

As I said, at that time, I was nine years old. So I did not have the full understanding of what's going on. But you can imagine. And I've talked to my mother about it. You can imagine her concern.

And I must say that my mother acted-- there's decisions, life threatening decisions that you have to make from day to day in those situation. And she had to make all these decisions. And, you know, of course, she was, as I said, aware of what was going on. So psychologically, that must have been quite a burden on her. And in retrospect, when you think later, she developed nervous conditions and so on and depressions and so on probably as a result of those days.

Yeah. Yeah. Let's talk about now you're now you're in hiding so to speak or is--

No. No. Well, after making--

Now, you're in Slovenia. You're in Italian jurisdiction.

Now, we're Ljubljana. Now in my grandparents' home. No, we're not in hiding at all. And--

What would you call it?

Matter of fact--

It's not hiding. But you have false papers.

Well, we had false papers to make the trip. But after that, now we were in Ljubljana. And the Italians, even though they started racial laws in Italy, and I don't know, I suppose there were also when Ljubljana actually became a province of Italy or Slovenia, they probably had the same laws. But these laws had nothing to do with extermination or even putting people in prison.

Those were laws that said, well, you can't work for the state. Or you can't teach at a university. And you can't have a non-Jewish servant, things like that. But there was no overt threat to the life-- as a matter of fact, I started going to the schools.

I was going to ask you, did you pass as Christians? Or--

No, no, in Ljubljana, we were members of the Jewish community.

And you had a-- what kind of life--

But, you know, we certainly didn't have to wear any stars. We were just going about our own business. And my grandfather, he had a business there of soft drinks and bottling and distribution and so on. And my uncle was part of the business. They were still working at the factory in those times.

So you had--

So it was a normal life--

Until when?

--while all these things-- but that's because this was not now under Nazi occupation.

How long did that last? Until when?

Well, unfortunately, it did not last too long because the Italians kind of-- I guess they were considering the Jewish situation. And they decided that for political reasons they did not trust the Jewish community politically there because they might oppose-- and, in fact, they did that also to non-Jewish intellectuals and so on. And they decided on a policy of transporting or deporting Jews and other ones into Italy and to have them under surveillance.

And so sometimes towards end of October or early November, I'm not exact, in '41. And I don't know whether that was everybody in the Jewish community there. But certainly my family was told that they have to move to Italy and you know where to go and so on.

Were you fearful of that? No?

Well--

It turned out it might have saved your life.

Well, eventually, it definitely saved our lives. And in fact, if I may say at this point, this is really a motivation for me to appear here because I really want to talk a little bit about the flip side of the Holocaust, if you can put it that way, that it wasn't just a situation of cruelty when we talk about concentration camps. That there were other people that helped and risked their lives to save Jews. And we are the beneficiaries of this other side. And there were many people involved, as we will talk about it I imagine a little later.

For the sake of the archives, why don't you mention a few of them?

Well, let me first talk about trip first. But--

Yeah, let's go into Italy now, right, yeah.

So anyway, we were-- my family, you know, we had what you call *lasci passare*, a kind of safe conduct--

*Lasci passare*?

To appear-- to appear--

*Lasci passare*?

No. Well, I guess it's a *lasci passare*, it's a let you pass.

Let you pass.

That's a literal translation. To go to Trieste and then to a town called Vicenza, which is between Padua and Verona. And at least part of my family-- there was my mother, myself, same aunt that I talked about it that happened to be in Belgrade when the war started, with her husband, and my uncle, a brother of my father's, the younger brother, with his wife and daughter, my cousin Kitty. And we were-- so with other people, we were assigned to go to Vicenza.

And I recall, at least I was told, because I don't think at that time I knew enough Italian, that the chief of police when he had all his people collected in front of him, he said, well-- and he was a fascist I assume, to be in position of leadership there. He said, well, I'm sorry that I have to do this. I'm under order. And I have to assign you to places. And I wish I didn't have to do this. But I'll assign you to the nicest towns that I can think of under my jurisdiction.

And what this whole thing consisted of was that we were really under--

House arrest?

