

Zdenko Bergl Interview

February 13, 2000

This is the interview with Zdenko Bergl. What was your name at birth?

I was never given a Jewish name. It was always Zdenko.

Okay.

Because we came from a Jewish background, that my grandparents were Orthodox, but by the time I come around, in the community that my parents lived at the time in Croatia, it was mostly Reformed.

When were you born?

In 1929.

What month?

August.

In what city?

I was born in a little hole in the wall called Sv Žabno.

Can you spell that?

Yeah. Is S-v, Sv Žabno, z with the comma on top of it, a-b-n-o.

What do you know about the circumstances of your birth? Were you born at home?

Yes. I was born at home and I was delivered by my uncle, the ... who was a physician, the husband of my mother's sister living in the same town.

What were your parents' names?

My parents ... my father was ... had the Jewish name of Ignatz, and my mother had the name of Ernestina.

Describe the role of your mother and your father in the household?

From memory or beginning of my memory or are there any certain point thereafter?

I'm not sure exactly about this question. I think what they're asking is, did your mother work? Or did your mother... ?

Okay. Okay. Okay, I'll tell you about it. My father was hired by my grandfather, my mother's father, to be the manager of their business in this little town. Because they were start growing. Originally my grandfather was just a little merchant selling produce in the grocery in general.

So your father was the breadwinner?

My father was, yeah. He was running the whole thing, because by the time my father come in the picture, they were already expanded. They built a brick factory and the lumber mill and the ... all this stuff.

Wow!

Because my grandmother won 500,000 Krone, in Austrian lottery.

Wow! Okay. So ...

So they did build the factory. And then when my father was hired, he was running the business for them.

So your mother stayed at home? She was a mother at home.

Well, she was a student at that time, when my father met her. And then, of course, they start dating and he ended up marrying her. And that's the only way could kept him to stay there, because my father wasn't bound to stay all his life in this little *ferkakte* [Yiddish expletive] town. So, after they got married, they told him, "Okay, you will get the whole thing there."

But your mother ran the household?

My mother ran the household, which was very big, because in our ... all the people employed by us, worked, eat with us. In Europe at that time, people who work for you, they in... in the package with their salary, it was the maintenance. Many time lodging

included. And every person who worked for us in the managerial position, in the grocery store, in the factory and all, all of them are eating at our house.

We'll ask about that. But really, they're more interested in the role of your mother and father just in the house.

In the house, my father was very little involved in the role in the house. My mother was running the whole shaboodle [sic].

Okay. And so... your mother didn't have an occupation. But you said your mother went to school?

My mother went to school. Yes. She went to the business school and she went to the professional cooking school.

Wow! So did she do any ... did she have a job for any period of time?

My mother did not ... the first time my father, mother got the job cooking. After liberation of Rome, she was the chief cook for American officer in the camp.

Okay. So now I think you told me somewhat about your ... what your father did, but tell me about the business a little more.

The business? Like I said, he took over for my grandfather.

So he was the manager of this business?

Yeah. He was running it. And eventually become proprietor of the business, which he expanded a great deal, because he ... next to the factory, they built up a lumber mill, you know, where the farmer would bring the logs and you would cut it for them and they get paid cash for it, to get percentage of the wood left over, you know?

Sure.

The guards said I don't have to pay, but I give you three logs or whatever. It was bartering, you know.

Sure.

And that was mainly what he was doing. And we had a tremendous agricultural own, you know. We had approximately 300 acres of land which was cultivated for wheat and other agricultural products. Plus you had the fruit ... a fruit garden, with 4,000 tree which was producing apple, apricot, peaches and so and so. But being the climate where we lived allowed you only one picking a year. You know, it was not ripe for...

Sure.

... growing around the clock. So, but, you know, it was very successful. But, unfortunately, when it started early budding, the garden was built in 1934. In 1941, we were gone. So the garden was only six years old.

Describe the members of your family, their names, ages and relationship to you.

Well, in the same town that I was living is ... was the youngest sister, sister of my mother.

How old was she?

Well, at the, that time, when I left, I think she was approximately 40 years old.

40. And how old were you then?

I was at that time, when we left, 12, because on the Easter of 1941, that April of '41, the Nazi come in. And by the August of '41, we were on the run.

So you were 12, she was 40 and this was 1941?

'41.

How old was your father then?

My father was at that time, I think, 45.

And your mother?

My mother was around 41.

Was your mother's father still alive then?

My ... when we left, no.

Oh, okay.

He died in '38 and my grandmother in '33.

So how old was he when he died in '38?

My grandfather, when he died, was 72.

And your grandmother?

Very young. 55.

Wow. And so, were your father's parents alive?

No. My father's, father's parents I never met. They come from Szegedin [Szeged] in Hungary.

Did you have any siblings? Brothers? Sisters?

I had two of them, and they both died. One before birth and one after the birth.

Before the war?

Before the war. And, because, both of them born ... were born slightly premature. If we had the incubator at that time ...

They'd have been fine.

They'd be alive already.

Wow. What kind of neighborhood did you live in?

I live in a small community, which I still visit right now regularly. It didn't change in 50 years.

Wow. That's what my mother says too.

Yeah. Didn't change. They got few more car, few more telephone, but otherwise, the cows are still pulling the wagon with the hay in the middle of the street and so on. The population about 6,000 - 7,000.

Tell me about the street you lived on.

The street? I was living on the main drag because grocery store was always there.

Did you have ... was it your father's grocery store?

That was father's grocery store. Yes.

And it's still there?

The grocery store is already gone, but building is there. And, but now in our house across the street where we used to have our residence, right now is a post office and

communication center. And they really put lots of work in it to fix the building. I sure wish they'd give it back to me now.

