Now we will hear a testimony given by Enriko Josif, who was a professor at the Music Academy. Along with his mother and brother, he escaped from Belgrade and went to Dalmatia, which was under Italian control. After Italy capitulated, they moved to Switzerland. He is an interesting interviewee, because he was one of the founders of the organization called the Serbian-Jewish Friendship in Belgrade. This interview was conducted by Jasa Almuli for the USHMM in Washington for the Jeff and Toby Herr collection.

I will let Maestro Enrico introduce himself, his family, and their life story.
I was born on May 1, 1924, in Belgrade. I left Belgrade for the first time at the beginning of the war along with my mother and my brother, and right after the war, we returned to Belgrade.

I have to focus shortly on the facts from my recent history to explain some of the situations of life that I went through. I was raised as an enlightened atheist. But going through these years of war, all I can say is that I was saved by some angel savior. Being atheist, I do not have the right to talk about the angels, but these situations simply force me to do so. There have been so many moments where my entire family and I were on the edge of survival, but we were not even aware of it. So many unpredictable moments where my family and I could lose our lives, but we were saved by some other forces. After the war, I understood what is the mission of the human being, what is my mission, as well as what is the mission of the Jews.

I would like to talk about the Serbs and their relation to the Jews on this territory. I will try to back this up with certain segments from the Bible.

I spent most of my childhood in Serbia where my status was not different at all compared to other citizens. We had equal treatment in society, and I could thank God that I was born in a country like Serbia. At the time of the rise of fascism and hatred that follow towards the Jews, Serbia and its citizens were the only country that fully contributed to and protected our
survival. At the time when Hitler was pointing at us as monsters, we lived in Serbia safely and happily.

Q: Could you please tell us your father’s and mother’s names and where you went to school?

A: My father’s name was Mosa Josif and he was a salesmen for Snia Viskoza, and he also worked as a representative for the German auto company BMW. He was the first man who had a BMW in Belgrade. We traveled through all of Yugoslavia in that car. In his free time, my father was writing drama, while my mother was a member of the PEN club. She was translating Jovan Ducic’s work into the German language. My family was a close friends with the famous poet Jovan Ducic, who used to come to our house very often. He lived close to our home in order to be surrounded by nice people. I remember him as a very nice and handsome man. He was always surrounded by the Serbian intelligence.

Q: Was he a Serbian diplomat or a Serbian poet?

A: He was one of the greatest Serbian poets. When he came to our house the entire Serbian elite was there. My brother and I had to come and say good night to everybody, and then Jovan Ducic would tell everyone to stand up,
because as he stated, “we do not know who is in front of us.” My father died before the war, but he used to say that we had to go and hide in Australia because he was able to predict Hitler’s moves. Everyone laughed at him, but he was right. I am glad that he died and escaped the Holocaust. However, I am sad that I did not spend more time with him.

At the moment of the aggression on Yugoslavia, my mother’s instinct told her that we have to leave Belgrade. My brother and I refused to go, but she said that if we did not go she would kill herself. So we went first to Sarajevo, where we experienced the bombardment of Sarajevo. There was some shooting in Sarajevo, as well. We saw the poor people of Belgrade running away in their pajamas and trying to reach the coast. We took the train from Sarajevo to Dubrovnik. We experienced a lot of trouble on the train. The train was exposed to machine gun fire. For the first time in my life, I saw people being chased by the machine guns, as well as hit by the machine guns. I saw dead people. We arrived to Dubrovnik, which was under Italian control at that time. But soon after, the Italian command told us that in a few days the Germans and the Ustashas are coming to Dubrovnik, so it would be good to leave. They even gave us permits to leave Dubrovnik. We left Dubrovnik and went to Split hoping that Split is the International port.
Q: Split was under Italian control at that time?
A: Correct. Split was under the Italians at that time. I was connected with some of the students from their Gymnasium, and built some friendships, too. At the day when they were giving the awards for the best students, after that ceremony, a group of students and I organized a demonstration against Mussolini. That alerted the Italian army, who arrested most of the participants and announced the search for the rest. I was one of them, and I was sentenced to death. I had to leave Split as soon as possible. I decided to hide at the island of Korcula, but I did not have any kind of permit. I went there without any permits and documents but luckily, the Italian soldier let me go.

Q: Did he let you go on the boat or on the island?
A: On the boat. Here I was hiding at the hotel room of our friend, Letica, who was a dentist and who had a hotel at this island. Later my entire family was moved here.

Q: Jews?
A: Correct. Across from our town there was the city of Korcula, a well-known Ustashas city. One day there was an article in the local paper where they say, “while our men are dying at the Russian Front, the Jews are enjoying at Korcula.” There was a lot of fear because of that text, but soon after the officials from the Italian government came to calm the situation, and promised us that they were going to send us to Italy without any permits as the refugees of the war. My brother and mother were legally there so they applied to the list. But I had to go illegally, so I found some bags where I hid myself and illegally crossed with the baggage.