--restricted-- well, not house arrest-- restricted residence. In other words, we can only reside-- we could reside in whatever towns we were assigned to. And only through police permission could we go outside of town. And I think the stipulation was you had to report in the morning and in the evenings and so on.

Did you live in a house or houses?

Well, we actually lived in this little town. Well, it was that little a town.

Which town?

Called Breganze, which is in the province of Vicenza. And we lived in a hotel in there.

A hotel.

And the Italian government actually paid a stipend, which was not enough.

It's ironic.

But just to tell you that while the Nazis at that time were already committing unspeakable atrocities in their zones of controls, the Italians were in fact trying to save Jews.

Yeah. Do you have any names of people that you want to place into the archives? Names--

Yes, I do. In fact, I am in the process of doing that with, yeah, in Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem, yeah. I know later we'll show some photos. And maybe we can also mention then--

Let me just say, at that time things were still very normal. So we spent our enforced residence in this little town. And there were other Jews in other towns. My grandparents and another aunt and uncle with their two children, my other two cousins, who unfortunately perished eventually in the Holocaust, they were in an other town in the Dolomites, another beautiful town. And every so often we visited and so on.

So we had a relatively normal life and with people that were kind to us and helpful to us. And we were kind of hoping to just--

Now how long did that last till?

Well, that lasted until '43. In '43, if you recall, Mussolini-- after Rommel got defeated and I think it was already Sicily got invaded, Mussolini was overthrown. And they formed a new government now with Marshal Badoglio. And for a while, of course, all the fascist-- or I shouldn't say all the fascists, but fascist law dealing with political prisoners-- and we were actually considered at that time more like political than Jewish.

Than Jewish.

We just were apparently you know-- since we were Jewish, we were not politically trustworthy in Ljubljana and in other parts I suppose because there were lots of other people in the same situation. And that's the reason we ended up in Italy. But whatever laws--

Yeah, just to backtrack, what were you allowed to do during that time when you stayed in the hotel? Could you work?

No, you couldn't work. No, I don't think-- well, I think people with professions like doctors would just volunteer their services. My uncle who was in the wine-- or was certainly interested in wine production and so on helped, volunteered with local growers because that was in wine growing area. And--

Where did you get food? How did you--

Well, food was served at the hotel. I mean the food was all right.

So you were like guests, like Guests of the Italian government.

We were like guest, in a sense, right. I mean, as I said, you know, not everybody was in the hotel. And the stipend was not sufficient. So people that managed to bring savings and so on had to do it-- I'm sure there were other people maybe not such good shape. And there was in fact, as a matter of fact, there was a concentration camp in Southern Italy where some of the not so lucky ones ended into.

Where was that?

But that was not--

What was the name of that concentration camp?

Oh, gosh, the name escapes me now. But it was certainly not an extermination camp. I mean it was not as pleasant to be in-- was really more like a prisoners of war camp, but--

Did the Italians all know that you were Jews, the people of the town?

Yes. They didn't know much about Jews. And they just felt sympathetic to us because what kind of a stupid government, you know. Why are these people here? You know, why? They had no-- they're just people like us, you know. Why are they treated differently. As I said--

That's refreshing to hear that during the Holocaust--

So they had no feelings of ill will, not even the fascist ones. Of course, there were a lot of-- the antifascists, of course, were sympathizing simply because that's another bad things that the fascists were doing. So automatically we were considered nice people from that standpoint.

So getting now, we're in the final-- the last phase before liberation. Could you go into that a little bit?

Well, now, OK, as I mentioned, after Mussolini got overthrown, for a while some of the laws that were enacted under Mussolini's government were overthrown and particularly those that had to do with political prisoners and so on. So we were really free at that point. Except unfortunately, the Germans were-- they were already in Italy because they were fighting the Allies down south. But now they were just pouring pulling their troops down into Italy.

And when Italy actually signed the armistice, or Badoglio signed the armistice with the Allies, in fact the state of war came about between Italy and Germany. And Italy now became an occupied country, or at least northern and central Italy because the Allies had already were in Sicily. And so the situation was no different-- or would be no different than in Yugoslavia or in Poland or in France.

