HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

RABBI MAYER RELLES

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Ellen Rofman
Date: June 27, 1983

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MR - Rabbi Mayer Relles [interviewee]
ER - Ellen Rofman [interviewer]
UP - Unidentified person
Date: June 27, 1983

Tape one, side one:

ER: This is Ellen Rofman on June 27, 1983, interviewing Rabbi Mayer Relles. Could you please tell me where you were born and when?

MR: I was born June 2, 1908.[1]

ER: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

MR: About my family?

ER: What was your father's occupation?

MR: My father was a carpenter until 1908, until the year I was born, after, on account of his sickness, he got a heart condition, he put this job away and he became a builder, not like here in America. A Jew needed a house, so my father would show him, my father was not learned, all he had was three classes, elementary school, but he was a self-made man.

ER: Yeah.

MR: He knew math and really he did well. I remember later he showed me how he knew geometry, he knew logarithms, with three elementary classes. He learned by himself and he became a builder and this is what he did to the very end.

ER: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

MR: I had one brother so far as I know, and seven sisters, but they all died when they were young, I don't remember them. I remember only two sisters, and I had a sister who lived in Vienna, she married in 1912, and died in 1920--no, in 1918 and she left two daughters and they live here in California.

ER: OK. What was the economic status of your family before the war?

MR: Before World War II?

ER: Yes, before World War II.

MR: Well, my father made a good living; he worked only summer because in winter in Poland there was no building and of course he made very well. I don't remember misery or hardship. Of course we lived very, how would I say, sparingly. Why, because we had two girls to marry and it meant a dowry. So my father would always put away--my parents.

ER: Did your family belong to a religious organization or to a synagogue?

MR: To a synagogue.

ER: Were they assimilated or did they have a sense of their Jewish identity?

MR: Oh, absolutely, they were Jewish people, what else?

[1]Mayer Relles was born in Skala, Poland.

ER: Can you tell me about your schooling?

MR: My schooling, I did not attend grammar school. I started secular studies when I was eighteen years old. Until eighteen years, from four until eighteen, I learned only Jewish subjects like Bible, very little, but lots of Talmud and of course the Jewish Code.

ER: Did you have non-Jewish playmates?

MR: Not until I left my town. But playmates, in 1926 I left for L'vov which is Leopolis[2] and there of course I had non-Jewish friends.

ER: Can you describe the life of Jews in your particular town before the war?

MR: No, I've been asking myself how could we survive? How could we live. A town where you had no water. The water you had to buy, we had no sewers and people would throw out everything in the street and of course our police would wait for them to try to give them a fine. I remember we lived very, very badly, not that we were hungry, we were not hungry, but I remember for example, from 1918 to 1924, bread was a luxury. When mother made bread, for 2 or 3 weeks she would say, don't be a *fresser*, don't be a glutton, slowly.

ER: But, that was not because you were Jewish, that was the general condition.

MR: No, there was great misery because after 1918 we had a Civil War between Poland, the Polish people and the Ukrainians, and we had fear that the war, the battlefields, we had a few pogroms, not in our town but in the surroundings, because we lived not far from the Russian border, the Petluritses [Black Hundred Gangs] which the Ukrainians, they made a few pogroms, Proskurov[3] and other cities, I don't remember.

ER: Was there a large population of Jews in your town?

MR: About seventeen hundred. This is what my father wrote to me in 1940. It was a ghost town. Why, because before World War I there were smuggling. For example, people would bring tobacco from Russia to our town and after it would go farther. From our town people would smuggle fabrics, like scarves, shirts, skirts all kinds of things. So we had about fifty villages from the Russian border, from Russia, which would come across the river, Juznyj-Bug, and do business with us. But after World War I, when Communist Russia took over, they were against it, so we were cut off. We had no background, we had a few villages, but those villages they would, instead of coming to us to sell their produce and buy things, they would go to Borscov.[4] Why, because in Borscov they had the court and all kinds of offices. They would not be interested in our town.

ER: Did the Jews in your town experience any antisemitism prior to the war?

MR: Oy, of course, but it was a hidden antisemitism. Why? Because we had a majority of Ukrainians, but the Polish people ruled, in other words Poland would send her

[2]Latin name by which the city was chartered.
[3] Now called Chmelnitski or Khmel'nyts'kyy.
[4]May be Borshchev.

employees and they needed our support, for example, when there were elections, all kinds of things.

ER: When did you leave Poland?

MR: I left Poland in 1933 anyways, and I don't remember the date. The first day it was about, I would say November, no it was not November, it was September 10, because I remember I arrived there September 16, it was on a Friday.

ER: Did your family also go or did you go alone?

MR: I went alone.

ER: You went alone. When you arrived in Italy in 1933, what was it like to live in a fascist country?

MR: Wonderful.

ER: Wonderful? In what way?

MR: In what way? For example they would not control you whether you worked, whether you did not work. Practically, I went there to study medicine, because Mussolini said, whoever wants to come to study from abroad, no fee. We did not pay a penny. Tuition was gratis. We had all privileges, for example, only 50% we paid for going to a movie, and so on and so on. And when I came after a month a man came from the university and he advised me to register. They had, how would you say, an organization for students from abroad who belonged to the fascist organization. Of course, I refused, I said I came to study and I don't have time, I cannot afford to belong to any party. Incidentally, I did not register for medicine because I went with very little money and medicine you have to attend university. While, for example, you are a student of philosophy or literature you didn't have to go there to attend.

ER: Now, where was this in Italy?

MR: In Rome.

ER: Were you treated any differently as a Jew?

MR: Yah, better.

ER: In what way?

MR: Because I was a foreigner and in Italy her industry was tourism from other countries. For example, I came on a Friday. I didn't sleep for several days and I had to go to sleep, I had to provide a place, so they told me there is a *casa tedesca* which means a house of the German people, German students and tourists and boys and scouts. They gave me the address and I didn't know a word. So a Jewish lady she gave me the address and I took a bus. It was not the right bus, but the man who sold the tickets, the ticket man, he did not even make me pay and he showed me to go to another bus and from that bus I showed this and there was an officer in the bus, he talked German and I talked a little German, and he said, come, I will show you where it is. And he went to bring me into that place. Such cases I had several times. I asked an officer for a letter box, mailbox, instead of telling me how to go, he would go to it and bring me there to the mail box. This is what I mean.

ER: When you were in school in Italy, did the teachers praise Mussolini?

MR: Well, I'll tell you, I registered not right away, not in 1933. I registered there in 1935. I started in the Rabbinical College. The Rabbinical College was something else. There practically, we had not antisemitism, but we had boys, the students who were from other countries, special from Poland, we had hatred. The Italian-Jewish students who studied with us they did not like us. They would sit on other benches, and this is understandable because they said, "Why did those people come to study, what do they want here? They are bringing antisemitism to Italy. Tomorrow when they are through, they will be competitors," and we had the same coolness from our professors. There was for example, a professor, a great scholar, one of the greatest, Casuto, Umberto Casuto, a great scholar. Besides that he wrote books both in Italian and in Hebrew. He died in Israel. He cordially hated students who were not Italian.

ER: Cordially hated them.

MR: Cordially. How did he show his hatred? He just ignored us. We were ignored. I remember a boy told me we are ignored like unclean people.

ER: How did the other Italians treat you. Not the Italian Jews.

MR: They were wonderful.

ER: No antisemitism?

MR: I did not encounter antisemitism.

ER: What made you decide to become a rabbi?

MR: Well, after the war I came back from Italy, and I had a good name, you know, and the president of all the congregations, of all the Jewish congregations, his name was Contoni, Rafaeli Contoni. He knew me from Switzerland. He wrote me a letter once and he said I opened a new page in your history that you become rabbi in Ancona. He knew I had my, how you say my diploma from Poland and in Ancona they need a rabbi and the rabbi is coming to Venice, in other words the rabbi from Ancona would come to Venice, and I would go to Ancona. I was not a rabbi, I was like an assistant-rabbi. They had no rabbi. Anyway, and I said no. I didn't like the rabbinate. I liked my profession, Hebrew teacher. A few weeks later, he came, on a Friday and he said to me, "Relles, if you don't accept the job in Ancona, you will have a hard life, because we are after the war. As a teacher, you will not be able to make a living. And this I knew he was right, because they would give me in Italy, at that time, ten dollars a month. Yes, I would have the children get soup at noon, the American Jewish soldiers would give all the ingredients and this would go to the Jewish restaurant, and the restaurant would give every day a portion to the children, the few children who were there. And so I used to get there a bowl of soup and bread and so on. So I was forced into it. So I accepted the job in Ancona and there I stayed from Oct. 1946 to July, I believe, 1949, almost 3 years.