Q: How many of the Jewish families were deported with you?
A: There were a lot. Around 30 to 40 people. It would interesting to mention that among us was the famous poet, Oscar Davico, who was wanted by the Ustashas government. He did not believe that we would be safely deported, and he thought it was a trap. We were brought to the city of Bari, where we were escorted from the boat by the Italian soldiers. We saw the Gestapo man standing on the side and observing the procedure. We were tied with a chain and the Italian soldiers were all around us. I thought that Davico was right and that we will be taken to the German concentration camp. But as soon as they brought us to the train, the Italian soldiers took the
chains off our hands and apologized to us, saying that this was just a fake action in order to fool the Gestapo, and that we will be taken to the Italian country side, province Parma, and the city of Bedonia. Parma was the hometown of my favorite man, Giuseppe Verdi.

Q: Was Bedonia a town or village?

A: It was a little town. At the beginning we were stationed in the local hotel. Later we learned that Ante Pavelic and his crew were once accommodated in this hotel. Later, the Italian soldiers came and read the statement, which said that Benito Mussolini allows the Jews to stay in Italy on the country’s expenses and that the Jews are able, if they received the entry visa to any other country, that they would be allowed to leave. In addition, he allowed the exchange of liras for dollars, as well as gold and other valuable things. These were all incredible and huge things that happened to us. My grandfather lived in Switzerland where he had two houses. He reached Switzerland before the war. The Serbian villagers helped him escape. He gave a down payment for myself and my mother and brother, but that was not enough. We did not get a visa right there. We waited until Italy capitulated, and my mother decide to go to the border. Along with us was the famous Finci family, whose father was the king’s personal doctor. He died
just before the war. At the border, the Finci family faced the German-Swiss soldiers who obeyed Hitler’s command not to let any Jews cross the Swiss border. He captured them and deported them to some of the worst concentration camps. My family was so lucky because we went to the Italian Swiss who let us go through and even paid our train tickets to get to our grandfather’s house. These were the circumstances and lucky situations that I described in the beginning.

Q: What kind of status did you have in Parma?
A: People without citizenship.

Q: Did you have a freedom of movement?
A: We did, but not along with the domestic population. We quite ignored that. We spent a lot of time with the locals. These were nice people, who shared everything. These times were very hard for them. They received restricted amounts of food. It was war. But we were accommodated in a hotel, we received lamb, veal, and other delicious kind of meat. They gave us everything they had. They thought that Hitler was going to kill us all, so to make our life at least little happier, they gave us all these things.
Q: Could you go only to Parma or even further?
A: It was not little. Parma is huge.

Q: How did you finance your living?
A: We received a salary from Mussolini’s government.

Q: Was that enough for you?
A: Certainly. All the food was free, and the money was to live. You might not believe this, but most of the people who were there will tell you the same thing.

Q: You did not wait for the fall of Mussolini and the arrival of the German army to Parma?
A: We were there at the time when Italy capitulated after which we went to Switzerland. Some of the Jews went to Rome. The trains were free, so that was not a problem. Whoever stayed did not survive.

Q: Did you face the Germans on your way to Switzerland?
A: No, no. We were lucky that on the Swiss border we dealt with the Italian-Swiss soldier who paid even for tickets to our grandfather’s house. We
joined the partisans as soon as we got to Switzerland. But my mother was scared that at the end of story, once we were on safe to joined the army now, and have possibility to die. So, we stayed with her.

Q: How old were your once you reached Switzerland?
A: I was born in 1924, so we can count.

Q: You were 19 years old?
A: I was in my best age.

Q: Which Jewish families were with you in Parma?
A: Davico, Amara, and Finci families were with us as long as I can recall. However, there were more Jewish families from Yugoslavia in that region. Some ten of us were in Bedonia at that time. Also, I remembered the family of Moric Demajo was with us, too. I heard that they went to Spain afterwards.

Q: They let you enter Switzerland without visas!
A: Correct. However we were lucky that we found this man, we could easily be deported in the case that we dealt with the German-Swiss soldier.
Q: Did the Swiss government give you any financial support?

A: Well, my grandfather gave a deposit for us. All that we had to do was go to the working squads, like every other Swiss person. We were equal, in that sense, with the people of Switzerland.

Q: So, you mentioned that you joined the Partisans?

A: Certainly. But my mother was totally against it, and the Swiss did not allow departure for those who entered Switzerland as refugees. I experienced a complete spiritual conversion in Switzerland. My knowledge of the Jewish history before the war was very poor. I had a very strong and angry professor of Jewish history in my school, so most of the time I used to skip his lectures. I hardly passed this class, with the help and connections from my father. So I was poorly educated on that matter. However, Switzerland was my turning point.