It became very serious then.

And now that side that I refer to, the fact that there were so many people in Italy that were willing to help Jews or other people in need, and we fell into this protective shield. So if I want to now backtrack what really happened is that in this little town, which was really Breganze, which was really a tourist town as well, in that town there happened to be two friends, two lady friends.

And they became friends of my mother. And these two lady friends, one was called Maria Zonarotti. And the other one was Yole Giadoso. They were kind of the spurs of two extended families that eventually helped. And not just-- the two person kind of-- the two people kind of-- we kind of lost contact, direct contact, as far as the help. But the rest of the family got more and more involved. And--

The names were?

The names?

Once again.

Yole Giadoso.

Giadoso.

And Maria Zonarotti.

Zanarotti.

Now, Maria Zanarotti was from Vicenza, which was the provincial headquarters, the town that I mentioned earlier. And Yole Giandoso was from Padua nearby. But Yole Giandoso, through her husband, it was-- her extended family included people in Milan.

So to recount the chain of events, as soon as the Germans were taking control, everybody had to make some decision. You couldn't obviously stay in the town that you were at because even though the majority of people would have not harmed you, surely there were a few fascists in there that would have denounced you to the police as being Jewish. So you had to leave.

So there were three alternatives essentially. One alternative is to start going south because that's where the Allies were. So that's--

American troop.

You wanted to somehow find your way down and cross the cross the lines, cross the war zone. And in fact that's the that's the line that my wife's family, who had a very parallel history, undertook.

I want you to tell us later how you met too.

Well--

That's also interesting.

--I'd love too.

Yeah.

The other avenue was going into Switzerland. The third one was essentially just live underground or somehow in Italy, which is the path that we chose. Now, none of these were sure ways. You couldn't really say one was better than the other one. I think some people made it either way. I would say most people in Italy somehow managed to survive, most foreign Jews in Italy.

But, you know, there were some that got caught on their way down to the south. There were people that got turned away at the Swiss border or got caught. And in fact, my aunt and uncle with the two cousins that I mentioned earlier, they got caught in Milan somehow. They were trying to make it to Switzerland, which other parts of the family that I mentioned, my grandparents and my uncle, aunt and my cousin Kitty made it to Switzerland. My other cousin and their parents got caught. And as far as we know, they were shipped to Germany and perished there.

You never saw them again?

No, I saw them last in Italy when we visited them. The name was Eva and Peter. They both were slightly younger than I. And you know of other people that got caught trying to cross the border.

So now what happened in my case is-- and you know there are so many people involved, which makes it a little difficult to keep an orderly story.

So many people to thank--

But on the other hand, illustrates my point that a lot of people were involved for no other reason than humanity. They just felt that people were in need of help. And you have to realize that these people risked their lives. If they got caught, they very well might have been shot or sent to Germany.

And a lot of these people had a lot to lose because we're talking in this case people that were middle class, as a matter of fact, some were in the high--

Upper class.

Upper class. Well, anyway I started mentioning--

Who were some of the them?

--the two ladies, Maria and Yole. Now, Yole's husband, Yole Giandoso's husband was prisoner of war somewhere. But she had a brother-in-law, whose name is Lugino, Lugino Giandoso-- or Luigi Giandoso. Actually, you should call him Dr. Luigi Giandoso, who at that time was a young man. And he was refusing to go to the draft. He was getting, you know, by going to medical school was trying to avoid the draft. And he came to visit there a few times. And he became actually my teacher for a while later on.

But anyway, when he got involved when we decided that we had to leave and decided that for a while the adults, like you know my mother to go and hide in the mountain, and I was taken care by with Maria Zanarotti's brother. Well, first of all, they took me by bicycle to Vicenza.

And first, I think I was put in a hospital, I remember, deciding what to do with me. And I was put in a hospital as a false sick person. And the doctors knew it--

That's a good way to hide you.

And the nuns who were the nurses in the hospital knew it. And I was there being protected in hospital. And then this Yole Giandoso first made arrangement with her parents, who lived in Vicenza, to take me in, which happened after the getting out of the hospital. But they were very uneasy. They were very scared. They were older people.