What was the inside of your home like? How many rooms, fireplaces, things like that?

Well, for this time in this community we were, we were up. We were so well off that ... I have to tell you this anecdote because it fits in the story. That every Christmas time when the priest went to blessing the homes, ours was the first one because we had the most money. [Laughs]

So how many rooms did you have?

We had three bedrooms.

Wow.

We had the running water. We had two toilets.

Three bedrooms. Did your grandparents live with you?

No. No. No. No. No. My grandparents already gone.

Did you have an extra bedroom or was this your... ?

Oh, we had the extra bedroom. We had a living room. We had a dining room. We had a tremendous house.

Wow. Was the kitchen inside the house?

Kitchen was in this house. Toilet was inside.

The toilet was inside?

[unclear] I'm telling you, the house, not in which in which I was born, I'm telling you house which I left. So you know, in the short span of 12 years, a lot of things happened.

Well, tell me about the house you were born in, too, then.

The house I was born in, it was a typical rural house. The toilet was inside but it was on the end of the hallway with a hole cut in it and then you had like a honey bucket in Japan that they would come over there and clean it up. But it was typical country thing ... no running water and building was like this.

But it was inside?

It was inside. We never had a toilet facility outside.

Wow. What about your bath?

Bath was inside also. It was a special room put on the side like a utility room. But she used it ... they used it for bath and for washing the laundry. So it was set up with the ... they didn't have no tile at that time. It was a brick floor. It was also a question of mopping. Easy to keep and get clean. But it was attached right to the next wall side, so go to the thing, it was right close to the house, in the house.

What did you have for heat?

For the heat, we had it ... we had the stoves which used firewood. And you started the fire in the morning. When the fire was going pretty good, and we ... just like in the fireplace, all red, and then you close all the doors. There was one up and then one lower, and you leave just enough air circulation for oxygen in order for fire not to die.

Right.

And it kept it warm 24 hours. You didn't have to stock it until next day.

Wow.

That was already upgrade, you know, because most of people, in the fireplace, they throw the logs like they would. This is the reason, when I built this house, I didn't want no fireplace. And everybody was, "how can you do a house with no fireplace?" Fireplace is for American it's symbol of prosperity and rugs and a marshmallow and ...

Yeah.

I was brought ... that was my way in certain times for cooking, for heating, for water, for everything. When you get up in the morning, you smell from the smoke, your house smell from the smoke, your food smell from the smoke, and the last thing I wanted to see was a fireplace.

I don't blame you. Okay. So I guess you had electricity in both houses too?

No, we didn't.

You didn't?

No. We had around ... we had ... in new house, we had a round generator from the factory. So in other words, what we had, when factory was running, I had electricity.

When they shut the factory at the 6 o'clock in the evening, we went back to the kerosene lamp.

Ahh. But you had it only for lighting?

For lighting.

Okay.

We were the only - you know - we produced our own electricity just for whatever we need.

Understood. How well off was your family? Did you have servants?

Oh, we had the servant. We had a cook. We had a maid. We had a stock boy in the, in the back for our cows well, because we had the milking cows and so on.

Yeah.

We had about five people on the staff working at our house.

And so you already told me about the land you owned. Did you take vacations?

Yes. We ... my family took vacations mostly to Croatian Riviera and almost never out of country.

Okay. What kinds of foods did you eat?

We eat traditional ... it was a mixture. Traditional Croatian peasant food with a mixture of Jewish food, you know. But we didn't ... see, the only, the only connection with the Jewish food I had through my grandparents, which come from the background in Hungary and didn't know about it. With our servant in the house and the cook didn't have foggiest idea. So whenever we wanted to have some Jewish like blintzes and stuff like this, my mom had to do it herself.

Okay. How often did you have meat?

We had meat practically every day.

Okay.

Not because of us. Because people working for us. So we would consume great amount of meat.

What was your favorite thing to eat?

Same thing as today, *wiener schnitzel*. See the chicken, in that time, in Europe, was a big thing also, fried chicken.

Right.

Because it was really expensive and it was a big luxury to go and kill a young chicken, because everybody was thinking in the term of egg laying.

Right.

But I love always veal. Veal was one of my favorites.

Okay. Describe the schools you attended.

I went ... finished the grade school in the little town, Sv Žabno, and then I went to the junior high in a little town about 20 miles away called Bjelovar. and attended first year on the beginning, in the middle, in the second year. And that's when the Nazi came, and that's was all she wrote. And I ... we ran to Italy. And we could not go to school.

Oh, you couldn't go to school in Italy?

No. No. We were ... Italian were the only one. This is the point that I like to bring out one point of this conversation and which is imperative for me. To show and to have it documented evidence of fantastic treatment by Italian to all the Jews. So they let us in. Nobody let us in. When America showed us the finger. When Roosevelt showed us the finger. Mussolini let us in. He didn't exactly go ahead and roll out his carpet, but didn't put us in concentration camp. And people who come in with the family, they were confined in legal community. People who were single, they were put in a camp, but Italian camp. Italian camp is a joke, you know. Italian camp, the guard, instead of having the hand grenades, was selling a potatoes to the people. You won't believe it. But you folks know a little bit, but, of several experience in Italy. But let me go back to school.

Where you went to school.

Okay. Now, during this period of 1941, to the end of the war in 1944, I couldn't go to school. Okay? Now as soon as the war finished ...

Yeah.

Then new first Italian government that was formed. Under American ... American umbrella.

Yeah.

They passed a special law. For all the foreigner, or Italian who may finish school because of the war, you could make a makeup exam. So we got tutoring. And we picked up the three years we lost with one exam in Rome. So we completed the high school with one test. Then, in 1947, I enrolled to ... in college in Como, architectural engineering.

