

National Council of Jewish Women Sarasota-Manatee Section
Holocaust Oral History Project
Interview with Leah Mayer, Survivor
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Bradenton, Florida

Wednesday, the 27th of January, 1988. I am Harry Rosenberg, the interviewer for the National Council of Jewish Women, Education and Social Action Service. I am at the home of Leah Mayer and Mrs. Mayer will tell us of her experiences during World War II in Yugoslavia.

Q: Mrs. Mayer, you just feel at ease and tell us, perhaps, how your earlier youth was spent, about your life, your parents.

A: Well they, um--I was born in a small town near Zagreb, but we lived in Zagreb. And there was a --I don't really didn't know how many Jews...

Q: Speak slow if you can, not too fast please. Okay, we're ready.

A: Um, it was an outside Jewish community--Zagreb. Most of the Jewish were, ah, Austrian or Hungarian, origin because Yugoslavia was part of the Austria-Hungarian Empire until the First World War. And, the Jews were all, ah, integrated into the life--like they got considered as Yugoslavs, not Jews. There was just their religion and being Yugoslavia consist of many, many religions, especially Zagreb, the city where I lived. And even in the high school where I went--in my class we had Greek Orthodox and Protestants and Moslems and, uh, Unitarian and Jewish--I think about five religions mixed in one class. And there was no difference. Absolutely, we never felt anything to be ostracized because of religion. We, ah, had even--religion was part of the education--public schools. We had once or twice a week religion. Each one of the class would go part because they respected--religious teachers were coming and from several classes they would put together the same religion. I think twice a week we had religion. And, ah, I never felt any anti-Semitism from my classmates or friends or anywhere that--we did not feel that. My father was a merchant. My father was in textile business and he had two stores together with a, with a cousin of his--they were partners--retail silks. And he was traveling twice a year to France to bring silks. We had an excellent education at home. I had private French, ah, ah, classes--conversational. I had a governess, ah, from Germany--Austrian German language up till fourteen years of age. And in the school we, in--and the high school we also--we had German and French, and later Latin. So, we had a real good education. There was nothing, ah, what we would feel if some different from anybody else. We celebrated our holidays. We were not. We were not obliged to go to school on our Jewish New Year or anything--holidays. And that was--oh, Yugoslavia at that time was a Kingdom...a Kingdom, and um, every big Jewish holiday--New Year, Rosh Hashanah--and representative of the King would assist in the services of the synagogue because all those big cities had very big

synagogues--like Zagreb—was a very beautiful synagogue, Zagreb, Sarajevo. And, I know that the representative of the King was always present on those big holidays. They respected the Jewish community. There were never any, anything. The chief Rabbi, ah, was received by the King. So we enjoyed a very good relationship among all the, ah, religions until the, um, politics of the pre-war--pre-war--not second--how do you say that...

Q: Prior to World War II.

A: Prior to World War II--when, um, Hitler's Germany tried to pressure Yugoslavia into signing a treaty with them. And, um, the Nationalist Croatian, the Separatists, started to plot against the Kingdom, against the Serbian--and the whole thing started to boil little by little. And, um, those Croatian Separatists were known anti-Semites. But the, ah, heads in exile and that's--Antipovlish (?). And he's the same that, ah, Tookovich (?) who just died now in jail in Belgrade-in Yugoslavia. He and some other big shots were in Italy, exiled, and they were also responsible for killing the King Alexander in 1936 in France and we had a Regent since then. That was the King's pavel because the, the young king was minor. And then was a coup d'etat and the king took over, Peter. That was in 1942, just before the Germans invaded Yugoslavia because they, the, the government, the, the king didn't want to sign a pact with Germany. And in the meantime the Jews--we were feeling so secure--we just couldn't believe that a--nothing could happen to us. And we couldn't believe that Hitler would be able to conquer Yugoslavia. I had an uncle who was an officer in the Yugoslav Army and he said the army is so well equipped that they, the Germans would never be able to, to conquer, ah, Yugoslavia--and eight days later they were right in the middle of Zagreb.

Q: Could I ask you just...how old were you then? Did you graduate school, high school?

A: I was, um, what we called it "matura" in our language. It doesn't exist here. It was some kind of...it was the eighth year of (words missing in original transcript)--of the high school, and you couldn't go to university if you didn't have that, ah, graduation. And, um, the times were so bad I wanted to go to study to France and I couldn't because the times were already very bad. So, I remained and my father, ah, asked me to get--to learn some, ah, office work--like typing and, ah, German stenography, and to help him in his office. And so, ah, because I couldn't--it, it was already very difficult, um, to go to any foreign country--dangerous. So, um, when the, ah--in nineteen--in April, 1941, the Germans came into Yugoslavia. And right away those, ah, exiles Separatists, ah, Ustersha (?) were back already--and they right away collaborated with the German invaders--with the Gestapo. They set up offices against Jews. They took over the Jewish community--they got a list of all the Jews who resided in the city. They--right away--they were so preoccupied with getting all--a hold of all the, ah, material goods about the Jews, per se. And they decreed that the Jews have to wear, um, the Star of David on a yellow ground with, a--that Juito (?)--it means Jew in

Yugoslavian, in Croatian. And, um, every Jewish family had to give so much money, ah, like--it was really not ransom, it was like a tribute. It helped to give them--I don't even know to whom it went--but I knew the Jewish community was in charge to collect all that. And, um, then they--everywhere certain restriction of times when you were not allowed--the Jewish were not allowed to be in the street. They had to wear the signs, but they were not allowed to be after seven in the evening or before nine in the morning, or ten. They were not allowed to go to the markets, ah, ah, prior to a certain time. They were not allowed to go to public places like theaters or movies or, um, or, um, entertainment--cafes and...All the Jewish stores immediately got commissars...a...how do you say?