So the next thing is that Maria Zanarotti's brother, who was Sergio Zanarotti, who was the principal in the local technical institute and had his living quarters right next to the institute, decided to take me in. And he had seven children, essentially one year apart, except there was a two-year span, and I fit exactly into it. And I was taken in as the cousin from Milan.

Cousin from Milan.

So I stayed in there with the Zanarotti family. And the mother in the family, her name was Mary, actually Mary Zanarotti, and the seven children. And it was really the first time that I grew up in a family having really--

That's right--

--brothers and sisters. And that was the feeling. And to this day, we are like cousins.

And now you've gone back there?

Of course.

Several times.

And we have visited.

They are like brothers and sisters.

They are like brother and sister. And I was calling the mother, Zia Mary, you know, my Aunt Mary. And Zio Sergio, my

aunt Sergio.

So anyway, it seemed like a long time that I stayed there. And it was really a wonderful experience, you know really living a true family life. But, of course, you can imagine the risk he took to have me.

Where was your mother at this time?

Well, my mother is now in the mountains kind of hiding away with another group of people. And now Maria Zonarotti is apparently already part of the resistance at that time. So she is arranging documents and so on. And you needed also like food coupons because at that time everything was rationed. And so she was arranging some place to go, documents to go.

In the meantime, Yole Giandosio, the original contact, she had an apartment in a town near Milan, called Milanino, little Milan, which was like a suburb actually. It was the first experiment in suburbia in Italy. So she had an apartment there. And she urged us to go to that apartment after we get documents. And that's what we did.

And Luigi, Dr. Luigi Giandosio, came with us, took us by train. And we ended up to go to Milan and then to Milanino. Now in this Milanino now, we got other people because now you had the third brother. This Giandosio, there were three brothers, Aldo, Luigi, or we refer to Luigino, and Riccardo, who at that time was in Switzerland because he was also an officer. And somehow he managed to escape German imprisonment by going to Switzerland, where Aldo actually got imprisoned as an Italian prisoner of war. I think he was located in Greece at that time.

Was your son Richard named after Riccardo?

No. No. Richard was named after my father.

Oh, interesting. Same name. OK.

So there's this third brother, who was married in the Bassetti family in this little town, in Milanino. So now, Mrs. Bassetti became our protector, if you will, in Milanino. And so was Luigi. And through her, we got to know the whole extended family, and we became friends with them. And they procured us whenever we needed documents and alimentary cards and so on.

Who made those documents? The underground? Partisans?

Yeah. So there was a whole group of people that knew our identity. In this case, it was just Mother and I. And we kind of just sat out the war. Nobody denounced us.

As a matter of fact, we were traveling to Milan a few times. I remember going to the opera, of all things, sitting next to German officers and so on. But, you know, you laugh about this time. We try to conduct a normal life. We were not in a cellar. We had forged documents and so on.

It was no problem for me. I could pass for an Italian. By then, I spoke not just Italian, but the dialect. You know nobody would question that I wasn't Italian.

It was a little more difficult for my mother. Her document stated that we came from a place in Istria, which then was Italy, Italian controlled. But it was already sort out of the control of the Italian because of partisans and Yugoslav partisans. So it was hard to trace.

So presumably she was not born in Italy proper. But she had an accent and so on. And from time to time, there were German or fascist, what would you say, they took group of people and checked identities and so on.

Could be picked off--



You know, we were once at a movie. And that's what happened. And those were difficult times. And of course, there was also the war, you know, bombings and so on. But in case of my mother, she was always wondering whether the next day something could happen. And--

You know there was a movie the garden of the Finzi-Continis, which resonated with that same theme--

Yes, to some extent. That was more to do with the Italians and the false sense of security that they had during that period because there was never any history of outright Holocaust in Italy. And of course, that went-- and it wasn't really made too clear in the movie either. I mean the reason they got caught at the end is because Germans were in control. It would have never happened under the fascists, except that during that period the fascists were cooperating with the Germans.