Yeah.

And there I went first two years, till our papers were approved to come to America. And I had this choice, when I asked Americans to give me extension for two years to finish my education, they told me, fine, but I would go on the back of the list. You understand? We waited for four years or five years in order to get, you know, to get ...

To get papers.

To get the papers. So finally when they approve to come, if you wanted to back off, you can back off. But they cannot tell you when you are ready, come tell us. We just put your name on the back of the list and whenever it come, it come.

Right.

Now how I come to Kansas City, because Jewish community of Kansas City sponsor us.

Wait. Were there ... when you were growing up and going to school, what were the teachers like?

I didn't feel any discrimination in Europe because by that time I was speaking Italian so fluently that they didn't know I was foreign and except by my name. And I didn't have no problem. I didn't feel any heat from them. And ...

Were they tough? Were they ...

Yeah. Yeah. In Italy, in Italy, maybe more than the other European countries, the school itself set a pace how tough a school it is, especially on a higher academical level.

Yeah.

Now whenever you see in America and a guy tell you, "I'm a graduate from the University of Bologna," then you know they couldn't make it in the school in America. They had to go to Bologna. But if they come ...

Right.

...but if they come from Rome or Florence or something, then it's easy even to get a qualification exam in the States. You know? If you come here, I graduated in Europe and you say, "Well, I come from Rome." They say, "Okay." Making ... you come from

Bologna, they're much tougher on you when you're making the test to get American qualification exam.

What were your favorite subjects?

History and geography. Unfortunately, I took engineering, but you require lots of math and I was very bad at it.

Oh.

Very bad.

When did you graduate? What year was it?

I never graduated because I ...

But you got a certificate?

I got a certificate of initiation but I never got [unclear] because as soon as come to America two year later I was in Korea.

Right. What did you do for fun as a youngster?

At home?

Yeah.

Soccer was my number one hobby. We had a little team. A matter of fact, I still get together in Croatia with two guys. I was the only Jew guy on the team and I was the only guy with my own ball. When I got pissed off, took my ball, the game was over. It's true. See the surgeon, the friend of mine who is retired surgeon and when we get together with those guys, they still rob me, and say, "Here comes our little Jewish friend. He was losing. He picked up his ball." [Laughs]

[Laughs] Did you belong to any organizations?

No. I didn't belong because at 12, I ... 12 years of age, it was too early. And then keep in the mind, that in town that I stayed five Jewish families. This is it.

Right.

And five Jewish families controlled the town economically. You know?

Right.

From grocery store to the nightclubs and the entertainment, to the pharmacy and to physician. [Laughs] When the Nazi came in, they run us out. The town dies.

Right. What were your teenage years like?

A teenager life? That I can not tell you ...

Oh, you can't. You weren't there.

No. Teenager life started in Italy for me.

All right, so tell me about it.

Oh my gosh, you kidding? That part, it was glorious, in Italy, being teenager. My father had a problem, but I the [unclear].

How did you spend your time?

Well, I enjoyed very much socializing in Italy.

Yeah. Did you have friends of the opposite sex?

I had lots of the opposite sex. As a matter of fact, I used to take one home at 6:00, pick the other one at 7:00 and then take her home at 9:00 and picked up ... I used to have a three dates in one day. But it was all very, very ... how would you say? Innocent relationship at that time because in Italy, when you start getting deeply involved, you can't back off, because they go cut you ...

You had to get married, huh?

Yes. Yes. Yes. And see, in growing Italy, when the girl tell you I want to take you home to meet my mother and father, this is a big no-no because you know where it's leading. Now when I came to Kansas City, first time, and I told a girl that I want to go on a date, they told me, "Well, come pick me up home." And I froze. I mean, home. You know, you used to meet, used to meet your date in front of the pizza shop or the movie theater, coffee shop. But you never go home ... when you go home, this is really a big time.

Right.

So, but I enjoyed it very much because I didn't look at your life realistically. To me, it was all big playground. My father was already worried what's going to happen tomorrow because Communist in Yugoslavia, and we know we are not going back, you know. And we know that we are just waiting for time to go back to the stateside. And matter of fact, when came ... when our papers came through, I told my father, "I'm not going to America."

Yeah.

And my father told me that being that I was not 21, yes, you are going. If I have to get the cops and put you on the boat, you are going to America. But I didn't want to go to America because I didn't have a mental delusion. I know America is not a blend of milk of honey. I know in America you work very hard for everything you get. It's a land of opportunity.

Right.

But is not a land of picnic, I assure you. And I knew that. In Italy was picnic. I mean, what, are you kidding? Nobody start work. You go to work 9 o'clock, 10 o'clock you ready for a coffee break then you go to ... Italian lives to this day, a hundred times better than America will ever live. They will never have very much. They had 55 governments since the war is over. They will always be on strike, but they know how to live. They live longer and better life, and who is today in the far front of the fashion?

Sure.

Who is running the musical world of Europe? Everything is in Italy.

How did you meet your friends in Italy?

In the camp. Well, this the other very important chapter. When we were liberated in Florence ...

Yeah.

... by Americans, it was in August of 1944, and as soon as we got liberated, American put us on the truck and sent us to refugee camp for foreigners they met in Rome. And that camp was in Cinecittà which is real Italian Hollywood. Germans used to keep British and American prisoner in this thing. She was set up already for the refugee. They had a kitchen. They had a big room where they used to shoot the movies, like studios. Huge, tremendously big room, you understand. You could put in 2,000 people to sleep on the cots. But, anyway, we end up in this camp. And in that camp, that I met many, many of my friends, which we are still associate today. And in that camp, I met my wife.