Q: You mean commissars?

A: Ah, how you say, um, yeah...

Q: Someone took them over--ran them for the Jews.

A: Yes, there were, ah...if there was nobody amongst the employees who was in that Nazi Party or, or part of that Separatist movement, then they would send somebody who they deemed...

Q: Able to run them.

A: Who, will run that, ah, that place. And the Jewish owner had, had to go out and they had nothing to do--they couldn't do anything more with the store. It was just like--just taken away from them.

Q: And they, of course, didn't pay you anything for those businesses.

A: Oh, of course not!

Q: They just took them away from you.

A: They just took them away. They--first they said--under the pretext that they should have a. um, like a commissar who takes it. But then they, the owner was absolutely not allowed to do anything.

Q: Now could I ask you just one question before you go on, please, and that is: prior, did the Jews see any danger of Hitler coming?

A: I don't know--but we didn't.

Q: They felt that they were at home there?

A: We were so...we felt we were part of everything.

Q: I understand.

A: We never, we never felt ostracized. We never felt anything.

Q: That is true of many Jews in Europe who didn't leave, just because of that. Well, please continue.

A: Then, um, they started to round up prominent people in the Jewish community. The presidents of the B'nai Brith and, ah, ah, acted very--lawyers, doctors. No, I'm sorry. Not doctors. No, no. They needed the doctors. And no--they--there were mostly lawyers and big industrialists. They imprisoned them. They made like a--like some kind of camp in a, in some kind of old (words missing in original transcript) somewhere outside Zagreb. And, um, then they didn't know at first what they're going to do with them. In the meantime--we didn't--we didn't--nobody knew what was going on. They said they, ah, interrogations, or a--or, or some kind of work...Then they started to round up young men, um, those who finished high school or were in, in university. Ah, most of my contemporaries, and my brother's contemporaries, were killed because they rounded them up. They said first they need them for some kind of work, whatever. We believed all kinds of stupid things.

Q: Forced labor.

A: We just forced labor. And they even made a list what they have to take with them. A, a backpack and then, and vitamins, and, ah, and, and then so many and, two or three shirts and this and that, you know. They just were making believe things--in the meantime they were just all killed. Of this, my class, practically, they all were killed. Those boys who were, who went to the ((words missing in original transcript)

Q: Were they taken to concentration camps, or killed in Yugoslavia?

A: You--there was not even concentration camps. They took them somewhere into the south of Zagreb, in the mountains between Dalmatia and Zagreb--into some mountains. They just dumped them from the, from the mountains. The Belepe (?) called it--the mountains. They just killed them right there. We, we only found that out later. We didn't--they just disappeared and nobody knew what happened to them. Then--that was before the organized concentration camps. Well, then, then they had already, a few months later, organized the concentration camps. Then they started to round up everybody.

Q: Can I just go back one step when you said that they arrested, or the industrialists and the prominent people--that was the move to confiscate their wealth, was it not?

A: Yes.

Q: That was the reason?

A: That was the reason.

Q: They forced them to give up all their wealth?

A: Yes.

Q: To the Nazis. I see. Well you go back to your time...

A: Um, in the meantime they, um,--Yugoslav, Yugoslav, Yugoslavs started to--who were not anti-Semite, and who were not for the Separatists--they started to organize--like Partisans..

Q: Resistance.

A: ...in the mountains. (words missing in original transcript) movement. Partisan movement. So, then those who were not, those Jewish people who are not rounded up yet and who were able-bodied, wanted to join the Partisans--run away into the mountains because somehow a connection--also, some women went. Little by little people started to disappear. You didn't know if they, ah, went into the mountains or if they were caught by the Jews. And if they, ah, went...

Q: The Gestapo.

A: The Gestapo. They really--what happened first was it's a small towns where they were much easier to get up all those Jews together--like in the town called (words missing in original transcript) I was born where my grandparents resided and were born because my grandparents were--my grandmother was second-generation already born in that little town and my father's mother and my, my mother's parents have been since two or three generations already--from those towns. So, they rounded up all the young people and they brought them into the city of Zagreb and they put them in a--like a fairground place--and nobody knew what was going on. People didn't know that we...they already had a concentration camp prepared for women and for men, separate. They even had two. So then they started to ship them and, ah, select them. And they sent the women to one and men to one. And then they sent some to an island where salt mines were, where they, where many people died there because they didn't give them to eat anything. And, um, I really know two survivors from that who were, who run away when they--after those which still survived in those salt mines--they moved them--they wanted to send them to those other concentration camps which were built in the meantime. And when they transported them by train, they run away from some station where the train stopped. Two ladies who were later with me (in Clerund (?). and, um, from all those small towns they right away picked Jews and send them to Zagreb, which was--I talk about Croatia now...

Q: Yes.