ER: So, how old were you when you made this decision that you had to go to Ancona?

MR: To Ancona? Tell you right away, it was 1946, 1946, I was born in '08, which means--you know math--so it means 36 years. I would be 36 years.

ER: What did the Italian Jews feel about Hitler in 1933?

MR: In 1933, Mussolini was against Hitler. In fact, when the Jews in Palestine organized a fair in Bari, which is in south Italy, he wanted to go into that pavilion and say, he said at that occasion: "Where were the Germans when these Jews had a great civilization, a culture. They still were half naked roaming in the woods." This was I believe in 1934. Why? Because, you're too young, you can't remember that, Hitler, tried to occupy Austria and a detachment of German Nazis, S.S. soldiers, they entered Germany, I mean, Austria. In Austria they had Nazis too and they killed Dollfuss, the President of Austria. Of course, Mussolini did not like Hitler, to have Hitler as a neighbor, so Mussolini wanted Austria to remain independent. Right? So he right away sent in an entire army to the Austrian border, so that Hitler should know not to occupy Austria. At that time the short romance between Mussolini and Hitler was like, I would say marred and I remember there was almost a war between them, which means that at that time Mussolini was very close to the Jews. But even before Mussolini asked Hitler not to be so harsh with the Jews and well, that's it, many Jews who came from Germany and from Austria, some of them were very well settled in Italy. I remember a man came, Brenner was his name. He had a few cameras, Zeiss and Ikon, after two or three years, he became very rich and in every corner you saw "Photo Brenner".

ER: Why do you think Mussolini changed his stand about Hitler and became his ally?

MR: Well, I believe he was thrown into the arms of Hitler, because both Hitler and Mussolini was a dictator. He was megalomaniac. I don't know whether he was bad maybe, they say he was. He was megalomaniac, he needed glory. In 1945,[5] he embarked on occupying Abyssinia, Ethiopia. Well, England had colonies, why shouldn't Italy have colonies. This is what he thought. England made a very dirty joke. When he started to send troops and mules and arms and ammunitions to Ethiopia, he had to cross the Suez Canal going to England. England would not say a word. When he was already to attack Ethiopia, England said no, you're not going to do it. We will make sanctions against you. You know what sanctions means, the nations would not give Italy anything, they would not have to do any business with Italy and so on, and so on. There was a moment Mussolini would have made an agreement, something just to save face, and England said: "As long as you have one soldier in Erithrea [Erithrea was a colony close to Ethiopia] we are not going to deal with you." In other words, England wanted to humiliate Mussolini, and at the same time he got everything from Hitler.

ER: So, okay. How do you think the other fascists interpreted Hitler? The other fascists of Italy, not just Mussolini.

[5]In Oct. 3, 1935, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia.

MR: I heard always bad things. They always hated the Germans. I can't say that all the fascists were against Hitler, because, I was in Rome, after I went to Venice I did not deal in politics, how could I express an opinion? I had no opinions. But those people whom I knew, and I had many friends in Italy. I remember a man came, he was the lieutenant and he was a very good friend of mine and he said to me, "Woe unto us if we win the war. If we lose the war people will say, okay, it's the Italians' fault, some people will say we fought well, some people will say we were cowards, but we will end with independence. But if we win the war we will polish Hitler's boots." This is the way he said to me and this was not at the end it was in 1939, before even Hitler entered the war. You remember it was Mrs. Sol's nephew. He had an aunt who was Jewish, who was a teacher in our school, but he was a Christian.

ER: You mentioned that you were aware of Germans and Austrians coming to Italy between 1933-38.

MR: Yes, ma'am.

ER: How were they treated?

MR: The Jewish people? Well, as I say, before Mussolini embarked on antisemitism, on the racial laws, they came. If they had money, they could open stores, they could do business. If they did not have money they could still go around and some, they took canvassing. I knew many of them because I used to eat in the Jewish restaurant, [unclear] on the *Via Campomarcia* and there they would come. Whoever came from Germany, from Italy ate, not because he wanted to eat kosher, but he wanted the Jewish milieu. But, even after he became antisemitic, one day he made a speech, I don't remember whether it was in Genoa or in Trieste and he said, "Now we will have racial laws and so on--but the world will marvel how humane we will treat the Jews." And the fact is that until Italy entered the war, Jews would come from Austria and from Germany and they would get help. In other words, there was the UIJC [Union of Italian Jewish Communities] like here the Joint. It was a French organization, with American money and it was recognized by the government. I know facts, and this you will read in my manuscript. The police, they did their best to help us.

ER: What effect did the anti-Jewish laws of 1938 have on you?

MR: On me? Well, at that time, you will see it here, I was a student in Rome, and I had my papers in Rome. But I was in Venice, I did not study. In Italy once you register, you are registered, even if you are away for a hundred years they keep you. I did not pay but my documents were in Rome with the University in Rome. When the laws came and the law said that within six months all Jews, the foreigners, had to leave Italy unless they want to be arrested and deported and so on and so on, so I went to Rome from Venice and I wanted my papers back and I got them back. My birth certificate and, what was more important to me, my diploma, my high school diploma. I took all the documents out. They left something, I don't know what they left, probably the translations, because I said both the translations and the original. Two weeks later the law came. Whoever was

already registered, at the universities, Jewish people, Poland, Czechoslovakia, from all other countries, they could stay in the country and continue, and they had to pay half not entire, rent, how would you say, tuition--half tuition. This was a savior for me. So I went to Rome, I arrived there and I said, "Take my documents back I want to continue." He said, "Sir, you cannot do that because this is only for those who were registered but you are not registered anymore." Here I have to make a parenthesis. It was in, was in September or October so you know at that time there were thousands of students there in a big line and there the Italians you know they are so slow, slow and I said to them, I didn't sleep all night, I traveled from Venice to Rome, you have to travel 10 hours, and I said, "Boys, I am a Jew, and I came from Venice and I have to go fast back. Let me go ahead and just like by a charm, I was first. Otherwise, I have to stay there three days three or four days. This is the way they treated. Well, when I came there what do I do? But I knew a man who used to teach, a professor, Amadasi, he used to teach Arabic. When I knew him he was still in the office there so I looked around for Professor Amadasi, and I talked to him. And I said, "Look what's--?" He said, "Well, I will go to see what's what. And he went there to the office, he left all his work, he went to the office, it was again on a Friday, all things happened on a Friday, and he came back and said, "The situation is very bad, anyway leave the documents to me. I will see what I can do." I stayed there over Shabbos you know, and Monday I came there and he took the documents again and said, "Well I have tried hard to help you, but I cannot, I'll try only once more." He went there and, illegally he put them back, the documents in their place, and he said, "Now all you have to do is--this is what I did." He also mentioned that if this came out, he would lose his job and he would go to jail. And, he didn't say it so, but and he said, "Now," he said, "you have to go to pay half your tuition, it's in the bank, the Spirit of Santus, the holy spirit." He said, "I am going, I will take you." And he took me in that little *Topolino*, that little car, you know, I don't know how many miles because Rome is not a village, so to do it faster, and I paid and I was registered, I was registered back. Now what happened, her brother used to be a secretary at the congregation. I was a teacher there. At that time, probably he was told to ask the ministery, the police in Rome, for a permission for me...