Wow.

Yeah. So, and that's where my social life started, you know.

Did you have a job in Italy?

I had never job in Italy. I was only working during the period in the camp. I got a job working for Americans. My mom was working the kitchen. We ... she was running the kitchen for the officer, and I got the job as a truck driver.

So you were 16? You got a job as a truck driver?

Yeah. Delivering supplies to different embassy in Rome.

What a job! Great job.

Oh, oh, I cannot tell you on the record what a fantastic job it was. Unbelievable! [Laughs]

I'm sure of that.

Yeah, that was my job. I had about ... every week ... don't forget, there was no market to buy. This was ... I'm talking after the war. Every embassy used to get supply from American militaries for weeks. Everything would come in the can and be powder and short. Fresh meat there was in Italian market. But everything else came from the Americans.

So you had your share of everything then?

No, I loved it there and then when I got really acquainted with opera and theater and so on in Rome.

How did you get along with your parents? Were they strict or permissive?

Well, my parents were not strict and they were not permissive. They were about middle of the road. I took advantage a lot of time in situations because they could not put the screw on me and tighten because of the situation they were living, you know. But I never had any problem in my upbringing with my parents.

Were you ever rebellious?

No, I was never rebellious because there was no need for it. Would I be living with them all my life from the day I was born, we probably wouldn't have any problem with my parents. I never left my parents since the day we had to run from the Nazis to the day that my parents died. They were living with me. Or I always said, I lived with them. Even when I had my own house, even when they were living with me, I always said, "I'm living with my parents."

What values or standards were most important to your parents?

Values?

Yeah.

Honesty and integrity.

And how did these values affect your daily life?

Very much, very much, because, you know, in the world, you've got givers and takers and is much bigger satisfaction to go ahead and give than to take for some. For some, it's not. We were always come from a family ... from a background that we always give much more than we take, because we were fortunate. We didn't need it.

It was a good position to be in. What was religious life like in your general community? Five Jewish families....

Five Jewish families. Very interesting. I had to go to the Hebrew school, walked 20 miles, every Sunday. And there the rabbi would have a private lesson with few kids at a time. I remember one thing very interesting that ... being that we were studying at that time the Old Testament ...

Yeah.

And Old Testament is identical to the Christian Old Testament. So when I would go to the classes at that time in Yugoslavia, the priest would come and they would have a special one hour every week that the priest would teach you catechism in the school. And in the summer time, or in the spring, I loved to do, because I had to take out, [unclear], and I would leave. But in winter time, when was cold, I wasn't about to go over there. So I was sitting in the classes and when the questions were asked, I was so far ahead of them in this Old Testament. I know every answer. You know?

Uh-huh. Sure. [Laughs]

Because at that time, was still the ... really division, religious division, started with the New Testament. Old Testament is identical practically.

You know what's interesting. You left Yugoslavia when you were 12.

Right.

Did you have a *bar mitzvah* in Italy? No *bar mitzvah*. And when did your ... so your religious education stopped when you were 12 as well then? How was Judaism practiced in your home? Did you celebrate *Shabbat*?

Yeah. We ... we celebrated *Shabbat* but not in traditional manner like the kosher people in all places do it.

Yeah.

We'd have traditional food, like chicken soup and matzo balls and stuff like this. And we would have a prayer, very short.

Right. And that was it.

And the ... didn't wear *yarmulke*.

Did you celebrate holidays?

Jewish holiday ... yeah. Jewish holiday, yeah. Very much so. Not only this. The whole town celebrated *Pesach*.

No!

Oh, they come for the *matzos*. They were lining up. We always bought three times more *matzos* than we could use.

So you could give it away.

Yeah.

Which holidays were most important to you? *Pesach*?

Yeah. *Pesach*.

Did you celebrate any secular holidays, like New Year's or did you celebrate ...

That was automatic.

Yeah. How did you celebrate?

Well, you know, when you're going back that far. I was 12 years old. They didn't let me celebrate too much. But I remember very much the Christmas time, because we had so many people working for us. They were all Gentiles.

Yeah.

So we had a ... in the working part of the house, a big Christmas tree, and on the Christmas tree, all the presents they ... that they got it.

Yeah.

And when it come up for Hanukkah, I got my present inside the house. But that was inside too, but it ... like I said, a social room where all those people ...

So you really got a gift for Hanukkah. There really was a celebration for Hanukkah then?

Oh, yeah. Sure. Are you kidding? Would I miss this?

No. But, you know, for me, personally, I thought that Hanukkah was more of a holiday that got to be more important in the United States as a competition with Christmas.

Well, in being that I was in environment so much exposed to Christianity ...

Yes.

... if my folks would not remind me that Hanukkah exists, I would think the only thing exists is Christmas.

Sure. Did you go out of town for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? Did you go to a *shul*?

We ... yes. Yes. Yes. In same town, same rabbi where I was getting my religious education. I hated it because you had to, at that time, you know, the kid had to put a suit and a tie and it was very important.

Every Sunday?

Every ... [unclear]

What impact did the secular culture have on your life? Were your parents more concerned about maintaining Jewish identity or fitting in?

My parents were really winging it as long my remembering correct information. They know they were Jewish, but they didn't ... didn't become very important part of their life at all. 'Til after the war, when they come to America, then this Judaism hit them right away. They wanted to come over there and join a congregation immediately, which Mayerberg told us no way, because we are not wealthy enough. It turned out, he told us send us some place in Kansas to join a congregation, they got room there. See I don't want to, it's only reformed temple in Kansas City. Said, "No, we don't have no room. But I will put you on a waiting list." And when Rabbi Silverman took over, the following week he called us and he said, "Look here. I see your name on the list for so many years. What happened?" So my father told him, "We were just not wealthy enough for Rabbi Mayerberg." And he says, "You know what? As of today, you are member of B'nai Jehudah. You pay what you can when you can and don't worry about it."