A: To Zagreb, and then from there they put them into all different concentration camps--men and women. They had already one north of Zagreb, one east of Zagreb for men and one for women. And, then slowly, little by little, they cleaned them all out. There was nobody remained alive from that concern...from those women's concentration camps. Nobody remained alive.

Q: Ahhh. But did they...

A: As far as I know, I lost a lot of my family. My grandparent mother and, and, and, my grandmother, my mother's sister, and, ah, cousins and, ah, friends and...

Q: These people that were—that you lost, this was done in Yugoslavia or were they shipped to the...

A: No, that, that was...

Q: ...infamous concentration...

A: They did not ship. They...

Q: ...or right in Yugoslavia?

A: ...took care of them right in Yugoslavia.

Q: I see.

A: They were so cruel, those young--those were mostly just youngsters, those, um, Croatians--kids.

Q: The Germans really...

A: The Germans didn't even have to, move a finger.

Q: I see. Well, that's what I wanted you to bring up.

A: Those were not the Germans. They were just the Croatian, ah, the Separatists at Usterstar (?). The collaborators. Well, we were not the only one--the Jews affected--they, they was after the Serbians also, because there were plenty of Serbians living in Croatia.

Q: What religious...

A: Greek Orthodox.

Q: Greek Orthodox.

A: But it, it wasn't really their religion, it was the Serbians', because the Croatians--it was not the Germans--it was the Croatians went against the Serbians because they said that during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia they, the Serbians, were always those who were getting the best out of the whole country--that all the tributes, all the, um,...

Q: Taxes?

A: ...taxes and everything wound up in Belgrade, and um, that, ah, the government was formed mostly of Serbian politicians that, um, they were subject to persecution because they have been just Croatian Separatists were exiled--they, they head to Italy. And, um, now they had their revenge. So the Serbians had to work--red bands over the arm, like the Jews had to wear those, ah, those patches, the yellow one. They said the Jews have to wear yellow because they were, um, gold bearing.

Q: Well, the gold diggers. Or were they interested in money, or gold?

A: Greedy for gold, and the Serbians were blood...

Q: Bloodthirsty?

A: Bloodthirsty. So the Serbians...

Q: Had to wear the red band.

A: Had to wear red bands. That in Croatia, while the Germans occupied Serbia and Bosnia with the Moslems. The Moslems were more--99.99 for the Germans.

Q: Moslems. Oh, yes, yes.

A: And the Serbs were all against the Germans. They found maybe one or two who would collaborate with them. But the Germans they did in Serbia what the Croatians did in Croatia against the Jews--because the Serb--they couldn't find any Serb who would kill a Jew in Serbia. And in Bosnia the, the Moslems themselves would also--they were really part of Croatia. They were all against--were a lot of them against the Jews, or 99% against the Jews. But in--Serbia--the, the Germans were not really persecuting the Serbians as Serbians. They, the most of the Serbians then organized into two different guerrilla. One were the Czechs (?) which were fighting the Croatians. And one with the partisans, which were fighting the Germans. Now, of course, they raid villages and whatever that they did--the Germans against those who were against them and Jews and took them away. But no Serbian collaborated inasmuch as I know.

That the Germans did themselves--while in Croatia they didn't even have construction parties. The Croatians were doing it all by themselves.

Q: I see.

A: That was the difference.

Q: Well, that's an age-old, age-old battles of the Balkans between Croatians and the...

A: That's right. Now the Germans tried to help some prominent Serbian in Croatia. I had a very dear friend who was Serbian and her father was arrested by the Ostershuss (?). Then she went to a--ah, to the German bishop who, through his intervention, got her father out of jail and he was hiding and then he went...I helped her in the--he got a, a special permit that he can leave Zagreb on the train for Belgrade and the Ostershuss couldn't do anything. And they moved to Belgrade. But those which is--the German couldn't help too many of the Serbs. A lot of Serbs are—that, that put by those, um, Croatians into cattle cars and just simply into sealed trains, thrown into the Sava river and drowned.

Q: So they did their own killing. At that time...

A: And the Jews were sent to the concentration camps and they were all exterminated right there.

Q: In the concentration camps created by the Croatians?

A: In Croatia. In Croatia they were all exterminated right there.

Q: So you're saying that the Serbians were really favorable to the Jews but were powerless against the Croatians?

A: They were...

Q: Now what happened to that young king? He wasn't quite of age then.

A: He run away. He wound up in, in United States and he lived sometime in Chicago and he died there many years ago. And they say he was an alcoholic. So...

Q: They didn't--couldn't help themselves.

A: They couldn't help. They couldn't do anything. They had to run away themselves. So...

Q: What was your situation during that period?