Tape one, side two:

MR: And, what happened, when I got my documents back in Rome, I said, well, appetite comes when you eat, by eating. Why can't I start to study? But I was in Venice, I don't remember, probably there are 500 kilometers, or maybe miles, between Rome and Venice, and I could not commute. But, Padua is very close to Venice, only 37 kilometers. You would travel half an hour by train. So I just asked the University from Rome to send my documents to Venice, not to Venice, to Padua. This is what they do in Italy. You don't have limitations, you don't need to be an A student to go to the best universities, no. But they did not, they had time. Meanwhile, when he made the application for me, her brother, the answer came the *questura*, the police, in Venice called me up, not that, they didn't call me, they wrote me to come, they wanted to tell me something. And there was an office for the foreigners, *Offico Straniero*, there was a man who was married to a Jewish girl from Germany--parenthetically, he was a good friend of mine--he said to me, "Well, you have to leave the Italian Kingdom within eight days. And you are not allowed to work here." I said, "What shall I do? Where should I go? I have nowhere to go because Poland took my citizenship away. " I was just stateless. So I said, "Well, besides," I say, "I am registered at the University of Rome, I can show you, here," I said, "here I have the receipts. I paid." He said, "Well," he said, "the receipts are not enough, because everybody accepts money. You have to bring a certificate or a document, or both, that you are registered at the University in Rome." "Now," he says, "you still have six days, or well, lets put the date," he says, "let's pretend that we called you after tomorrow, you know, so you have time to go there." I couldn't go, but I had a good friend. He was a student of medicine, he was from Germany, Marks, his name was Richard Marks. His father was Jewish, the mother was Christian, and he was a very good Catholic, and he could not study because Italy said, Mussolini said, that everybody, all students from all other countries, Jewish people, once registered in Italy, they can stay until they finish their studies, except German Jews. Finis, yes. We were very good friends. I used to be in Italy, in Rome, in '35 and '36. I used to be a guide in museums and old places, and I introduced him to, I made him work for me. I would go to Cook you know, these travel bureaus, and what I had, I always had more than I needed. So he used to make a little money. I wrote to him and I said, you go to Professor Amadasi and tell him the story. He went to Professor Amadasi, to the same Amadasi. What business did I have with Professor Amadasi? Nothing. He was not my relative, my friend, nothing. But the man, he just wanted to help me.

ER: To help you. So you really didn't...

MR: So, right away, Sunday I received expresso, expressed, I received both a document and a certificate that I am registered at the University. You know, I left all my documents, all these in Archives.

ER: In Yad Vashem?

MR: No, no I have it here in Madison, in the Jewish Archives. If you are interested, all you have to do is to request it because they have to give them back to me if I want. They can make copies. But, anyway, so that was that. I came back, and I showed it to the man, to the--how you say...

ER: The registrar?

MR: Ya. He said, "Well you can stay." So he, they had a *soggiorno*, it's just a paper, a *soggiorno* that I am allowed to stay in Italy. So he wrote again that I am authorized to stay in Italy, but I am not allowed to work. He said, "Well, work, you can work. You have to make a living, don't you? We are not going to see what you do." And so I stayed in Venice. I went to the University, and this you will see in this...

ER: Manuscript.

MR: ...book that I am giving you, how they treated me. And I don't, I didn't try to lie, and I'm not telling you lies, cause what difference, what ties me to Mussolini or the Third Reich. I mean, what interest would I have to praise Mussolini, but, for the sake of truth.

ER: So, you did not suffer any ill effects from the...

MR: Yes, I was arrested in Italy, when Italy entered the war, they arrested me. They kept me in Venice for two weeks exactly, two weeks in the jail, which was terrible. I never, never experienced such misery. Terrible misery. And from there, they sent me to a concentration camp, which was one of the concentration camps...

ER: When was this?

MR: This was in July 2. I was arrested June 17 or 18, and July 2...

ER: What year?

MR: 1940. Two in plain cloth, two policeman, in civil cloth. They accompanied me...

ER: Plainclothes?

MR: Beg your pardon?

ER: Plainclothesmen.

MR: Yes. They accompanied me and another one. They carried our baggage. They provided water for us. They were just friends. They did not treat us bad.

ER: But from 1938 until 1940, you lived relatively easy, with no trouble?

MR: No trouble at all.

ER: I would like to get back to 1939, in Poland, when the war, when Germany attacked Poland. Were you able to hear from your family?

MR: I wrote, in 1940, I wrote to my father, I wanted to go back to Poland. He made me understand not to do it. This is what I say, I did everything to be destroyed, and...

ER: Did you know what conditions they were living under?

MR: My father worked for the Russians, so did my brother-in-law. They did very well. They were not, my father was never in politics. Whereas others who were communists, you know what Russia did? The communists were the first to be deported to

Siberia. Why? Because Stalin said, communists were not from Russia, they are Trotzkyists. You know, he was very much against Trotsky. They took all the communists, those who were communists right away to Siberia.

ER: But many of those communists survived the war because they were in Siberia.

MR: That's right. You have--that's right.

ER: Did you continue to hear from your family?

MR: No.

ER: When did you lose contact with them?

MR: In 1940. I wrote a few times, and after I was, you know, advised not to do it. My friends said don't... [voice in background] Oh, this was in 1937, my father was in Lithuania. No, it was '37 or '38.

ER: So you no longer had any contact with any family members in Poland?

MR: No.

ER: Were you aware that they were deported.

MR: No, they were not, no, I knew it after the war.

ER: After the war. OK. What was the attitude of your immediate non-Jewish friends and neighbors?

MR: When?

ER: After 1938, when the anti-Jewish laws had taken effect. You were treated with decency at the university, you were allowed to continue but...

MR: Not decency. They were just wonderful, most wonderful.

ER: But your neighbor? And how did your neighbors treat you?

MR: Well, they were wonderful. For example, I was to go to buy fish. You know how it is, fish were not rationed. But when bread is rationed and butter and this and this, you have to wait. And I used to come there to buy fish. I used to eat in the Jewish restaurant, there in the ghetto. The woman would come to me, there was a woman and a man and boys, selling, who said, "Go home. We will leave fish for you." And when I came back, as much as I wanted. I went to buy cigarettes, so help me God, I swear to you, when I stayed in the line for cigarettes, because cigarettes were rationed too, the lady would say, "Come to get the cigarettes. I know you need them very badly. Go home, I will." And when I came back, instead of giving me one package of cigarettes, she would give me two, three packages. Why? Because there was always somebody who does not come, or who dies, so he leaves such, so she would give me more than I had a right to. This is the way the people in Venice. Do I say lies?

ER: Do you think that all the people, all the Jews were treated that way, or were you an exception?

MR: Why should I be an exception? No. This is the way Italians are. Of course, I am married to an Italian woman, which doesn't mean that I have an interest to say lies.

ER: You mentioned that you were arrested in 1940, and then you were interned in a camp. Could you tell me where that camp was?

MR: No, it was not in a camp the first time. In July 2, when we, it was July 3 probably, we were brought to Battipaglia and the train ended. There they took a taxi, the two policemen, and brought us to Campagna. Campagna used to be a resort place in peacetime, because it is beautiful, I cannot tell you. Such beautiful--poverty, great poverty. But it was a sort of second or third degree. It's surrounded by hills, not mountains, so that we could not escape. They put us in barracks, there were some *Bartholomeo* [phonetic] and *Concettione* [phonetic]. I'm telling you from there to look, it was on hills. To look down, it was the most beautiful thing. To watch a sundown or a sundawn, it was the most beautiful thing you can imagine. The population was very poor, very dirty, you know, but we were free all day, we were free.

ER: What did you do all day?

MR: What we do? We used to go into the cafeteria and stay there. Watch the girls, or give them trouble, not me...

ER: You didn't work? There was no forced work or labor?

MR: Work? Are you kidding? There was no work in no places. They had concentration camps. We did not want to be [unclear]. Yes, there was the man who took care of the, would sweep the barrack, the hall, he would get paid. Not by us. We had a treatment like a prisoner, like a war prisoner. No, not like a war prisoner, sorry. Like an Italian soldier. The government would spend for each internee as much as they would spend for the military, for Italian soldiers.

ER: There was enough food?

MR: Food, we had more than we needed. Why, because the poverty was so great there, that they could not, the population could not buy the produces which they were entitled to. So we could, we had coffee and sugar and chocolate. Fruit oh, we used to get six lires a day.

ER: They paid you for this?

MR: No, we was [unclear], I mean, it was like, yes. Six lires a day, a good lunch would cost three lires. Food was just for nothing. You would get, for example, oil for nothing. Everything...

ER: How long did you stay at this?

MR: I stayed until August 18.

ER: The same year, 1940?