Wow. Were you encouraged to develop relationships with all people or just Jews?

No. All the people.

All of the ...

All the people. All the people.

Were you or your family interested in secular culture? Art? Music? Philosophy?

Yes.

Okay. You want to talk about it a little bit? Or you did, you did already, a bit, but ...

Well, Jews by pure contact with the people I was having I was automatically led to it, so you cannot avoid it.

Was there any antisemitism in your town?

Yes.

Okay.

But you got to understand this was every place. It was subdue. It was not violent. We never experienced any violence against us. It was never organized. It was individually, most of it, for one reason or the other - but you always, especially when you're a successful merchant in total Gentile community. But the interest part to me is the people who were antisemitic, they were very careful what they are doing because my father was the biggest employer in little town. He donated ... my father rebuilt the church. Or in the meantime, he could build three synagogues.

Was the antisemitism, when you were growing up, any different than you think it is here? Was it more, less?

Well, this is a very good question because right now I equate everything by looking from point of view with the age. Perspective changes with your [unclear].

Right.

So the way I look now ... things the way I look when I was 12 years old in Croatia, I mean, they ... things are in a different light. But I think that American antisemitism is mostly generated by jealousy. I don't think that America you would have half as much antisemitism if the Jews would be less successful. But if you look at literature, everything you read about Jews, everything you read in the States about Jews, always said bankers, money ... they don't realize ... America really don't realize that you don't have in the five wealthiest people in America, you don't have a single Jew. And then you come in the

banking industry, we are very small. You know, because people equate Rothschild. Wealth of Rothschild of 50 years ago and the wealth of today, he was a little peanut. But the stereotype of Rothschild stayed with the generation because of the name is like engraved in the memory of many people and in the younger people.

Well, okay. So do you think this was more of an ethnic, an ethnic discrimination in Europe and it's more of a jealousy discrimination here?

Yes. I think it's more material in America and ethnic more in Europe.

Okay. We talked about occupation a little bit, and you really didn't have one before the war. Okay, so you met Evy in the ...

Cinecittà.

Okay. What year was that?

In 1944.

And how did you meet her?

Well, her mother was employed running the kitchen for the people employee, not military personnel, people working the camp. Some of them refugees, some of them not refugees. But if you were employed in the camp, in any capacity, you ate in the kitchen where Evy's mother was at. Now, our rooms, our quarters ... were practically next to each other in Cinecittà. And I was hanging around with her brother. Eve's was about two years younger and I was not interested. I was looking at girl, 19, 20 and she was this time around 14.

Right.

So I didn't think of it dating. I started only seriously dating Evy I come back from the Army. Because, you have to remember, when I came to the ... Evy ... when we split in the camp, Evy stayed in the Cinecittà. I went to school ... architectural, engineering, right? Then we lost the touch.

Right.

Then in 19- ... Evy arrived in America with her family in '47.

Wow.

I arrive in '49. In *New York Times*, run the picture of Army transport chief, *SS Marine Jumper* arriving in New York Harbor full of refugee from Naples. Most of refugee, including your folks, come from Germany. Bremerhaven and the other ports. That was when ... very big rarity ... from Naples. So in *New York Time* poverty arrive, arrival with the ship. And we are on the front page, sitting my folks our visas. And Evy mother in New York, reads the papers...

Do you have those pictures still?

This famous picture? No.

Oh.

Evy mother in New York reads the paper, see this picture and she tracked us down, because we stayed in New York for two weeks before we continued to Kansas City.

Would you like to have that picture? You know, I'm sure you could get it somehow.

Oh, sure. Sure.

It's got to be archival.

Well ... might be archival.

That's so interesting.

So that's how ... that's ...

You know, my parents came from Italy too at that time.

I know.

Okay. So. Right.

I think they were Barletta by your parents.

With Lilly and Boris.

And Evy's father, because he was first one to land from Germany. He was not with the family. He was living in same camp in Barletta. During the war, see you folks were there after the war.

Right.

And they were there during the Fascism, but when Evy and her brother came to Italy, then they let him out, the Fascists let him out to be together as a family.

What attracted you to one another after the war?

You took ... when I met in New York? Well, mostly what attracted me because she told me get lost. [Laughs] That's true. I was stationed in Fort Lee, Virginia.

Yeah.

And I was going every weekend, was driving to New York to be with my friends and my family and so on. And, of course, Evy was one of the things I would like to see. But she was already ... didn't have interest in me because she didn't trust me. You know, she knew my background with me. She remembered Cinecittà. I was going from flower to flower.

Yes.

So she didn't ... matter of fact, when I proposed to marry her, she went to her brother and said, "You think he means it?" She really didn't think. She think I was pulling her leg. But that's how we met and then finally, when I come back from the service, when I went to New York, and then we started seeing her seriously.

How did your parents feel about your marriage to Evy?

Well, they saw practically Evy growing up from Cinecittà, so at that point, very easy to accept her. No problem because that ... it's not like I brought a stranger in.

Right. Describe the wedding. Where was it?

That was just as Orthodox as it can be.

Yeah.

Little Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn. I can't imagine me ... I mean ... I mean Orthodox. And I don't know anything about tradition. I don't know what's going to happen. They tried to coach me about all this stuff. It was ... I remember from the food to the music to the signing official ... the *ketubah* document, very ceremonial. You know, is not really Jewish, go ahead you put your signature and I didn't know if I was coming or going. I was like in a total trance. But was very interesting. This is the most Jewish thing I ever done in my life.