- A: So, I--my own situation was that my father was born in that little town next to Zagreb and went to school there with, with, with--the schools were mixed--all religions, as I told you before--and one of his comrades become one of the Separatists. And he became the chief of the Jewish Police in Zagreb. Now, there are those which say my friends who were Jews are good Jews. For the others, I don't care. So, he took--the people who--to those--the family of those who went, who went to school--that was my father and some other people from that town went to school with him--he gave papers that they can go away. Like, they called it like a, a Lasapasada (?) in Italian. It means "let them go."
- Q: Exit. Visa.
- A: Ex...well, exit—but we didn't get entries to nowhere.
- Q: That's what I wanted to know.
- A: We just could get out.
- Q: That's right. But not in.
- A: But nowhere in.
- Q: I see what you mean. That's real interesting. Why don't you complete...
- A: You know. So, at least we got papers that we knew that will help us if nobody would touch us. My father got, ah, out from that--about I told you like that fairground--when they came from the town, the people, it was his brother-in-law and his nephews and his own brother and, ah, some other people from the town--he got them all out of there.
- Q: Yes.
- A: So now they all got out. So then my--we, for instance, also my brother and I, we were hiding. We never opened the door for anybody when they were ringing because those Ostershuss were going--they had lists of the Jews who were living in all the districts. And every district they had ah, those young kids--those Ostershuss had like an office and they, they would go to all those Jewish homes and, um, take away whatever---carpets or things--but they wouldn't take them themselves. For instance, they came once to my father's--to our store, our apartment--they said--I want tomorrow, we want this carpet and this, and this, and this, and this, and indicated things--into that headquarters there and there. My father never bothered to send anything. We never sent anything there. And no, and then we never opened the door anymore. We had, but you could see, we were walking with--without shoes in the, in the house and we, we were very careful and we had a Serbian janitor. They were very nice people. They later, I understand,

they were taken away and nobody knows what happened to them. And, um, when they started to round up young people, like my age, my brother's age, then I went away. I went--I had an uncle in a village. He was the only Jew in, Jew in that village. And they had a, like a tavern, a restaurant, he and his wife. And they were very friendly with the priest and with all the village people. And I stayed for about a week until the whole, ah, roundup finished. And then I came back. And I traveled without the Jewish sign, without anything, you know, the...and, um, then we were told that we can go to part of Yugoslavia which is annexed by Italy because when the Germans invaded they traveled from the north. The Italians invaded from the south and right away annexed some town in Dalmatia, and, um, along the Adriatic Sea, they annexed. They made it like Italy. They had their own, ah, like--it could have been Italy. Then they occupied military--well, a lot of other towns. But the civil--the civilian government was Croatian, but the military command--commander has--what he had to say was....

Q: Law.

A: Was law. So we were told that we can get into those annexed territory. It—and from there into Italy itself, eventually. But you needed people who would smuggle you into there because, see, you couldn't get from them the permit to go in, but we had at least from the Croatians that we can leave. My mother--my father still remained because he had a--his father was still alive, who was an old man and, um, (words missing in original transcript) little town and he was always going to visit them and he figured that he can, in the last moment, always get away. So, my mother and my brother and an aunt of mine, and I, we left with one of the smugglers. I don't know how, it was some kind of a grapevine where you got, eh, somebody--or somebody in--you know.

Q: I understand. You paid for it too, I presume?

A: So we got to the railroad station. We had to work in silence because there was this young Ostershuss. You were allowed to have a, a little suitcase--something like those Cubans when they were leaving Cuba, you know. Then when we got there, then they looked into everything and we only--that cost maybe ten dinars or something, to have a (words missing in original transcript) that time because it was not even the dinar anymore. They changed. They had their own, eh...

Q: Currency?

A: Currency--those Croatians then. And then, um, we were allowed to go on the train. But we had to get at the border out. And that woman who was taking us, she was with us, without--you--we made like we don't know who she is. But we followed her and we got into the train, which was going towards (words missing in original transcript), south--and before we got there--because out. And there were again this Ostershuss. Again they looked us all up and--but those in Zagreb still didn't take away, they still took away. By the time the--we, we finished with

it practically--they had maybe one change of clothes or something for us. And they looked even in the shoes if that—they couldn't have, um, any money with us, or anything. I really don't know how or--I think that woman had some money, our money or something. Then we had to walk. We had to walk over the border what was Croatia into that part which was annexed territory of Italy. We had to walk up and down and down and up. And we got...

Q: How old were you at that time?

As: Mmm—about twenty.

Q: Oh.

A: And my brother was a year and a half younger. And then we wound up in Soucha (?) Then when we got to Souchok there were already a lot of our people there and, eh, there was a café where everybody was--and then you went right to the cristoura (?) and you got this permit for eight days and, eh, food stamps from the Italians.

Q: So, in other words, the Italians helped the Jews?

A: The Italians helped a lots of Jews. But they gave you only for eight days, okay.

Q: I see,

A: After eight days you were supposed to get appeal from there.

Q: Yes?

A: Well after eight days we went underground.

Q: Yes.

A: You know. So, um, we couldn't--yeah, my brother--for my brother and, two cousins of mine--somehow they arranged--they went to Ljubljana, which was Slovenia, but that was also next by Ita--Italy. And somehow, from Ljubljana--it was not like from Souchok. Ljubljana--all the Jews were taken into Italy automatically, into a con-confino libero (?). If they had money, they were taken to little towns. My brothers went--wound up with my cousins in Italy, and my uncle into some (words missing in original transcript) little town. Dianova (?). And, um, but in Souchok, somehow it was impossible to get into it--I mean, until you really had a lot of money. It's a--there was a bridge between the, the Croatian part of--and the old Italian, which was always Italy, which was Fiume and Souchok. And that bridge was like something--you just couldn't get over that bridge. It was like a fortress. You just couldn't get over it. It was very, very difficult. I know very few people who, who, who got over it.

Q: But did lots of money--could buy you...?