MR: The same year, from July 2 to August 18. Then, a part of those people, a great part, were transferred to Ferramonti, which is in Calabria, more to the south. It's a deserted place. It's where, excuse me, the expression, "devil says good night." And there, of course, they, we were told that there is malaria and all kinds of things. When we arrived there, we saw that was a desert, a real desert. But when we entered the barracks, we saw a

great difference. And this you will read there, I have described it. We had a paradise, I wish before I die I still want to see that place.

ER: And how long did you stay there?

MR: There I stayed until October 30. October 30, at that time, things weren't so good. It began to rain. We had good seep through, you know, we would have a little water, and when it rained, lots of mud, and it started to be bad. At that time, Mussolini sent me to take exams in Padua. I was a student at the university, a university student. So they gave me two policemen, two plaincloths, to accompany me from Calabria, from Ferramonti--the camp was there--Ferramonti, to Padua. You know, three days traveling. All the means Mussolini had for the policemen, for the army, for of course, transportation, he had nothing else to do, but to say, and I was not the only one, all the students, they were sent to the universities. And I was there, a month in Padua, and the professors they forced me onto the exams. For example, I was not prepared in Latin. I didn't even know the title of the book Professor Marchesi taught, and I said may I withdraw? No, you have to make the exam. He gave me 18 over 30, which means like a C. This is the way they treated us. And when I came back to Ferramonti, students, some students didn't come back. Well, they were...

ER: They just left?

MR: And I was free too, I was free all the time.

ER: But you decided to come back?

MR: I had to come back.

ER: To Ferramonti?

MR: To Ferramonti. And I came back at the end of December, and after three weeks, I received an order, not I, the secretary of the office, to send me back either to Venice or to Padua. It was my choice.

ER: And where did you choose to go?

MR: Venice. And I graduated, this was, as I said, it was December, no, wait, I don't know, November, no, it was December the 20th.

ER: 1940?

MR: That's right, ma'am. And there, I stayed in Venice. I used to be there and do my teaching. I was a Hebrew teacher there, they had a parochial school, and to the University I would go very seldom. The only thing is, there, you have, they call it, an index, a book where it is written what you pay for your tuition and the lessons you attended. Everything. And the grades you had. There, you have to get the signature of the professor who taught you. I had, for example, I had to make 20 subjects, but every year, I had to make four or five, something like that. So I have four or five professors. And I needed these signatures. But there were, I don't know, 40 students, 50 students, and the professor would teach and teach, and teach, and after, he didn't have the time to give the signatures. So the custodian, how do call it, *bidello*, you know they call them *bidello*, the custodian there, he would take those booklets and the professor would give a signature, and after he

would distribute among the students. Of course, you would give something to the *bidello*, give him a couple of lires. But they used to make a roll call. Very often the professor would say Relles, and present. Where, he wanted to see. I had a friend there, he was killed later, in the army, he would answer, "Present," how did the professor know? There was another thing, as many of the students who were at the front, they were called to the army, it was a tacit recommendation not to be so harsh with the students. So, if a student came, he wasn't prepared, he was in the army, he was in Russia, I don't know where he was, in Greece or in Africa, he came to the exams, a lieutenant, a captain, or even a sergeant, he had to be present. And I profited too, cause I was not prepared.

ER: What happened after 1940.

MR: After 1940, 1941 came, and on December 6, I graduated, not with honor, almost with honor.

ER: You graduated the university.

MR: The university. The way they treated me, the professor asked me, "How can you make a living? If you need money, you just tell me."

ER: And did you get a job?

MR: I didn't need a job. I had a job in Venice. I was a teacher there. I kept my job all the time. I was free.

ER: And you continued to work?

MR: That's right.

ER: And how long did that last?

MR: That lasted until December 5, 1943.

ER: And what happened then?

MR: At that time, a few days before, the government announced that all the Jews will be interned, and their properties sequestered, I don't know [unclear]. And the police began to go among the Jews telling, "You better take care that you disappear, or we will have to arrest you." It was very easy. Why? Because a Jew who lived in Venice, he went 20 kilometers from Venice, to Mestre, and he said that he was bombed, or he was afraid to be bombed, and he wanted, so he was a refugee. But there, no one asked him whether he was Jewish or was not Jewish, you don't recognize there between Jews and non-Jews. There is nothing whatsoever.

ER: So were you arrested?

MR: No. The rabbi, who happened to be blind and deaf, his wife, the director of the Jewish restaurant and his wife and a niece and the niece's boyfriend, we were seven, seven people in hiding. We left for Switzerland and we went to Milan. From Milan we went to Fermo, not Fermo, [voice in background] no, it's on top of Como, well, we went there in the mountains, you know, a few kilometers, you know, and there we began to look for guides. We found a guide, and this was, we arrived on a Friday night, terrible rain, oh, it was terrible. And Saturday, we were there all day. Sunday morning, the guide came, the guide was not good. He was a swindler, but anyways, we went to another place, and there

he saw a, from the custom police, in plaincloth, he right away disappeared, and there we were arrested by the custom police, the police.

ER: Of Italy?

MR: Of Italy. We were four kilometers from the border, the Swiss border. And if you, I was not there, it's a long story. I was not there because a lady said to me, "You want a guide? Come with me, I will show you a guide. " And she took me. She had a small like a buggy with a horse, a horse and buggy. And she took me to a man who was, who happened to be, I don't know what, a carpenter or shoemaker, I don't remember, and said, "Yes, but I cannot do it today. I can do it tomorrow, after tomorrow." And so, we made it up. When I came back, she brought me back on that buggy, a young woman. And so she says, "Oh, escape, escape, escape because I see your people are arrested." She saw what happened. I said, escape, how could I leave those people, they were all over the line, except that girl and her boyfriend. And I went there, and I was arrested too. Not by that man, by that thing, you know, but by the Fascists, about eight or ten Fascists, you know. They said, "Oh, don't be afraid, nothing will happen to you. Mussolini is good." This is what they told us. And they took us to their commander. And there was the marshal, you know. He said, "Why didn't you go before? A few days before no one would have said a word. Why didn't you go?" He cried more than we. And after the man came back and the man who arrested them said, "They are my people, I have to, they are at my disposal." He says, "Thank God, that's good. I am very happy." And they began to take us from one place to another, you know. Well, how was it?

ER: Where did they take you?

MR: They took us to the custom police. They gave us blankets and sheets and pillows, and we all slept on the floor. Next day, they gave us to eat something, we didn't have too much. After they took us to Como. They were so kind, you have no idea, of how kind they were to us. In Como, well, we arrived there in Como to the police, the *questura*, about 12:00 o'clock and we were there from 12:00 to 6:00 o'clock in the evening. And there too we saw a man coming in and crying. Looking at us and crying. He was one of the, an employee. At 6:00 o'clock a man came, he was a pig. That one was a pig. I don't know what he was, but he was in plainclothes. He was shouting at us, not the police. And they took us to jail in Como. We arrived to jail, I don't know who there, the head there, the director, said, "I cannot take them. We have a place for 160 people, and we are keeping 800." Why, because there were too many people who were, they escaped from the army, they were close to the border, there were many people, smugglers and robbers and killers, so they cannot take us. So they took us back to the *questura*. The *questura* has a place for seven, eight people. If a man is caught drinking, they are arrested there. It's not the jail. We were about 35 people sleeping in a place for seven people. We slept one on the other. We did not have place where to stay. And there we were for three days. Wait a minute, it was Sunday before, Monday, we were there until Friday. The food, the only food they

gave us was a piece of chocolate like this, you know, and they told us, we are giving it from our rations, the policemen.

ER: Was that once a day, or...

MR: Once a day. They didn't have themselves. And Friday, they brought us to another place not in Como. There it was a place for the custom police, another custom police. We arrived there, and how many people we--were there? About 35, 40 people, and a captain came in with a lieutenant, and "Ladies and gentlemen," they said, "you know you are our guests. We did not arrest you. And so, we will try to do what we can. We will give you a few crusts of bread, just that you can eat something. We will lend you things to sleep, blankets, we will do our best. But, you have to say nothing what we did for you." At that moment, I knew that we are in trouble. Because they were afraid of the Germans. And at the same moment, the soldiers, not soldiers, the police, the custom police, brought in pasta with cheese.

Tape two, side one:

MR: I imagine you want me to show, eh?

ER: No, that's alright.

[Voice in background.]