Q: Didn’t you go to the Jewish community and attend the lectures?

A: No, I was very scared.

Q: You were scared of Professor Kalderon and Dr. Levi?
A: Correct.

Q: So you skipped their lectures?

A: Correct. I skipped because I was scared, but I can not recall the reason why I was so scared. Suddenly, it came to me that I have to read and learn more about it. I will tell you who had me start reading the Old and New Testaments.

I was allowed to play music in Switzerland in the Women’s Club, after their meetings. My sisters were cleaning the food and I was playing piano. I played the only music that I brought with me from Belgrade, and that was Boris Gudanov written by Musorski. While I was playing, a lady came up to me and told me that the way I play reminded her of the Bible. She said that I was playing the piece in a totally different way, a way that reminds her of the Bible. I was ashamed that I was not aware of any readings from the Bible, so this little hint made me start reading the New and Old Testaments.

Even thought I refused any public appearance, this time I took this part because I wanted to explain something to my friends and countrymen Jews from the United States.
We have to understand and accept the Serbs as our brothers. Serbia was the only country where the Jews could live freely and equally as the rest of the population. Serbia is the country who welcomes everybody and never refuses anyone. A reason for the partition of Serbia is because she welcomed everyone and now all its people want part of it. Serbs suffered the same as Jews. There was Jasenovac, who stood next to Auschwitz and Dachau as the same symbol of hatred and intolerance. I would like to say that a media war was led against the Serbs here, as bad as the Gobbels propaganda machinery did. The West accused Serbia of everything. This was a media genocide towards the Serbs. I am trying to explain to you that the Serbs are different. I do not the way you will perceive this. I believe that I should try to direct your perception and advise you to look at the Serbs differently.

Please understand that the media was wrong, and the way you were informed was incorrect. It was one stream, one sided, as well as do not participate in petition in signing the documents were you request the bombardment of the Serbs. We have to build a brotherhood with them. I was writing to a French rabbi, where I asked him to tell to his members to look to this problem as the part of history. To tell them that the Serbs were allies in the mutual fight against German Nazism. I asked him to tell his listeners to stop this century-long chase after the Serbian people. The Serbian people
were the true followers of the principles and postulates on which the
democratic American society was built.

That was the only reason why I accepted to talk here, in my attempt to
say my side of the story. I would mention that Isiah said that, “people who
you do not know, you should invite to yourself.” That was my intention,
without accusing anyone to tell you that you were informed wrongly and
that most of the stories that you hear are misconceptions and notorious lies. I
keep reminding you that Serbs are our spiritual brothers. I can not believe
that we will raise our voice on them. Nowhere were Jews more welcomed at
that time than in Serbia. We have to show our solidarity with them. The
people you do not know, try to hear.

So far we heard stories about this people, only from the negative stand
point. Thanks to some great Jews, who were the only ones to stand in their
defense, the rest of us remained silent. Let’s give them a hug, and open your
hearts, or at least remain silent, unlike some of our Jewish brothers, who, not
even knowing the real side of the story, started the accusation without a
good historical insight.

Q: Tell me something about your distant family members, your relatives,
from your mother’s and your father’s sides. What did happen to them?
Where did you go to school, and how did your music career develop?

A: Well, my relatives there were a lot of them. At that time, mothers were delivering 15 or 16 children. Half of them would die and the rest would survive. Some of them were resettled throughout the world, while the others were liquidated in Serbia, and some of them survived. Most of my relatives from my mother’s side survived under the same circumstances as we did, while most of my father’s side was liquidated during the war in many of the concentration and death camps.

Q: Where were they liquidated?

A: For some, I know that they were liquidated in the camps Tasmajdan and Sajmiste in Belgrade.

Q: So during the German occupation most of them were killed?

A: Correct. Most of the members of my family from my mother’s side survived because of the local Serbs, who gave them shelter in front of the German soldiers.

Q: Who was hidden that well?
A: Family Tajtacak from Krusevac. They lived in Krusevac and the Serbs were the ones who saved them from certain death. My cousin Leon survived the entire war working as a shepherd at a farm, but at the end he said something that he was not supposed to say and he was killed right away. It was a civil war.

Q: Was he hiding?
A: He was hiding among the shepherds. However, they knew that he was a Jew.

Q: What was his name?
A: His name was Jasa Josif. He was Leon Josif’s son. He was among shepherds, but they knew that he was a Jew.

Q: Once you came back from Switzerland you graduated …
A: I returned as a true believer. I came from Switzerland totally converted and spiritually recovered.

Q: There are a lot of Jews who said that if there was God such Holocaust would not happen to them.
A: Since Moses everything was said. God said to Israel, “Israel, I will spread you all around the world among all of the people, because you left me.” The people of Israel really left God in their desire to be the same with others. But he also said that he will bring him back to the homeland over the hot heat. That homeland was Israel, and the heat was the Holocaust.