A: It--it was a lot of money, a, a lot of fre--friends, or connection, or those who have tickets to take a boat from there for, eh, Spain or for, eh, America, or for Canada. I had some part of family and friends who went that way. So we went underground. And then one day, whatever happened, they started to round up people and they arrested me. I have my maiden name of Heutchler (?) and I had a cousin who was in the Partisan, Eric Heutchler (?). and he was working somewhere around there and they had a warrant for him. And when they saw my name, they put me to jail right away and interrogated me--I know anything. I said--didn't--I didn't even know at the time any relative--any relation to that Heutchler (?) - -that he was my third cousin, and we went to school together. But I said I never--I don't know who he was, or where he was, whatever. And then they repatriated me back. And I was with my aunt, with my mother's sister, because they took both of--but I stayed with her, in her apar--room what we rented. My mother was in a different place. We, we all separated. So, ah, my aunt and I, we had to spend one night in the jail. The next day They put us in the (words missing in original transcript) They put us--they took us over to what was occupied--military occupied zone by the Italian--which was not annexed. So after a few days, my mother realized that we are not going to come back so she went alone to--she went herself to the Italians--then said she wants to be sent there too.

Q: I see.

A: After us. When my father was still up in Zagreb and after his father passed away, who was an old man--who maybe died from a heart attack--and, uh, he came down on that famous paper, eh, from his friend--and he got to, to (words missing in original transcript) which was really Croatia, but was occ--military, uh, Italian occupied--and he remained there. So, we stayed there very happily. We were--we could live--we could live privately. We had nothing to do with the Croatians and the Italians, eh, were protecting us.

Q: Well, what did you live on? What did you have...how could you survive without funds?

A: Well we had money.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: We had money and--so we, we lived there.

Q: Did this woman that smuggled you out give you the money?

A: Oh, that--yes--I don't know who. I don't, I don't know that my fa

ther arranged that, my mother arranged it--I didn't know how it was. It's it's--this I don't know. This--we were at that time, you know, when you were twenty years old, you were really like a child--if your parents arranged everything for you--that is--that's how we were at, at that time. And that was in--over--we left in August '41. In, ah, Sept--in September, in September we were--I was already in that place called ((words missing in original transcript) which was Croatia military occupied. And my mother and my aunt, my brother was already in Ljubljana and already in Italy from--Ljubljana. And the other part of the family was to save themselves. And, um, my father came down already at the end of that year. In '41--he was already with us, and remained. And then there were no Jews left anymore. My mother's mother-- and my mother's sister was the secretary of the Jewish community in Zagreb. And she was the one who always said that they organized everything--you know--the (words missing in original transcript) they were so stupid, everybody say that they didn't, didn't believe that something could--they really, they really thought that just resettle them, or they send them--who knows where or what. And my aunt had immunity and her mother, which was my grandmother. But when the last Jew left they took them too.

Q: Yes, yes, yes.

A: And they were both killed. Right in Croatia.

Q: Oh, oh.

A: ...and, um, so then there were no--practically no Jews. And there--not practical--there were no Jews, uh, no Jews in--living as, as--in Zagreb. There was nobody anymore. And, um, so my father didn't go back anymore. And from that little town where his father still lived, where he would go and visit him always--they took also everybody away. First, all the old Jews were together under one roof in my grandfather's apartment. And then they, they took them away--they killed them all. And drove which were taken--the, the man from the town--the Jews that were taken to--that man, that very, very miserable concentration camp, (words missing in original transcript) which--where everybody was killed. And the women were taken to another one. They were also killed. They were all killed still in, in Yugoslavia--in Croatia.

Q: And this killing was done by the Croatians?

A: By the Croatians.

Q: Germans only in...

A: The Germans were not even near there. They, they didn't need it. They didn't need them. They did all themselves. There were from some towns, from Serbia and from some other towns near Serbia, they would take them to Germany.

Q: I see.

A: Poland. I mean to Auschwitz, to Poland--to those concentration camps--and killed there. Now, um...

Q: In '41, of course, the war was still being won by the Germans, so to speak.

A: Yes. That was already '42.

Q: The Italians, in '42, yes.

A: In '42 we were still in Italy. In, in that, uh, town--that little town. And, um, the Italian--no, the Croatian just couldn't do any...we had nothing to do with the Croatians and nobody could do anything. But then, one morning, just like out of the blue skies, a carabinieri came. That was in, ah...

Q: The police, carabinieri...

A: In November '42--and we were, we were a year already there. In November '42 there came the carabinieri with big trucks and started to gather all the Jews and take them to another town nearby where there was like a concentration camp, was a Partisan (words missing in original transcript) They had the Partisans. They had like barracks with like--military barracks

Q: Yes, yes.