MR: Well, the facts are that we slept very well, of course, men and women apart, and in the morning, one of our people said, "Well, we actually should be in jail, shouldn't we? They have no place, but the rations we should get, we are entitled to get the rations." Now, we were watched, not by those custom police, from the *questura* men watched us. His wife brought us to eat; they didn't have themselves. Such wonderful people, you have no idea. And, so we talked to that man, and said why can't we get the rations. He said this was a good idea. He went to jail, or called, I don't know, and he came back and said, "I have good news for you. Tomorrow you will get the jail portions." And in fact, Sunday morning, he took two people, I was one of them, and brought us to jail, and they gave us a kettle, you know, with food, with soup. I'm telling you, this was soup. Of course, there was pork, but who cared. You know, the week before, somebody gave me a sandwich, a pork sandwich, and I said no. I didn't eat, you know, while we were there. But after they brought this, and I began, "Well, well," a boy says, "Stupid," he says, "it's meat." And I tasted it, and it was meat. It was so good, and some bread. You know, in the country, you could get such good bread. So, there we were, and we used to get that rations, a pound of bread, which means a pound and two ounces, and soup as much as you wanted. I really began to eat, we all began to eat, and what did I do? I asked them--it was very dirty and neglected--I asked for a pail and something, you know a rag and a broom, and I cleaned the steps, and they had to be all like me with them, all around, swept, and so they gave me cigarettes and bread, I had some more bread, I kept it under my pillow. Well, a few days later, there was a colonel too who was arrested because he would not adhere to Mussolini. We were three inside, a few days later, a German pullman arrived, a bus, and we were taken to another place--Camerlata. We were brought there, the place was called Camerlata, and there we were brought into a place which used to be a barracks for the *carabinière*, after it became a tobacco factory, a huge, huge hall, everything cement. Lots of garbage, garbage, and they make the men come in and they swept and made a big heap of garbage. And there we were about 200 people, because every once in a while, another group was brought in, people from Venice, too , you know, in Venice there was a colonel, you know, a Jewish colonel. He and his wife, a boy and a girl, none of them came back.

ER: Who was in charge at this "Camelot"?

MR: In Camerlata, the police, the *questura*.

ER: Italian?

MR: Yes, and the *carabinière*. Because the *carabinière*, I don't know the difference. But there were two different kinds of police. The *questura* is not the town

municipal. It's police, but they are not so harsh like the *carabinière*. The *carabinière* have to do more with criminals. When the *carabinière* takes you, he handcuffs, not the police.

ER: And there were no Germans.

MR: No. No Germans at all. One German soldier came because he was looking for a body. And they said, well, we were left there at noon, he said, the police came and said, "Well, you have to be very careful. You will not be mistreated, but remember outside we have machine guns. It was a three story house. And food, we want food, right away. All day, we have nothing to eat, all night, we have nothing to eat. Then one of those, yes, there were both *carabinière* and police, as I say, and to warm up a little bit, because this was in December...

ER: Was this in Northern Italy?

MR: North Italy, yes, ma'am, it was not far from Como, Milan, not far from the Swiss border. And he took some, something like coal, it's not coal, I don't know what it was, and made a fire so we had lots of smoke. But the next day, the food came from jail, a pound of bread, a very good soup, and towards the evening, the Italians were brought in. People because one did something, or another did something, or because they did not do something, they were arrested and brought in there. And those people, they brought tobacco, they were from the same town, so they would have what to eat, and so on.

ER: Did you work there?

MR: What work?

ER: During the day?

MR: Are you kidding?

ER: No forced labor?

MR: No, nothing. It was very cold there, but they brought straw, they gave us, and the nuns brought things. I cannot tell you, we had so much. Meanwhile, I think, we had Christmas. They brought in ham and ducks and geese, you know, fried, and money, and brought the nuns. A man, whose name was Bianchi, he had a garage, he was in jail too. He took us, I don't know, he had sympathy for me, I don't know why. And before he left, before Christmas, the prefect, the head of the town, he let the Italians home. So he came to me and said...

ER: Italian Jews home? Or just the...

MR: No, no...

ER: Just the other Italians?

MR: Yes, the Italians [unclear]. He said to me, Bianchi, Mr. Bianchi, "Now I leave this sheets and blankets," and he had other things, "I leave for you because you may need it." And the next day, a man came, where is Relles? He brought me to eat, rice and meat, and even wine. Well, to make a short story long, a day later, a day or two days later, they came from the *questura* and they said, well, we have a list here for people who are going to leave this place which is so bad. You are going to Fossoli di Corp not far from Modena. There is a concentration camp. There you will have places where to live

different, apartments for married people, for bachelors, and you will live like human beings. So he makes, he reads the list, but I am not on the list. There were a few more people who were not on the list. A Jew from Tripoli. A Jew from Turkey. A Spanish Jew. We say, "Why aren't we?" You are at the disposal, we cannot, we don't know. It was clear that the Spanish Jew, you know that Franco, although he was a Fascist, he protected his Jews. They would, the Jew from Spain would be sent to Spain, and the Jew from Poland to Poland, and so on and so on. But was said there was, that the Germans, when they caught Jews in Milan or around, they would not deport them because they did not have transportation. They would either kill them throw them in their, in the lake. So I had, I knew that I had to escape. Now, what happened, there too. The first floor were the *carabinière* and the second floor were the women, and the third floor were the men. And, I was on the third floor. But, because I asked the *carabinière*, I would like to make a little order, they gave me a pail and a rag and a broom, and I washed the--outside, not far away, there was like a depot, a place where the peasants, they would bring their tobacco, you know, to the government. And so you have there straw and all kinds of garbage, and I worked there, so I could go out and look around. But I said, "I'm not going to escape." Why? For the simple reason because to escape and after to be caught and to be brought back would be worse. So, OK. On the third floor, we did not have the water. It was too high. So I would go to have--because it was barracks, so they had bathrooms and the water. So I would go to the women. I had to wash. I had to keep myself clean. So I would go and percentage-wise I would wash. I washed, I had rags, you know, and I go out from there from the wash place, and I see a lady talks to the women who were arrested, a lady in her 70s, for sure, beautiful, tall, elegant, and she says, "What does this man do here?" And they said, "He is arrested too. And she says, "So, why didn't you go with other people?" Because they had people remain, people who could not see, blind people, there were a few invalids, but she saw I was not an invalid, people who were mixed marriages. There was a lady who had a son, a Jewish lady, but the boy was not Jewish and he was killed in the war, thus he would be free. These people were there. She said, "What are you doing here? Why didn't you go to Fossoli di Carpi?" I said, "Because I am going to the deportation." She says, the deportation, why? Why don't you escape? I said, "I have no money. They took all the money away."

ER: Were you aware at this time what deportation meant?

MR: No. No. We were aware that means work, beating, why, because we heard what they did in Dachau, what they did before the war broke out, we had refugees, and we knew what...

ER: And you didn't know that they were gassing people?

MR: No. No.

ER: This was 1941?

MR: No. No.

ER: They weren't gassing people in 1941.

MR: No. No. We didn't know anything. And, when people came, for example, in 1944 in Switzerland, the man came, and he told these stories. He saw how they would make, how they would kill Jews en masse. He was from Maidanek and he told all these stories. Nobody believed him.

ER: So did you believe him?

MR: No. But going back, she says I give you thousand lire, and that time a thousand lire was still money. So I said, "What should I do with the money?" She said, "Well, first of all, you can buy a bike. If you are caught, you can give it to the policeman so he lets you go."

ER: You could bribe him.

MR: Bribe him. With money you can do. I said, "No thank you. I'd rather not. I am dead. I am a dead man," I say. "I don't need. You give money somebody else might need it better." I thanked her of course in a nice way. But I caught her interest. Next day, while I was cleaning outside, sweeping, she came back, she brought me *Grossini* [phonetic]. How do you call *Grossini*?

[Voice in background.]

MR: [unclear] No, a bunch, and she says, "This coat for you is not good, because I want you to escape, but this coat is very dirty." Of course, you know I slept in it at that time, and its *untergesunter* [not healthy]. This is what she says, which means it's--

[Voice in background]

MR: Yah. And she gave me a new coat. "I want to save you," she said. OK. I thanked her, and a day later, I don't remember, or that same day, a girl came, a girl, 18, 19 year old, her name was Colombo, which is a Jewish name, but she was not Jewish, and she said that she was from the Red Cross, because we needed certain things like soap and writing paper and all kinds of things, so she would take, they didn't have a casino there, for the refugees, for their prisoners. So she would take the people whatever they wanted, and they would buy it, and they would pay her, and that's all. So she came, and we knew her, she would come and go, come and go. Did I ever tell you the story...