How many guests were there?

We had 85 guests for the dinner and dance and I could hardly wait to get the hell out of there. And ...

Did you have relatives in the United States? ...

Oh, yes.

How many?

Yeah. I had my mother's brother and my cousins, and lots of friends. I even had a friend that was I was serving with them in Korea - some Jewish friends, you know. Typical New York Jewish friends. And I invited them. And it was ... was very ... and lots of friends from Chinacinz that came to America, you know. That we were running around. We had a little club what we formed. Jewish Community Center within Chinacinz. We used to call it Maccabi. Vinkler was president of our club. We used to have a Boy Scout club with the *Mogen Davids* and the Boy Scout insignia in it. We would organize ourselves real good. And this in fact was to go to Jewish community in Rome and get every bit chocolate for all the young kids in the camp.

Well, that was nice.

Yeah. Oh, yeah, and lots of fringe benefits there.

Did you have food and music at your wedding?

Yeah. Yeah. Was a regular sit down dinner, served.

How long did you ... oh, you already told me your wedding lasted too long. Was this a typical wedding for the community in New York then?

Yes. Typical ... Orthodox community. They picked up this little Pitkin Avenue. If you would see the surrounding area, they had some special ... you're going back now to 1954. And if you would see this old ... they were as Jewish as Jewish can get.

Wow.

All of them come. Lots of them, come in with *tsitskes* [fringes] and *paves* [side locks] the hats and the silk coats and all that. I said "What the hell is going on?" You know, it was really first time, even so that ... when I visited Brooklyn many occasion, and I know how the Orthodox Jews look, but I never had in my festivity and social circle, and that was very interesting.

Where did you live when you first were married, and describe the place you lived in?

Oh, 2308 Truman Road. That's where the God created earth and forget about it.

Wait a second. You're talking here.

Yes.

But be in New York. You were married ... you weren't married in New York?

I married in New York. But she moved right away with me to Kansas City.

Right away?

Right. She come. Honeymoon in Miami and Kansas City.

Well, what brought you to Kansas City?

I came to Kansas City first. I was sponsored from the Jewish Kansas City Community. I came in Kansas City in 1949. I arrive in Kansas City after Thanksgiving 1949.

And the reason you were visiting ... she was living in New York.

That's right.

I see. So you were on Truman Road?

So, I was living there before I marry and after I marry her for ten more years. If my father would not buy this property here where I build this house, then I would live there. I paid \$34 a month.

[Tape stops and resumes]

Okay. I think we're all right now. Yep. Okay, when and how did you first become aware of the Nazi presence?

Well, like I said, I have to go back to 1941, or are you talking about in general?

In general, just to know that there were Nazis.

I know that there was Nazi practically since my memory ... in 1936. I was at that time seven years old.

Yeah.

When the Nazi started their expansion, when they started to persecute the Jews in Berlin and in the Germany, and they were slowly moving towards the Austria, they become aware, because when the Austrian Jews started running, many came to Yugoslavia. Many. Only Yugoslavia was not organized in that time. But they were ... we were probably in the same stage as American Jewish community was when, in the beginning of the war when

they never ... so little organization as the National Center for ... to coordinate all the community together. The same thing happened in Croatia ... in Yugoslavia, I mean. When the Austrian Jews started crossing our borders, many of them with nothing on, and they would come to Italy also. Then the Jewish community, being they didn't have no central organization, would take in those family in their home.

Right.

You understand? Or if they didn't have no home, if they could afford to buy, renting apartment, then they would give them a little cash so they could run their own grocery and buy so on. Everybody donated what you could. If you had extra room, you give them the room. If you ... more convenient for you to give them the cash, that was good too. And that's how I become very strongly aware. I was still nine – ten years old when the Hitler [unclear] entered Austria. Because he had the biggest impact, because there were poor people with nothing on, they were putting in from the old side. You know, before it was only a question of what you read ... if you read in the paper or whatever you heard on your radio. But how much interest an eight year old kid has in the reading a newspaper political news? But when they finally come physically and you saw those people with their valises or with nothing on, struggling to just make everyday life, because we were hoping the Americans would just trounce Germany overnight. Nobody dreamed at the time, [unclear] 1939, that this thing was going to drag and drag and drag. Even so, despite the tremendous damage and the life loss, if you look at ... in the time span, the ... worst of Hitler damage, it was caused from '39 to '44. Five years.

Was that a general opinion that the Americans would come in and it would be over?

Yeah. Yeah. European thought ... we had the great expect ... as a Jewish community, you know, because we remember when Roosevelt was running against Willkie. You know, when you talk to lots of Polish Jews, they don't have any concept for Roosevelt and Willkie, because they didn't know for shit from shinola. But our community, in Zagreb, was so close to Vienna. It was much more aware politically what is going on. So we ... we really thought that the Roosevelt was going to come over there with this tremendous power. He was elected already three times in a row and we really thought he ... nothing. Nothing. I don't have to tell you about disappointment. With this [unclear] they ran him out. I think, at that time Secretary of State was Stettinius. Do you ever ... does the name ring a bell?

No.

Okay. I think he was ... he was instrumental. He was not better than John Foster Dallas, same kind of creep.

Right.

And then they become very much aware what is going on.

Do you remember the first day of the occupation?

Of Yugoslavia?

Uh-huh.

I remember like today because was Easter Sunday. And we saw German plane flying overhead, and I've told myself now ... you know, like a young kid think. I saw these Yugoslav tanks going on the road toward the border and the cannon. And when I saw three cannon going by, I say, "God, nobody can stop these cannon. We go run all over the Germans." Took Germans only 48 hours to eat the whole Yugoslavia up.

