

## Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

**Name of interviewee:** Fisse, Margareta

**Date of interview:** 8/21/1990

**Summary:** Margareta Spitzer grew up in Maribor, Yugoslavia until she was 4 or 5 and then the family moved to Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia because her father had a job at a printing company. Her mother sold her beauty shop in the process. Her mother was originally a Catholic but converted to Judaism. Margareta did not consider herself a devout Jew but her mother observed Jewish practices and beliefs. In high school, Margareta first experienced the Nazis when they bombarded Belgrade and she was forced to leave school. At that time she already knew about the horrors of the concentration camps from orphans at a local castle whose parents had died in the camps.

Her father could no longer work and the whole family was deported to Italy. Margareta described the Italian officers as gentle and kind; people who had no idea why a family needed to be deported based on religion. Her father has a feeling that things would be worse and asked a wealthy Jew for money to immigrate to the US but was unable to get the money. Margareta stated that the wealthy Jew died later in the war and that people held on to material possessions and didn't leave when they had the chance. Their belongings were kept at a friends' house and later were given to some friends as they were getting married.

In Italy, the Spitzer family met other families and were put in Endinaria, Italy; a tiny village. They did not bring much with them, only a suitcase for each person. In the village, the adults could not go out of the town or work. The children were able to leave but had to report to the city hall and could not go to school. No interaction with the Italian citizens was also a rule but it was not followed much. Like most of the town, the city mayor was only a Fascist on the outside and instead really wanted to help the family. The family lived in a rented room and then in the dining room of another home. To pass the time Margareta read books and became good at speaking Italian. She also played cards and swam in a local creek. The family did not have much money so in order to get food, Margareta and her mother would knit objects to barter for food from local farmers. There were about 15 families there. When news came of the Allies reaching the southern part of Italy, the families decided to escape and flee past the frontlines to safety. The mayor gave false Italian citizenship papers to the Spitzers and they moved south through an underground network of sympathizers and ended up in Rome. Margareta had a dog named Pikizat that she thought saved her family in many instances because most Germans would not think that refugees would have dogs. In Rome, the family lived in a hotel and had to constantly watch out for the SS or the Nazi police. They would get food either from the Red Cross, the Vatican, or by other means. Margareta had to stand in line for water and other supplies and there were many close calls that could have resulted in their arrest.

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Margareta's father at one time was almost called to labor but fortunately they were able to receive false Hungarian citizenship papers from the Hungarian embassy. The Ferrari family helped the Spitzers while in Rome. After the liberation of Rome, Margareta's father signed the family up to go to the United States and they were selected as part of a group of 982 people, mostly Jews from Germany and Yugoslavia.

In the US, the family lived in Fort Ontario, in Oswego, NY, for 18 months where they went to school. They lived in the Emergency Refugee Shelter - a 1944 shelter opened by President Roosevelt in an attempt to rescue some of Europe's Jews. In the end, the family settled in San Francisco, California and Margareta visited Europe with her husband and children in 1970.