So there were some fascists in Italy that if they found out that you were Jewish would denounce you. Or the militia would take you and hand you over to the Germans. But the population as a general was trying everything to save people that were in trouble, including members of the Catholic clergy, certainly in our case, lent their hands and so on.

Yeah. Before we go into the next phase, the post-war experience, is there any names of priests or nuns or anyone else you want to put on record right now.

No, I don't recall the names of all the priests that-- I remember there was a Don Egidio in--

Don Egidio.

--that was in Breganze, the town that I told you because he invited me. There were always two competing groups, the fascist, you know, like the Hitlerjugend. There was the equivalent there, the--

From the Italian jugend--

Yeah, well called Balillas, Balillas. And so there was fascist youth group. And the Church was trying to compete with them, with some Catholic groups. And I remember that Don Egidio invited me to be with the Catholic group, kids. And I went on sightseeing trips and so on.

So you have a very warm and loving relationship to the Italian people, don't you, to this day?

Of course. And I get very upset whenever I hear in any way having Italians mentioned in the same vein as the Germans.

Germans. They should be separated.

They should be separated. And as a matter of fact, you hear a lot about the Danes. You hear a lot about the Dutch and so on. And the Italians should be right in there.

Right up there.

Because they certainly-- as a matter of fact, before the Germans even took control, other parts of my family, or my wife's family in Yugoslavia, were saved by Italians who actually tried try to keep Croatians and the Nazis from taking Jews or repatriating Jews. There was something on TV about the-- something--

The saving of Italian Jewry?

Well, not about Italian Jewry. But the action that even the fascist government took to safeguard the life of Jews. I mean in spite of the racial laws that they had, they could not accept the treatment that they knew the Germans applied to the Jews. And they did everything, including as I understand, representation in Germany itself.

But in their zone of control, they adamantly refused to hand any of the Jews to German authorities or local authorities

because they were born wherever they were born and so on. They accepted the refugees. And eventually, most of them ended up in Italy. Some eventually got-- there were other ones in Greece and other islands around there that got caught during the events. But those that went into Italy or ended up in Italy, most of them managed to save themselves through the help of the Italian population.

OK, let's go now to the concluding part, this post-war experience. What day, or if you remember the day exactly, when were you liberated? And with who are you with on that day?

Well, everything seems to happen in April, again in April, April '45--

April '45.

--the Allies made it all the way up to northern Italy. But in fact, already a week before the partisans were all over the place. And that area, northern Italy, Milan was already essentially, as I said, they were liberated by the partisans. And the Germans and the remaining hardline fascists were in flight.

So I remember we were all wondering, when are the Americans, when are the British coming? I mean the Germans are gone and so on. So anyway, it happened in April of '45. So this experience that I recounted lasted from essentially September '43 to April '45.

Thus being saved by the Italians.

Being saved by the Italians and living under false pretenses.

Were you suffering any illnesses, physical, emotional, or mental after the liberation? Was anyone--

No. I mean the-- I guess one of the less normal things for me was that all this time I was really not permitted to go to public schools. But I had private instruction. So in a way that made me slightly different from the local people because I probably didn't follow much of a regular curriculum. And my teachers just instructed me and including Lugino Giandoso.

And after the war, we decided to go to Milan. My mother found employment with the occupation forces because she spoke some English, and then eventually with the American Jewish Distribution--

The Joint Distribution--

--Committee. So we moved to an apartment in Milan and essentially started leading a more or less normal life. And I passed my exam. So my instruction must have been pretty reasonable. And because--

You were a 13 at that time when the war ended approximately?

That's right. But you had to pass the exam to go to the-- well, this would be a junior high school. You have to graduate-- you have to have taken an exam that shows that you passed all the requirements of elementary school. And I did that. So in spite of not having formal schooling--

You did well.

--I did well.

How long did you stay in Italy before you came to America?

Until 1949.

'49. And you came to America in '49. And what town did you first come to?

We actually settled first in White Plains, New York, because my mother had a distant cousin there who provided the affidavit.

I see. And then you moved where?

Well, after that, I went to college.

Where was that?