Right.

You know, Greece gave them a little resistance but we didn't. But when Yugo ... in Croatia, particularly what was a tragedy, that was a puppet government of *Ustaša*. Those were Nazi, Croatian trained by Italian and Nazis, for many years, they run away from Yugoslavia. Like in '36. Waiting for these glorious moment when Hitler is going crash Yugoslavia and make the free states of Croatia under *Ustaša*. You ever heard of *Ustaša*?

Uh-huh.

They ... they were worse than Nazi. And they caused lots of damage. They were, Croatian Jewish community is, was approximately at that time 25,000 people.

I think Boris pronounced it differently, though. But he ... he used the same term.

Yeah, *Ustaša*.

Uh-huh.

That be why they could cause the tremendous damage in concentration camp, in ... in all that. But Yugoslavia had ... see, our Croatian Jewish community was immensely wealthy, immensely. I mean, it's not like Jewish, you had a poor tailor and the little carpenter and the guy who is like a fiddler on the roof with the cow for the milk. They were doctor and professor and all that, because in this window Austro-Hungarian Franz Joseph allowed Jews education. Allow expansion.

Right.

You understand?

Right.

So it was in completely different category, this period. And, therefore, they were able to be very wealthy people.

Did you see the Nazis march in?

Yes. I saw march in 19 ... in Sv Žabno. Not on the day the war was over but I saw him on ... just as I was ready to run to Italy.

Did they seem threatening?

No, because what I saw ... I never saw SS. I saw *Wehrmacht* unit marching in. I didn't see elite.

What discussions about the Nazis do you remember having or hearing at home?

Well, in 1936, my family started a boycott of German products. That meant anything that was made in Germany, including the most fantastic cameras and lenses and products, we stopped buying. And that's only what I heard. You know, I was just a little [unclear]. I remember once, like today, that for my tenth birthday, I want a Leica camera. Instead, I got a Kodak Brownie. [Laughs] You know, and they tried to explain me. I was very disappointed, because I loved photography. And I know big difference with a Kodak Brownie. But they told me that the Germans product and so on, blah, blah, blah, blah ... but, what it would really confuse you, that Yugoslavia ... now, I'm not talking as a Croatia. As Yugoslavia still in 1941, my family, which was Jewish ... one member of my family had a car dealership from German automaker called [unclear] for all of Croatia. And they keep shipping in car clear to 1940.

Wow... What actions did your parents take in response to the Nazi occupation?

Well ... well, you know, in order to go over [unclear] give you picture, I have to go chronologically back, just for a single second. Then in 1941 for the Easter. By July of 1941, my father was forced to work on our own land as a laborer digging potatoes in the field and so on, with my mother, together. Under supervision of the local *Ustaša*. Understand?

Right.

Two weeks after that, they arrested my father, ready to ship him to concentration camp. When they arrested my father for concentration camp, we had enough connections in Zagreb, through my aunt, who got him out of the shipment and we got a paper for Italy. And we ran to Italy [unclear].

So the Nazi presence really changed your life dramatically.

Exactly. Because we had to run from living in our home in April, by the August of the same year, we were on the run and living in Italy. We were not in Italy yet. We were in the parts of Yugoslavia occupied by Italians. In Ljubljana in Slovenia, and then even later on to Modena, that's the hometown of Pavarotti.

When it changed and your father was working in the fields that he owned before, were ... did they make you wear a Jewish star?

No. No, not in the field. But whenever you went out on the street or in the city or anywhere, we had to wear a Jewish star.

Uh-huh. What other changes did you notice besides wearing the Jewish star? As a child, what do you remember?

Not very much.

Did ... was there suddenly more antisemitism than before or where your neighbors more sympathetic to you?

No. My neighbor ... well, when we had to leave the town, my neighbor, they hide in between the ... behind the curtains. They watch us as we'd be going to the railroad station. There was only one family to come to the train to say good-bye. Everybody else ... I just saw them looking.

Were they afraid?

They were afraid.

And did you sympathize that they were afraid or were you ... mad at them?

I ... some of them ... see, nobody would have go ahead and arrested them for it. But they were so panicky because they didn't expect that it would come down so hard on us. They didn't know how to behave.

You know, something I'm curious about that's different than what's on my list here, is, you've gone back several times.

A lot.

When you've gone back, have you thought that there were things in your house that your neighbors took that maybe they might have returned to you? Things that would have been ...

They claim that... let me tell you, Steve, 48 hours after I left with my mother, we were still in Zagreb. We didn't leave the country. Our house was cleaned from our good friends. I mean, they cleaned that house like you would come over there with exterminator.

Your good friends did it?

All my friends of them ... and nobody ... when later on we'd be coming over there, you know, after the war ... "No, I didn't do it. But I think I know who did it. But I didn't see them do it." Probably they were side by side rolling it in a damn truck, but they'd never ... they did a horse wagon. They'd never ...

Were there any things that were important to you that you would have wanted to have back?

Well, the lady who was very close friend of my mother and took all our jewelry. She say, "I give it to you." Because, again, we thought Roosevelt is going to clean out the things. She said, "Next year, when you come back, I give it to you." But that woman never give up, stolen. The Nazi come and took it away from her, yeah. Like she had a sign that said this belonged to a Jewish family. But if you want to ...

Were you prohibited from going to public places? Did you have property that was confiscated before you left?

No.

Only your real estate and the businesses.

Everything was, everything was ... everything was confiscated within matter of 60 days of Nazi enter Croatia.

So they took all your possessions?

They took everything. They took the real estate. They took the grocery store. They took everything.