A: And we were so terrified, we didn't know what happened. And in that villa where we lived--that woman was renting several rooms--we had one room and a kitchen. And there was a--another small, uh, little apartment--and there were the--an Italian high officer and his wife and a little boy and we were friendly with him. So I run over to his office, which was the (words missing in original transcript) headquarters, was Italian, and asked him what happened--what--that they are rounding up the Jews. So, he didn't know. So he called and he left and drive, and finally he said to me--you don't have to worry--and--the Germans want you to be ex--extradited to Germany- -take us to, what--whatever. We didn't know it yet about Polan- -Poland--that it's a concentration camp, and that kind of thing. The Germans have sent word that they want us extradited. The Croatians have been asking if we should be sent away. And they wanted to save us, so they are sending us to this, ah, their own (words missing in original transcript), their barracks where they evacuated overnight all the Partisans which they have --I don't know where they took them to annihilate them somewhere. Because every fighting it- -eh, the Partisans--the Partisans were fighting the Italian as allies of the Germans, you see, and (words missing in original transcript). So they had a lot of Italians there. So they put us --they said we are going to be 100% under their jurisdiction and nobody can do anything against us. We're going to be

behind barbed wire. But they are going to do everything for us to have to make our life complicated and, and secure, and we should be, be --we don't have to worry --we can take all our belongings with us, whatever we possess, whatever we have. We didn't have, eh, but some clothes and some money, but...

Q: These are the Italians doing that? They are...they helped. They're saying they're helping?

A: They did that. So then, when we got those barracks everything was in very decent... now I want to add to this that after the war we found out the following. The little book came out with--was telling the story of us--that we were about thousand two hundred Jews there. Those which were repatriated from Souchok who couldn't get into Italy, who were in those little towns of Croatia under the military occupation of Italy. They were all taken into that, uh, into those barracks. Now, after the war we found out the following -- that the sec--secretaries, the personal secretary of Mussolini in Rome, put away that he--that, that an order came that we should be extradited. The Germans wanted us extradited, that trains were already in Fiume ready to take us to Poland, where ever to--Auschwitz or so. He kept that in his drawer, never gave to the Duce to sign it. The Duce probably wouldn't have signed it anyhow. And they give order to those generals, it was the--whatever--General Domato (?) was his name who had that territory under his, his, eh, jurisdiction. That they should do everything in their, in, in their, um, power to save us, to take us away from the Croatians and from the Germans. A year after we were in that, eh, concentration camp, what we called--they took us to an island which was annexed to Italy. It was a Yugoslav island which is today back Yugoslavia (words missing in original transcript) where they had big, they had housings for those Partisans which were taken away and those Partisans built for us, eh, like rooms for families, you know, that--it--everything was very primitive but we had everything. And before they moved us, during this--during--it was less than a year--we stayed from November until about August, September next year--'43--no, we were not even--and, ah, before the armistitio (?) shortly before the armistitio--before the--September '43--we were moved to that island. So we were almost a year on the mainland and they organized so--the kitchen and everything with this, ah, the delegates from the Jewish community--from this twelve hundred people--we had our religious, uh,--like a temple, you know--Fridays and Saturday. Those who were children had like a school that they can learn. There was a special kitchen for sick people and um, the kitchen for the children, and, ah, they put up.

END OF SIDE A

would go with, um, Italian officers to Fiume to get the provisions what the army was getting because the Croatians, they didn't get it --they didn't have all that food--that everything was rationed--so we were getting everything like the army, like the Italian army. We paid for it but we got it. We got everything. We, we

were not hungry. We could--we, we had a kitchen which was like a military kitchen and we could even do something on little stoves on our own.

Q: Did the people who went into this group--they--somebody must have had money to...

A: No, we--they all had money.

Q: They all had some money...

A: They all had--because they were all consignalibras (?), they were all wealthy—I mean like middle-class, or, or, or...

Q: I see. And they were bringing them--they got that money out of Yugoslavia?

A: Everybody had money. They all got money out.

Q: That's very good.

A: So, um, then we, then there came the orders that they want to send us to an island and after the war we found out why it was--because the Germans and the Croatsians are really putting their fists down that they had to--they said--why do you keep them here, give them to us, we will keep them the same way, but we want them in, in, in--away from here. And they wouldn't. So they took us to that island. It's--the general himself came to the camp and told us he wants--if he could hide us somewhere. He said--his words were...

Pause while Mrs. Mayer regains her composure.

Q: ...he said--he would hide us somewhere where nobody could see us and produce us safe--and alive--with the whole worries over--that's how he, he hold a speech and told us that. And he said--but that's all what he can do is to move us away from the coast, to put us away from this miserable--(words missing in original transcript) the people there where we were...they just couldn't us if we, we were (words missing in original transcript) Croatsians. But he really also said that the--all the Croatian population there--they were miserable. And, uh, so we, we got to that island. That was in, ah, in about July '43. And, ah, in September, 8th of September, come the armis--armistice. But all your--the armistice was they--they lied. The Italian invaded, ah, Italy and--but already made the armistice. So the Italians threw- -they were only waiting for that- -they hated the Germans. They never wanted to be- -to, to fight, really. They, they started to throw away their arms and they only wanted to go back home. And, um, the Partisans started to organize. They liberated the camps. But we- - we had nowhere to go. We were - -we were on an island. So the Partisans started to organize everybody to go up to the mountains. The Partisans, they- -under Tito- - have been already, ah, doing a lot. And, um, but I was, after all, not too patriotic anymore. So I decided I have

kept my head down from 1941 to 1943, I'm not going to do that up in the mountains. I knew two, two girls who were together in camp with me and they were engaged to some of those Italians. And they arranged for us to mix with them when they were repatriated back to Italy. So we had something to let us go and they said that we were Italian teachers. And we mingled among the Italians who took the --the Partisans let them all go because the Partisans took over the island. The Italians threw away their arms, gave everything over...