To University of Colorado. I had a scholarship there from the Institute of Foreign Students, or something. I forgot the exact organization. But it happens to be that one of the director of the Joint, David Wallinger, who recently died, became head of this organization over here. And he managed to provide a scholarship to go to college. And I was fortunate.

You probably ran into a lot of soldiers on the GI Bill too.

Oh, of course.

Yeah. That must have been an interesting experience.

That was practically-- not quite a few, at least half of the class was GI.

And some of them might have even been in Italy. That might have been an interesting way to-- your perspective was very different. And so you went and became an engineer.

I became an engineer. And then was kind of at that time in strange situations about getting a job, kind of a Catch-22. I was not a citizen. And yet, most-- at least in Colorado, which was not industrialized, most of the outside jobs had to do with government contracts, where you needed to be a citizen.

And so I decided to volunteer for the army after graduating in '54. So I served two years in the United States Army. And after that--

Where did you serve?

Well, I actually served in Germany.

Oh. That's a whole area that I want to get into another time.

Very strange.

Very strange with soldiers going back to Germany or survivors even or whatever, very interesting topic. I know two or three people like you who served in the American army.

Well, it was an ambivalent feeling that I had there. And--

Then I want to get when you married your wife.

--got out of the army.

We got to get to that before we conclude.

--settled in the Boston area because my mother meantime remarried. And my stepfather's business brought him to the Boston area.

Connie.

Right. Connie.

Connie, yep.

And so they settled in Brookline, 1720-- no, 1768--

Right next to 1724 Beacon Street, yes.

And so after I was through with my army obligation, I settled in Boston, eventually got a job on Route 128 with Sylvania, then Sylvania, now GTE.

GTE as an engineer.

As an engineer. And that's my start of my life over here.

Now, where did you meet your wife? That's the big question.

That is a funny thing. While I was in the army, my mother was working at the Beth Israel Hospital. And this aunt of my wife's that I told you that they went to gymnastic classes back in Belgrade before the war was also working on one of-- Mutual Insurance Company or something in Boston. And they happened to have pretty much the same working hours and used take the Green Line into Boston.

And from what I'm told, several times they happen to be in the same streetcar. And they were kind of eyeing each other--

Now who is they now?

This is my mother and Leah Almuly--

OK, Leah Almuly and your mother--

--which is--

Your mother's first name is?

My mother's Nelly.

Nelly. OK. Nelly.

And so they were eyeing each other and saying, gee, I know this person. But they didn't dare talk to each other. But eventually, they did.

And so they determined that, sure enough, somehow, you know that they came from Belgrade. And so they must have met. And they finally registered that they didn't go to the same synagogue and so on, that they met at this gymnastic classes.

What a coincidence. Unbelievable.

And I remember my mother kind of mentioning that she met this family from Belgrade and they even two daughters and so on and so forth.

So you got interested.

So, well, no, I just said that that's interesting. When I came back, I think one of the first few days that I came back from the army decided to go and have supper at the window shop. There used to be a restaurant-- it doesn't exist anymore-- in Cambridge on Brattle Street.

And my wife was going to Simmons College at that time. And she was actually waitressing at this window shop, which was in--

Ena Almuly. OK.

So we went to supper. And sure enough, you know, here's Ena waitressing. And I think my mother said, oh, you know, this is the daughter of these people from Belgrade that we met and I told you about. And I guess she met her at that time and said hello.

And so it turned out that Ena did not have a car. And it's a long ride from Brookline. And so we gave her a lift because they lived at 1724 Beacon Street. And that's the beginning of our relationship.

And so you met and you went you went on a date.

Well, eventually we dated. And eventually, we decided--

How much later-- how long later did you get married?

It wasn't-- it was only two years later.

Two years later, wow. And I want to mention that you have three beautiful children, Richard, Lisa, and Michael, all very talented. And you have a daughter-in-law, Shoshana from Spain, and a grandson Carlos. And it's kind of like come full circle, your whole life.

I also want to add that we are brothers-in-law for the record. Your wife, Ena, and my wife, Miriam, are sisters. So there must be something from God's hand, I don't know what it is, some kind of momentous thing that brings children of survivors together, Ashkenazic and Sephardic together.