The United States proclaimed Israel as an independent in one day. I believe in this, and I think that this is true. Someone can say that it was symbolic, but I do not believe in that. It was not coincidence.

Q: So while others lost their faith in God during the Holocaust, you found God?

A: That is correct. That is completely correct. By reading the Bible, I found the sense for all that happened to us, and where it came from. Our rabbis always say that because of our sins we were abandoned.

We wanted to be like others, while God told us to do something else. For us it was sin. We can see that most of the postulates in other religions were taken from Judaism. These were all correct things that we had to follow. The only ones that did so were the Orthodox Jews, the ones that we laughed at. Spain was supposed to be their future homeland. Recently, I read in a book that wealthy Jews in Spain were laughing at the local rabbis for their beliefs
and at the things that they believed. The only movement that maintained and saved Judaism was the Hasidic movement. Martin Gruber successfully translated this to Europe, who looked at this as the retarded Jewish mystics.

Q: Were you in some youth clubs after the war?

A: Before the war I was a member of the Hashomer Hatzair organization, where I was considered to be a progressive, left-oriented. We had such a great time there. We used to go camping together, celebrate all different kinds of holidays together, we had sports and musical competitions. One day a friend of mine from the same organization, came up to me and suggested to me to take a different way home. He knew exactly which way I used to take home, so he warned me to take a different route. Again, I did not listen to him and I decided to take the same way as before. In the beginning everything seemed to be OK, and at the moment I felt the need to urinate. I looked around and could not see anyone, so I decided to go behind one post. I did it, and the next moment, someone started yelling from behind, “Hands up. Hands up.” I looked around and saw a primitive man standing in front of me and asking me for the ID. I gave him my ID, but he was completely illiterate. He was holding the ID up side down. I learned the next moment that the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was about to be
proclaimed at that time, so the guards and military were on alert. I was afraid that someone might have written “Viva Draza Mihajlovic” or so on some of these posts and I was urinating on them a moment ago. Well, they took me from Kalemegdan past the Russian King and the Greek Queen, and in the direction of the political police OZNA. However, once again my angel savior saved me. These men who were taking me came in front of OZNA, but they did not have a permit to stay behind the police our, so the regular OZNA guard who stood in front of the building forced me to go home, apologized to me, and let me go. It was very dangerous because I could be considered as the international element, and OZNA did not like that. I could very easily disappear in the moment.

I graduated soon after, and I had to make a decision what I was going to do with my further education. I did not want to study music even though I studied composition with Vladislav Grinski, who was later killed while trying to escape prison. Since music was my obsession, I did not want to live out of it, so I decided to go for something else. I did not like technology because it brought so much harm to innocent people. I went to medical school. However, soon after I found that I was not ready for this. At the anatomy class during the abduction, I could not handle the scene. I felt very bad. I almost faded away, but I was trying to keep up because of the girls
who were around me that was ashamed of. It would be like being a singer and not having a nice voice. To transfer from one school to another it was very hard. The human resource department was very harsh at that time. You had to stay at the same school as you started. One of these officials came to me and said, “you were accepted to the medical school and you have five years to finish it. In the case that you don’t you are going to jail.” I was a very successful student but I did not like it. I received the highest grades in most of my courses, but I did not want to study it. However, my angel savior helped me again. One day I met a man whom I knew. It was our close family friend, Milo Djuric, who was the vice president of Belgrade’s University. I explained to him what happened and he managed to help me. I successfully transferred from the medical school. It was a real destiny, and my angel helped me again.

Q: What did you finish?
A: I finished the Music Academy.

Q: Were you active in the Jewish community?
A: I lived in the Jewish dorms. We ate these sardines, which saved our lives.
Q: Where did you live?
A: I lived close to the Jewish temple.

Q: There were some rooms for the students in the synagogue!
A: That is correct.

Q: Did you eat in the cafeteria?
A: I ate somewhere else.

Q: Are you active now?
A: I work as much as I can.

Q: As I know you are a community member?
A: Yes, I was just chosen.

A: What did you do after the academy?
Q: I was a professor in the music school, and later Professor Zivkovic took me as his assistant.

A: You were chosen in the Serbian Academy of Science?
Q: That happened, too. I have never been a member of the Communist Party. Before only the members of the party were able to progress. I was asked many times to join the Communist Party, but I refused. But I was not punished because of it. I received the July 7th award, the October award, and Sterija Popovic award for music.

Q: You retired as a professor
A: I decided to do it. I could teach at least ten more years, but I decided to retire.

Q: Did you participate in the creation of the organization of the Jewish-Serbian Friendship?
A: Yes. I am in love with the Serbian people. I repeated that so many times. I still believe that our two peoples are, and should be, spiritual brothers.