ER: Where did they get the money to pay her?

MR: Well, the nuns brought in money. Yes ma'am. I had 300 lires.

ER: From the nuns?

MR: From the nuns. No, they gave to that Colonel Basami, and he divided, and he gave me more because he said rabbis would need more. Now he protected me. He gave me preference. So anyways, and there were people, they had money. As a matter of fact, where was I, yes. And she comes and she says, "Listen," she says, "I'm in love with you, and I want a picture of you." I said, "Why would you want a picture?" "Because now we are going, Mrs. Monte, that lady," was not her name, Mrs. Monte, her name was Carmelli, "Mrs. Monte wants to make a false document for you, and if you escape and we will help you to escape, you will need it." Now, there were three floors on top. You know, the Italian roofs are made like, terraza they called it, terrace, made of cement, and all you had

to do is open a window, and we would be allowed to go there for fresh air. You could stay all day there, because the *carabinière*, they were downstairs, they were our best friends. They would help us. They didn't know what to do to help us. And she says, "Why don't we go upstairs there and make the pictures." And she made pictures, I don't know how many positions she made, about 20. Next day, she came back with the pictures. I even remember the name of the photographer --Bernasconi. It's the foolishness you remember. "Mr. Bernasconi made this picture," she says. And I looked and I looked so bad in it, I said, "Ma'am, you cannot put such a picture on the passport because I look like a murderer, you know.

UP: You put it on the identity card.

MR: Identity card. "No," I said, "this is not, doesn't make it. I thank you very much." So now, next day she came and she said, "Listen, I have here the next house is a place where there is furniture of a firm which was bankrupt. But when you cross that road from this place," that she showed me, "there is another place. There is a lady, Mrs. Gatto," which means cat. "Mrs. Gatto is willing to let you in when you escape, and keep you in her place. The only thing is," she says, "the trouble is, there is in the same house, there are SS men. So we have to see what's what. OK?"

ER: Were these people trying to help anybody else?

MR: Oh yes, of course. It was a committee. I never knew the name of the committee, but they were all caught later.

ER: Were they caught?

MR: That lady who saved me, she was in the country, I don't remember where, and she came back. She was so in bad shape, in such bad shape, they didn't know whether she was a man or a woman. Anyways, okay, there was another man with me, Nochmeas [phonetic] was his name, he was a spy, this is what he said, from Yugoslavia, a Jew who was baptized, and he was caught for espionage, not for being a Jew. But they had nothing against him. So they put him there, he had lots of money his wife would bring him. And they were interested in him too. And so, we were there one evening, she comes, I was downstairs with the police there, cause there it was warm, you know, and I warmed up the soup, you know, they had little things for making, and she comes and she says to me, "Come upstairs, I have the paper which I bought for you. Come upstairs, because I have to take it out, I have many things." And I came, and she says, "In 10 minutes you must be out. There you will go," and she showed me all--I have to make here a parenthesis, the day before we took, you know, she invited the *carabinière* and that man Nochmeas and me to drink wine, a--how do you call it--the saloon, there every second house is one, so that we could spy out, look around, what's out there. She says, "In 10 minutes you will have to be there. You cross that road, and there at the end of the extremity of that road, it brings you to the house of that Mrs. Gatto. There is a little balcony, you have to go to that balcony. The lady will put a ladder." OK, it was on the third floor. I took, I had mountain shoes, and I put, I went up, you know, and the mountain shoes I put on my feet, and I began to go

on that road, it makes a jingles, you know, and I came there to very end, and down there are streetcars, they had curfew at that time. But it was before the curfew, this is what she said, "You have to run fast, because it was 6:00, because at 7:00, its curfew, they catch you." And, she took me, I mean, I myself went through, you know, creeping, creeping, and I arrive there. And I remember all my life, I came and I kept my hands, you know, at the roof, and looked for the ladder. I didn't look for the ladder, just, you know, moving my legs, no ladder. Finally, the lady came out and she put my feet on the ladder, and I came in. She says, "You will tell the lady that you are a cousin of mine." She gave me right away tea, I don't remember, tea or coffee, yeah, tea. She gave me sardines, you know, and a few minutes later, that girl came, Columbo, and says, "Now you come with me." And we walked and walked, maybe, I don't know, a half a mile, one mile, two miles. How can I remember? And there we met a lady with two young daughters. And they took us, took me in a home, I tell you, it was a palace. And there a bed, I didn't sleep in a bed for months. I didn't go to sleep on the bed. Why? Because I was stupid. I didn't have, you know, bedbugs or lice, they were everywhere. I kept myself clean, and we didn't have it, but I still was afraid. And I slept all night. Yes, when I arrived there, there was good soup, chicken soup, you know, and pasta and meat. I ate everything. And cigarettes, they were in good condition. Their son was a prisoner in Poland, a German prisoner. The Germans deported him to Poland. So she says, "What I do for you, I hope people will do for my son."

ER: How long did you stay there?

MR: Next day, we get coffee and bread and a good breakfast, and that girl came, and she gave me 100 lires, that lady, and I cannot forget this, and I feel so--unconsciously I feel so guilty. I did not, I couldn't afford it after the war, I wasn't there at the end, you understand. I should have gone there to thank them, or at least to make it known, I didn't do anything. And I really, my conscience is so guilty. So, and that girl came, Colombo, she says, "Well, now we are going to Milan." I said, "You are not coming with me, because if I am caught, you are caught." "Don't worry," she says. So I sent her ahead, because she had to take me to the train, the commuting train, people who worked, people who lived out of Milan, they would go to Milan to work everyday, and finally we arrived there at the station, and we took the tickets, and OK, and we were on the train. I said to her to stay far away from me, and this is what she did. She gave me an address before, when I arrived in Milan, where I have to go, everything was organized. Well, we stop for a while, all is stopped, the militia comes, the Facist militia, for documents. You can imagine in a train, full of people, they cannot call them all. So they just made, they call, they said, those two, come to me with your documents. And I didn't have any documents, and I begin to look, and the other one says, "Oh, let him go. Can't you see he's just a poor devil."

ER: Lucky.

MR: I arrived there. They called, "No station," because in Milan, you have many stations, many depots, no station. There weren't two bricks together. All bombed. And I

look and I have to go to Via Amoretto, do you know where Via Amoretto is? Via Amoretto [unclear]? Nor did I. And I knew that there every second man is a spy to catch the English spies, because England, the English people, with their English Air Force, they knew everything so well, I said, "How can I go out to save myself." So, I go out, there was a German soldier, in his 50s, you know, an old man, directing the traffic. They didn't have the--you know, I precipitated myself to him. I didn't think strong. And I began to talk Italian. "I want to go to Via Amoretto, ok, you tell me?" And I talked in Italian dialect, you know, I was five or six years in Italy. So he talks to me in German, I don't understand anything. He says, there is a policeman, because he was directing the traffic, and there was a policeman, so if somebody violated the traffic, to arrest him. So I go to that policeman and I said, could you show me where, how I go to? He says, "Well, in about a half an hour, I end my service." It was about 11:00 in the morning. "And I go to Piazza Suza, and Piazza Suza is across the Via Amoretto. You understand?" Now, when a man stays with a policeman and talks to him, who is going to think that he is a Polish Jew?

ER: That's right.

MR: I had cigarettes, the best cigarettes. I couldn't smoke them because they were too light for me, Ceralio cigarettes. [laughing] Small things, you know. I gave him a cigarette, offer him, it was something, he didn't smoke such cigarettes all his life. And I said, "I have another two here, keep it." And after we started walking, I know that until Via Amoretto I am safe. If you go with the policeman, you know.

ER: Sure.

MR: And I walked with him, and he brought me there. But, in Italy, at 12:00, there is the *siesta*, or the fiesta, what is it? The *siesta*. They close up, and they have to stay open but this way, eh, it was dumb. I say, what shall I do? I go to have a shave. Usually I shave myself, but I go there. First, I went for a coffee, I took a card, you know, to write to my friends who were deported to show them that I was free, which meant I would do something for them. And after I went to the barber, and you know, he didn't have too many people, there, because there were underground fighters, partisans, there were spies, there were all kinds of people, there were deserters, the Fascists, they used to close up a square or a street. No one could go in, no one could go out, and they would ask people, you know, this is what they did there. He was shaving me, you know, or cutting my hair, I don't remember, and they closed up the street. They did not come into, I finished, I go there to...