And anyway, I want to thank you for a very beautiful story and very well put. And we're going to stop so we can get pictures of your family, et cetera. Thank you.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity because I think it's not so much my story, but the story of the people that helped us that I really wanted to focus on.

Yeah.

It's a worthwhile story in that respect.

Thank you very, very much. Thank you. Oh, wow.

Why don't you take your pictures and--

I don't even know which picture to start with. I've got hundreds of them. Oops.

Well, start with the ones you mentioned in the story.

You can walk around.

You want me to--

You can leave it on. That's fine.

You have a picture of you as a child. You have that--

Well, I got them. I just got to get them, you know.

I feel like Jay Leno, you know, his first appearance on the Today-- that's hard work.

Where do you want to put them? Here?

Just set them down.

OK.

Let's get some lunch. You have to get out of here at 11:30--

11:20. I have another appointment.

You have a meeting?

Yeah.

Can I help you in some way?

All right.

Who is this person?

This was my grandmother. But--

Is that your father?

Yeah.

Yeah, your father and mother are very important to see. Your father-- should I-- how are you going to do that? Hold it up here.

Sit down in the chair and hold it.

Why don't you sit down in the chair, Charlie. The camera's low. And just show them--

Do you want to show the map? Or you don't need the map?

All right, well, go ahead. I'll get the map. I'll show the map.

All right, well, tell me where-- well, wait-- I don't know whether.

Well, all right, so just get people just get some idea of where-- here, why don't you hold that in here.

Well, first of all, I wanted to start with this picture here because that's the one-- so you want me to recount this thing?

Pardon?

Talk about them?

Yeah. Tape this running.

Well, just to very quickly, this lithograph that I was talking about, this is my grandmother--

Charlie, you have to turn around and face it to me. Thank you.

This is my grandmother over here and her mother and her father. So these are my great grandparents. And this picture was taken, as I said, in Brno, Czechoslovakia.

And now this is my grandmother, as I said, she made it actually to the United States after the war. And this is a picture here of her in Savannah, Georgia, shortly before she died. So she saved herself by going to Switzerland. And then another aunt of mine from Austria that settled in Savannah took her home.

This is my grandfather, again, on my father's side. And this was actually taken at a time I was in Ljubljana when we escaped from the Germans. And I remember-- his name is Adolph, of all names. And he was always every day walking to the park and feeding the pigeons and squirrels. And I remember that.

This picture over here is my father.

Richard.

Of my father Richard. And as I mentioned, he just left for the war and never to return.

And this is a picture of my mother from those days. Of course, I have more recent ones. But that's how she looked at the time that the war started. And that's how she looked during the days that we together were-- she took care of me escaping.

Why don't you show them the map a little bit.

Well, from the map, you can see this is Belgrade. And I have traced this map because I made a trip back. And this is-- but essentially, when we escaped Belgrade, we went this way, and Pozarevac is the town that we kind of were refugees.

And then we managed-- after coming surviving the air attack and then not getting caught by the Germans in Belgrade, we went to Ljubljana, which is down here, through Croatia to Ljubljana. And then, of course, when we went to Italy, we went by way of Trieste into Italy.

I should say, by the way, that a lot of people ended up in Dalmatia and managed to somehow go to Italy from there. So that was the other escape route was through Albania. But in our case, we went to Ljubljana because our family connection.

If you look at the map of Italy here, again, it's marked because our trip, but here is-- here is--

I'm going to try to help you hold it this way.

Here is Vicenza. Vicenza is over here, now this circle over here. And Breganze, the little town, is really not shown. But it's essentially north of Vicenza. And this is where we--

Near Venice.

It's between--

Milano.

Any part--

Rome is here.

And then after Germans moved to control of Italy, after my stay in Vicenza that I mentioned with the Zonarotti family, we ended up again north of Milan, Milanino, which again is not shown. But it was just a 10 kilometer out by streetcar. So that's another.

Thank you once again.

Well, I-- welcome, I got other things. You want to see a picture of when I was small at that time? Or is it too late?

I just turned--