Q: These are Yugoslavian Partisans?

A: The Yugoslavian Partisans.

Q: Tito's group?

A: They're Tito's people. So they--the Italians were glad to get away and we mingled among them and we went over to--I got over to Italy.

Q: Ohh. You went to Italy?

A: And, um, it was two girls, and um, their fiancés--and their good marriage in Italia...

Q: So the war is ended and you were going with the Italians to Italy?

A: On a boat. We wound up in Italy. In Chadvia (?) Italy, ah, and a day and a night after. And when we got there the whole population was at the port waiting for us, shouting that the Germans are coming, that the Italian capitulated--the Germans took over--and that they are taking every Italian whom they find in uniform and who didn't want to fight--they take them all to Germany. So, here I come into other troubles. And, um, ah, on the same boat with us was the--an Italian carabinieri colonel who was the commander of our camps. And he had money. He had the, the military cash, cash with him--he had it with him--and I have 1,000 lira with me. And I had my matura papers and I had some pictures and I had an Italian dictionary with me. By that time I was already speaking perfect Italian. So when we got to that town called Chervia (?) which is north of--next to Rimini--it--it's on the Adriatic--and the Italian right away--the--all the doors opened from those homes and all those Italian soldiers disappeared and came out civilians in pajamas or whatever they had. And, eh, that colonel provided for me and for the two girls who had those, ah, Italian fiancés--were with them. He took us to the carabinieri station and said that we were Italians, that we have no papers, and we invented names. They gave us right away, papers. So we had real papers with false names and we, we said we were born in Trieste there because we had--all of us had a little accent. We were of Italian fathers and Yugoslav mothers, Istria and things like this. Nobody could trace it there at that, in that, at that, in that (words missing in original transcript) there. But we got our food rations, we got everything they give because we had legal papers and we were really free now

and we, we were on our own. What we found out later that this, that particular colonel, he was from Naples. He was caught by the Germans on the train to Avignon (?) to Naples and he was sent to Germany and he was--he died there in the concentration camp. And there were many Italians who were taken away by the Germans because they were going there--but patrolling--the Germans were patrolling all the trains and asking identifications. And those poor Italians who just, just ran away from the army--they, they didn't have anything. And most of them were taken to concentration camps--to Germany--or to labor forces--they started to treat them like occupational forces treat an enemy contras (?)--that's how the Germans then treated the Italians.

Q: I see. I see. And what...this is '43?

A: That was September '43.

Q: And what did you go...?

A: I remember that I had an aunt whose husband was the president of the B'nai Brith in Zagreb. She ran away with her two daughters and she was, and he remained captive with the Germans and they killed him then in Zagreb. The day when the Partisans entered Zagreb, they killed him. He was alive until that day in jail because he was a big lawyer and he worked for a big company which was a lumber company. They needed him every day in the office. Those were the Germans...

Q: Umm.

A: ...who took over the company. The owners escaped. They were alive. They went to South America--and it was with the London--then to South America. But he, somehow he got caught right away--he was one of those prominent Jews, Doctor...(words missing in original transcript) And um, the day when the Partisans entered--he had--the day when the Partisans entered Zagreb they killed him because he was kept alive in the jail, he had to--every morning they took him to the office and in the evenings they brought him back to the jail--and he was not allowed to sit in the office, he had to work standing,

Q: Umm.

A: And, this aunt of mine--then her brother, who was also a lawyer who escaped in the last minute from Zagreb--um, they lived in a liberaconcerno (?) in a town called Piacenza--that's near Verona in Italy--and I knew that they were there and I knew the address because we were in, in touch. So when I got there they were very happy to have me. But then the Germans came and they, um, the town mayor, the mayor call my uncle and, uh, and his sister--my aunt--and gave them identification in blank--they should put whatever they want their names--and he put his stamp on it. But they have to go out of the shelter because the Germans

are going to come and maybe it--even just the population were--the people were nice--and they will be--never know if they cannot get into trouble--somebody would say, those are Jews, foreigners. So he gave them Italian papers and they filled out--they became Rossi from Rosenberg, and, eh, whatever--and their, and their daughter was very sick. She had leukemia--tamar. She was fourteen years old and they moved over to Bologna and she died there. And, from there they went, they went to Switzerland--my aunt and my uncle and their older daughter, Naomi. And they, they saved their life. And I, then, ran--I went--I had my Italian papers. Anyhow--so I went to Milano. I knew somebody in Milano--and I even got a job. And I worked for the Prefectura de Milano, which is like the government office. I was doing translating from German to the Italian, from Italian to German. And they were paying very little money and I couldn't live on that. And, um, I met--through some Italian friends which I met--I got into contact with the Italian Partisans--and, um, they told me that if I can get a job with some of the German organ--German, ah, military organizations and get into one of the--to work there--and give them some information. So I got a job with something called Rouohstaub (?)--something like this--they have been--that was a ministry, a German ministry which took over all the industry--all the ministries of--Italian ministries, and all the factories--the whole war machine--everything was under their juris- -jurisdiction. And they had exactly the same department like the Italian ministries had. Um, I wound up in the panzer division.

Q: Well you could speak German--so they hired you. They didn't check you out too closely?

A: I had the papers from the...

Q: Italian papers?

A: ...from the Italian...