Tape two, side two:

MR: I came there, and there was one girl, who said, "Oh, we were so worried about you, because Mrs. so and so, Mrs. Monte, called us up asking us, telling us, no asking us, whether her gloves are ready, which meant that you were supposed to arrive, and you did not." So I explained what happened. There, every store has a room behind, how do they call it? She says, here, she says, will be your place. To eat, we have nothing. I said, "You have nothing, but I do have." And I took my servings out, and we split it. There was a boy, also a boy, 17 or 18 years old, he had to go to the army, and he did not go. So he was there. And we began to talk, and this and that, and she says, "Well, you will sleep, you will sleep in a place which is, the people left, it's empty. They left on account of the bombing. You will sleep there, OK?" This was at noon or 2:00, you know, it was the last day of December, maybe December 27, 28, it was the end days, the last day. And nothing to eat. She made a soup, it was water, just water and a little vegetables. Night, all night I slept there. Cold, terribly cold, without heat, terribly cold. In the morning, her sister came. Her sister went to that camp, to that jail, where I was. Oh, the *carabinièries* they were so angry...

ER: Yeah, that you were gone, that you had escaped.

MR: Oh, one says, "If I catch him!" And they make signals, but one young soldier said to her, and I knew the name, Jachito was his name, I know, so she described him to me, a blond, he says, "Oy," he says, "I couldn't tell you how much I enjoyed that he will be saved. He is out. He will be saved." And all day I stayed there, and when I said, "Well, you promised me a document." "No, we cannot give you a document because if you are caught and beaten, you will say who saved you, and this we cannot afford." And so, nothing doing, about 5:00 in the evening, the boy who was there, hidden, he brought me to a lawyer, oh, he was a man in his 70s, maybe late 60s, Garatski, a lawyer, and he said, "Well, now I will put you in a nice place. Do you have any money?" I said, "Yes, I have about 400 lires." And he put me in a streetcar, and we traveled, traveled, traveled, to there, the address was Via Aldini, which means Aldini Street, 12, Number 12, it's the Tutio Palazzio [phonetic], I don't know more. I show the man, another man, and one says, "Why, I live there. You come with me." And we arrived there, maybe about 8:00. There was a rest home, and for people, for cripples, you know, there were about 1,000 people, men and women, beautiful place. You know, I wasn't used anymore, warm and light, and there was a nun, a young nun, she took my name. She says, well, your name is not Mayer Relles. Your name is Giovanni Piorolla. I still have the document, oh, maybe I gave, I gave it to her? Giovanni Piorolla. You are from Passia [phonetic], which is Italy, South Italy, under the occupation, American and British occupation, which was very foolish because when I talk one sentence in Italian they know that I am not from the south, and that I am not Italian. You know, the accent. You don't get rid of your accent. Anyways, she says, you have, you are sick, and what sickness, how call that sickness, when a person goes and falls...

ER: Fainting?

MR: No.

ER: Seizures?

MR: Something like that. Well, anyways, and that's it. And she brought me upstairs to the second floor. There was another nun, and she says something to her, and she gave me a bowl of rice with milk, and she gave me bread, they have new bread, fresh, and she gave me a piece of cigar, and I cut it and wrapped it in paper, and I felt the happiest person, and after she brought me in a room, other people slept there. A room, and a bed, and a mattress, and blankets. Well, I had there, but, at 4:00 I woke up, no fear anymore the Germans would come to take me. And I was in my bed at 7:00, they called to church. It was the first day of January, 1944. The bells, they have bells, ringing. But it wasn't real bells, it was something made with a phonograph. And where I am, everybody had to go to church, and I went down to church, and I saw Jesus, in that little thing, you know, and the man, the priest, made a beautiful speech telling them don't expect me to tell Jesus, the *Bambino*, to give you cigars, those funny cigars, and so on, and so on, and after I came back they gave me a uniform, special for those people, and they gave me a glass of milk and they gave me bread like that which you bake, and said now, that bread is for all day. And there for three weeks I learned what hunger means. Why? Because they would give you bread, they would give you a glass of milk, but for lunch they would give you a spoon or so of potatoes, a piece of meat you needed binoculars to see it, and in the evening they would give you all nothing. And this is what they gave. Of course, the eldest sister, she ordered to give me a double portion of bread, and I used to go and to wash the windows and to wash the floor, so she would give me another piece of bread. But there, everybody wanted to wash the floor. When I said, do you have some wood? "Piorolla, where can I get wood for you? Everybody wants wood." And I knew real hunger.

ER: How many people were at this house, this store?

MR: At this place? About 1,000 people, and about 50 people would die everyday of starvation. Of course, many of them were from Milan, because this was in Milan, a suburb of Milan. There were many people, saw the children would bring them, relatives would bring them, they knew that one who has no, nothing from outside cannot survive there. They would eat grass, if there was any. They would swallow paper, and we had funerals, funerals, funerals. One day, on a Friday, a man is brought, and I don't remember, yeah, his name was Ochsong [phonetic]. A man of 75 years old, a Jewish man from Poland. He was in France, and this man in France, he managed, he was a month, oh, never mind, he came, and I said, he was there, put there by a committee, and I said to him, "Oy, it's bad here, hunger." And he said, "Young man, don't worry. I have money. You won't starve." In fact, next day, with money you could buy everything there. You could buy, of course, there was bread made of bran. No one would eat the bread of bran. I ate bread of bran, because in Italy, only the pigs are given bran. And this was not tragic. And there were all kinds of things, you know, he would help me every once in a while. Not often, after all,

an old man, and I was not the kind, I would die 20 times better than to take advantage. One day, Mother Clara, her name was, Mother Clara comes and says, "Piorolla, are you, could you be a barber." I said, "What a question you ask! My father was a barber, my grandfather was a barber, and I am a barber!" She said, "Because one of our barbers died, and we will, we need a barber, and your advantage will be, because as a barber, you have your room where it's warm, and you shave, you get nothing for shaving, but everybody gives you, one gives you lire, one gives you half a lire, you make a little money." And she brings me the razors and everything, and soap, but the soap was "otarkik" what does "otarkik" mean--you had everything in that soap, besides soap. You had sand and stone, everything. I needed good soap. But there was another nun, old, and I said to her, "Do you have a little soap, good soap?" So she brought me soap, and you know, on the paper was written it was made 20 years ago. This was good soap because soap, the older--and I began to be the barber. Most of my work was on Sunday. And, of course, the first few beards I cut, I would cut every beard, they said, "Leave me alone," and they wanted to beat me. But after I learned, you know, I used to shave about 100 beards a day, you believe me or not. Yes, I would begin at 7:00 in the morning, and this meant money, I make money. Of course, we have people who didn't give me anything, but with money, I could buy, how would buy. They had funerals. So whenever there was a funeral, I would go with the funeral, and opposite, there was a bakery, and for money, instead of two lires for a piece of bread I would give them 20 or instead of 20 cents, I would give them two lires. After, I used to make with that nun who gave me the soap, I was to do business. I went to there, they had Tuscany cigars, they were rationed. But people would die, so they would not smoke. So she would take the rations. So she had cigars. I would, for every few cigars, I would give her money to buy candles for the Madonna, but as I knew later, she bought wine, she liked the wine for herself to drink. But I had cigars, Tuscany cigars, I had cigars. So I went there to the baker and I said, he used not only to smoke cigars, but to chew them too. In Italy they chew them, in Milan. So I said, this is rationed. You give me bread, I give you cigars. So I had so much bread, I couldn't, I would never be able to finish it. After, about, oh, I don't remember, exactly when, after two months, a boy came, his name was Klinger, his mother was divorced from his father. He was Jewish, he talked Jewish. She baptized the boy, she lived with a policeman, and that boy was put there to be hidden. But, what was his job? He was a young *infermièra*, a young nurse. He didn't know too much, but he had--they gave him to eat. And every day he would bring me bread with jam, bread with butter. I tell you, he would put it under my pillow. I said, "Listen," I don't remember his name, "I cannot accept this. If you don't accept it," I told him, "I don't need that much." This I want to tell you. Those nuns who preach paradise and all these things, I saw people at that time, you know, all this starvation, I saw people eating like in a restaurant, having the menu, with money. With money you have everything. And he was treated well, his mother paid. And that little boy, he was lucky, he did for me more than a child for his father. OK? Now, in that place, she would come, not Mrs. Monte, but another girl, oh, she was about in her

40s, Miss Commelli, she would come, she would bring me pastry, cigarettes, that I needed like a hole in my head. I didn't need it. And I tell you, they were so fine, so nice to us.