Q: Yeah, right, okay...

A: ...prefectura.

Q: Right.

A: So I was--I got all the, ah, I knew what--where ever they were putting together the panzers, the tanks--in Bologna and in (words missing in original transcript) near (words missing in original transcript). And I was passing over everything to the, to my friends, the Partisans. And they were bombing here and they were bombing there. And it seems that somehow they must have smelled something and I was arrested.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: I was arrested but they really couldn't pin anything to me. They couldn't discover anything. They interrogated me and they couldn't—they--Gestapo--even the Gestapo interrogated me. There was a famous--un-famous hotel, Regina, in Milano--which was Gestapo headquarters. And, um, being that I had the papers that I was Trieste and my mother was, eh, Yugoslav--my father was Italian--they, they were digging out if I had something that--with the Croatian-Yugoslav's Partisans. They just couldn't find there. They went where I stayed, where I lived. They looked into all the papers--they couldn't. They let me go. The next day I went--through this connection of my friends--into Switzerland.

Q: Oh.

A: Next day, I was gone.

Q: The Partisans got you out?

A: The next day I was gone.

Q: Yes. You went to Switzerland?

A: The next day I was gone,

Q: So you spent the end of the war years in Switzerland?

A: And the end of the war in Switzerland and I got--and this part of this, um, ah, branch what I was working for was part of the British passport control offices. I didn't know that I got a name to whom to go in Switzerland. It was a man, a Swiss man, who was the owner of the perfume factory near the border, near the Italian border. And after the war I contacted him because we were supposed to be repatriated by the nationality--all those which were Yugoslavs had to go back to Yugoslavia. But my parents were in South Italy, in Bari. They wound up in Bari.

Q: Yes.

A: And I wanted to go--I met my aunt, the one from Vicenza, and my uncle in, in a, in Switzerland...

Q: Where did you live in Switzerland?

A: And I was interned in Switzerland. But they would let me go to visit them, I could--like the money. And I went to the (words missing in original transcript). And then I got in touch with this man, with that Swiss man who was the agent in Switzerland, and he sent me to the British Passport Control Office in Geneva. I got some money. I got a letter, and I got a pass of their live forces to go back to Italy--that I don't--that I didn't have to go to Yugoslavia,

Q: Oh. I see. I see.

A: So..and I was with a relative of mine who went with me from Switzerland. I was living with her--from Italy we went together to, to Switzerland. And she was with me all the time so she got--and me--and we wound up in Milano and I got even some--we got some money from them and papers and (words missing in original transcript). Then my father came from Bari. And that, that was already in 1945. After the...

Q: The war was over.

A: The war was over.

Q: The war was over. I see. And you were saved. Really, the Italians were good to you.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: It has been said by people--I have had relatives in Italy--that the Italians really didn't treat the Jews all that badly.

A: I will tell you another thing. Not that they didn't treat the Jews that badly, they were helping them and they tried to do the best they could to save their lives and to make them, a, that we shouldn't be in the eyes of, of, of the world--of that world there. I, I have somewhere, I should--I didn't think of it--I have a paper from Israel—the--those Jews, Yugoslav Jews who were in camp in Italy, and who were in--there were many Jews in camp in Italy--in Consino Libero (?), In Contrmonti (?) camp--or like we, in their occupied part of Italy--we all contributed to it, and they made, um, like a...

Q: A memorial, like Yad Vashem A memorial built like a...

A: No, no, no, not like Yad Vashem. A very nice book that, that a delegation went to Rome, to the President, and presented their thanks and we all signed where ever they collected--all over the world--wherever they knew somebody's living who you--whom the Italians saved their life. They signed the book.

Q: Oh, that's very nice.

A: And I got a paper.

Q: I see.

A: ...of that--about that--and some pictures from that. And as much as I know, I was told that there was also the Channasuppena (?) Program--but not here in New York--about us.

Q: That...

A: And somebody wrote about this group of Yugoslav Jews who was saved by, by Italy. About a few months ago, somebody called me up and told me but--here we--they--it was not on the program--it was only in New York.

Q: That's very interesting. So, that's how you survived the war.

A: Yes.

Q: And then, how did you come to the United States? That was later on?

A: Oh, I worked for the American Joint in Milano.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: After the war. And then the D.P. Bill came. And all of us who didn't have any relatives in the United States and worked for American joined. And I worked in the immigration department. And after I have sent away thousands of people over--to all over the world. I made my own immigrations through the, eh, D.P. Bill and I wound up in the United States in 1949.

Q: Oh.

A: In November, when we all liquidated all the American Joint offices in...

Q: Oh, I see.

A: Until we finished our work. When Israel was Israel--when we, we, we worked with all this. American joined in the organizations. In the United States and we, we helped all these people--whoever wanted to go to Israel underground. Later, all those who went when Israel became Israel. And whatever remains, there were no refugees anymore in Italy who wanted to go somewhere, because America Joint.

Q: Joint Committee, yeah, I see.

A: Liquidated all (words missing in original transcript) --wherever they wanted to go.

Q: Well, that was a very interesting time that you described and I'd like to thank you very much for your time.

A: You're very welcome. I hope that it will serve the purpose--that the American youngsters should know and find out how the Holocaust--how everything has

been done in Europe. Also, there are many people who, who want to deny all that.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

A: You're very welcome.