ER: How long did you stay here?

MR: I stayed there from January 31st in the evening until April 15. And there, that lady made it out that we were brought to Switzerland. There was another lady, that man Ochsong, that old man, died. He had a wife, he married her because Hitler said if an old man needs a wife, his wife can survive too. She had two girls, one was 12 years old, they are both in Israel, and one is 18, she was 17 years old. They were in another, not in a church, in a monastery. One was in Contello [phonetic], and one was in Tradate. You see, I remember the names. But, it so happened that there was a church, not a church, but an institution for poor people for them to eat and sleep, Cardinal Ferrari, and there one day, there were about 100 Jews hidden. And there the SS came in, they didn't even ask are you Jewish, they, by themselves, they recognized who was a Jew, and who wasn't a Jew. With the dogs. So, she was afraid to keep these girls, so she brought them to [unclear]. And we, on April 15...

ER: 1944.

MR: 1944. Yes, it was--there is a story, you know, I really believed in kindness and gentleness. I promised that woman, because she was not under my committee, you understand, she was under another committee, Cardinal Ferrari. But Cardinal Ferrari did not exist anymore. So she said, "Relles, do something for me." I said, "When the time will come, when you will have to go, I will go with you." Because the girl, 12 years old, she had, here was a neuritis. You know such a thing.

ER: Yes.

MR: So, one day, that Mrs. Comelli comes and says, Piorolla, she called me Piorolla too, Piorolla, in 10 minutes you are going to Switzerland. She used to call us together with that Mrs. Ochsong. You are going to Switzerland. You have three guides. And you are four people, five people. When she heard, she says, "Herr Relles, you promised me that you would help, so how do you leave me, how will you help me and my daughter." So I begin to tell and I said, Mrs. Comelli, look, I would like to go with her. She said, Relles, no Piorolla, do not put the stick among the wheels, something like that, don't give me a hard time. You know everything is organized. You have to go. And I said, "You are right, but whatever you do for me, am I not obligated to do for other people? How is she going with that girl?" I can take her on my shoulders. So she says, "Yes, you are right. Well, I will ask another one, you know, a man who also was caught and escaped, he was from Nizza Savoya [phonetic], I will ask him to go." And I stayed other weeks. And this is what happened. After two or three weeks, she came the old lady, Monte, and in the afternoon, on a Wednesday, she took us from Milan to Como on the *embarcadaro* [phonetic], which is like for people, you know, on the lake, a big, big barge, holds about 500 people, she took us there, and from there she took us to Como, from Como, a Fascist officer waited for us with a small, a car like, they used to call it a *Topolino*, which is a

mouse, as big as a mouse, and there we were like ferried and he brought us to the frontier, where at the moment, well, we were tired. And he brought us, there where people arrived, and there were the custom police. They did not say a word to us. And with this car, we went, about a half an hour, we arrived to a mountain, you know, to a shack. And there was about, I would say about 8:00, 9:00, I don't remember, and we have to wait until midnight. Midnight that man would take us through. We had three guides, and the passage was so wonderful and marvelous. It took us two hours. An hour away, we saw English planes coming through Switzerland, and throwing down these lights, so that it was like daytime. And next day, we arrived there at 2:00, at the Swiss border, you know, in the Swiss border, the woods, the man showed us, "You see here there is Switzerland," and he left us there. We had to write back that the *Topolino* is very interesting, we want more *Topolino*, which was, how would you say, a convenience writing, so that the lady would know that we arrived. And we arrived in Switzerland.

ER: And you stayed there until the end of the war?

MR: Yes. Of course, Switzerland was very nice. Very nice. But we had, actually I had the experience that *omo, omini, lupus* [phonetic]. You know what it means? One man is a wolf to the other man. Now, people who were saved, we used to give those Swiss people such a hard time. They are pigs, the Swiss people. They sent so many Jewish people back.

ER: I know that.

MR: But, we were saved. And then when they saw that Germany lost, they tried their best to please us. But this is another chapter.

ER: Were you aware that the Germans were persecuting the Jews in the camps of Northern Italy?

MR: Now, we know, they were not persecuted.

ER: The Germans?

MR: One day, they were under the Italians. As long as they were under the Italians, from December to February, it was no paradise, but they lived, for example, in a house, and they had a kitchen. They had a stove, they had common bathrooms. It was not like a concentration camp. They could even go to town and buy something. But one day, the Germans, they needed this place for prisoners they would make, for partisans, for underground fighters. So they took all those people and deported them to Germany. And I received a card from the director of the Jewish Rest Home, my name he knew, but he, had another name too, Pietro Benbak, and he wrote that he thought that they were going to the deportation.

ER: When did you become aware of what deportation to the East really meant?

MR: After the war. Because we never believed it. In Switzerland we were in an *Arbeitslager* [work camp], and men came, a very fine man, and he told the story, not in the camps, how they would make the *Aktionen*, they called it, they would begin to shoot, shoot, and have to go from one place to another one. Pick up the Jews, put them together, and

have them, dig the graves, and so on and so on. We did not believe it. We just did not believe it. That's all. And we had, on Saturday, we would have parties and we would sing the *Hava Nagilla*, and so on and so forth.

ER: What was your feeling on the Pope's action, or his lack of action, concerning the condemnation of the Germans?

MR: When?

ER: After 38?

MR: What I feel now, or...?

ER: Then.

MR: Then, of course we knew that Hitler did not come to power by revolution. He was elected, legally elected by the Germans. [Speaker in background.] The Pope, what could the Pope have done?

ER: He could have spoken out.

MR: Hitler did not, Hitler was not, Hitler persecuted the Catholic Church too. How many thousands of Catholic priests died in the concentration camps?

ER: So you don't think he could have done anything?

MR: He could only, he could have worsened it.

ER: If he had spoken out.

MR: Yes. He could have worsened it. And, my dear friend, may I call you so, we, the Jews, and the free Jews in England and in America, by making riots against Hitler, by writing against Hitler, didn't do any good to those who were his pawns. And if you are not convinced, read Goebbel's Diary, where he says, the Rabbi, the Chief Rabbi in London, made another demonstration against the Germans. We will know how to handle it. And those actions were always, they called it *Vergeltung*, which means...

ER: Revenge?

MR: And this is what we are doing today in Russia. Russia has 2,000,000 Jews. What makes us believe that the Russians are so humane as not to take advantage and to hurt those Jews who are there. What makes you believe that they are humane? [unclear] And whenever I hear that Jews go to the embassy and call names, I know it doesn't do any good. You might ask, what is there to do? What else can we do? I cannot find the answer, I am no politician, but this is simply not the way.

ER: I just want to ask you a few more questions. You were in Switzerland when the war ended.

MR: Oh yes.

ER: OK. And when did you arrive in the United States?

[Voice in background.]

MR: November 8.

ER: 1951. And what members of your family survived the Holocaust.

MR: One niece, she was a genius. After the war, she was, I don't know what she was, but she was a genius, I can tell you this. She died of a heart attack in 1964. In 1964 she died of a heart attack. She was in the hospital.

ER: But she's the only other one other than yourself that survived?

MR: Yes. We were in correspondence. Oh, she gave me so much. This is another wound in my heart I didn't go to see her. I couldn't. [Voice in background.] They left Austria ...

ER: Is there anything else you might like to add before we finish the interview.

MR: Well, what can I, you know, all these things, well, we lived in an ocean of evil, but of course, we still hope, and we still see that there people, there are nice people, people who through their own sacrifice would help other people, and that's it. In other words, one could not say absolutely evil is growing.

ER: I want to thank you very much.

MR: You are so welcome. If you are interested, you can have these too. It's not written well, but you will...