Only from Jews, or from everybody?

Only from Jews. Only. Like five Jewish family in this little town, and they cleaned everything. But, you know what is sad part? I don't, well, I think out of the five Jewish families, there were sixteen people in five family. I think three of us with my parents, four survived.

Wow! Did any Gentiles help you?

Yes, a lot.

All right. How did they help you?

In Italy.

In Italy.

After the armistice of Italy, in 1943, when Italy capitulated, and the Germany occupied in Italy, and then they liberate Mussolini, you know, from prison and they made him a puppet. They leaving Mussolini then in control. As long Mussolini run Italy, now I want to do that for record ... as long as Mussolini run Italy, never a single Jews was turned over Nazis. He didn't treat all of them with kid gloves. And some of them were rougher than on the other. But you have to remember, when Mussolini came in power in 1928, Jews, Italian Jews were the hard core of his intellect to put him in power. They taught him everything Mussolini know. Mussolini is a, was a little peasant who didn't know nothing. And for many years, Italian Jews were living in total euphoria, until this thing. Why you think that Mussolini told to Schuschnigg of Austria? If Nazi touch you, I come defend you. And then he chickened out. But I do ... I just have to ... I don't know if you have this on your record, but I have to tell you being that you wanted to know how the people treated us, and they took everything away from us. I'll tell you one little episode that gave me the greatest satisfaction of my life. Now when I came ... when I left Europe in 1949 for the United States, I never returned to Europe 'til 1972. Now this is a ...

23 years.

... 23 year span. In 1972, I take my Cadillac. I load it on the boat in New York and I'm drive ... you remember in [unclear] and I drive it to my hometown with American flag flying. And I mean, people come from all over. Now how did you do it? We took everything from you. We cleaned you Jews, everything. How did you Jews do that? And always the Jew, and how did the Jew? I said, I'll tell you the truth. When you come to America and you tell them you're Jewish, your fellow Jews wait for you at the airport or the ship, and they give you a key for a new house and they give you a key for a new car. Jews stick to each other. I'm telling you, they just shower you with the goods. [LAUGHS] And they believed it. They bought it.

[LAUGHS] They ate it up.

They ate it up. And that made me happy, because if I would have tell him that I come to America and I swept the store in the first place I worked, they would say, "Ahhh!" But the final thing what is called, if you will build and you have a little muscle, you will succeed.

Right.

And that's what it meant. But that made me very happy to take my big car to Europe.

What do you remember about the liberation? Oh, wait a second. I didn't ask this right. Were you ever deported to a concentration camp?

They never caught us.

Okay.

Never.

How did you manage to stay away?

Well, will you go ahead and stop the recording for just a second?

[tape stops then resumes]

So I asked the question, how did you manage to avoid going into any camps?

Okay. Now, when Italy capitulated, we know we had a very short time that we had to run, because Italian Fascists had, first they told us... The German told them they are taking over and they ask for the name of all the Jews that live in the particular community. So they tell you, you better get lost as quick as is possible. The lady that we were renting from, which was ... become very good of us ... through her connections, she found us a place in Florence in a building, through the priest in this same dio- dioceses ... Diocese of Modena issue us forged identification cards. They give us Italian name. And they give us the place of residence in Southern Italy that was already occupied by Americans. So if the Nazi wanted to check if this is true, they can't because this town was already under American occupation.

Perfect. Wow!

You understand?

Yeah.

They didn't have nothing to go back to.

Right.

And we could have a good, legitimate excuse that we are refugee because we are running away from American.

Uh-huh.

You understand.

Right.

So, we got ... and in the building where we were hiding, we were hiding till the day before the Nazi entered Florence. Day before they enter Florence, being that the house that we lived was facing the Arno River, Nazi decided to blow up all the streets facing the Arno River and they did. And all the bridges, except Ponte Vecchio, you know the bridge with the boutiques?

Right.

That's the only bridge they didn't blow up. Everything else in Florence was blown up.

Wow.

And the people who are living in this building, that put us in Palazzo Pitti, that's Italian Royal Gallery Museum. There were 6,000 people living, waiting for liberation. And we were in this building. And the American entered and a few days later, we were on the way to Rome.

Wow.

But if was not for Italian who helped us to hide in this period when the Nazi took over Italy from September of 1943 till liberation of the August of '44, we would be in concentration camp. Probably I wouldn't be here.

You know what? I didn't ask because, I don't know why. But, was there any antisemitism that you noticed in Italy at all?

Italy is the less antisemitic country on the earth. Of course, you have every place. But is so many [unclear]. In matter of fact, in rural Italy when you tell them that you are here. Ask you, "Why are you here?" You say, "Because I'm Jewish." The guy says, "So?"

Oh, yeah.

Well, it was something stupid to them to tell them I'm here because I'm Jewish.

Okay, so what year did you go to the displaced person camp in Rome?

I arrived in the Rome, in the August of 1944.

And was the food good?

Ach! Are you kidding? My mother was eating together with American officers.

Was the sanitation good there?

Sanitation, was for most of the part very, very ordinary. We'd dig row of toilets back in the ground.

Uh-huh. A latrine.

Yeah. Yeah. Very, very ... but don't forget, the amount of the refugee and turnover that was going through this camp was huge.

How many people were there at one time?

I think we had ... it was as much 3,000 people going at one time. It's a hell of a lot of people.

What were the sleeping quarters like?

Sleeping ... sleeping quarters for refugee, which was in transit ... they used the shooting ... the studios, you know? Which were approximately like 300 feet by 150 feet wide.

Oh, so lots of people slept in the center?

Oh, got ... they, they made partitions in between the beds, wood partitions. But they were all in the big, you know, no [unclear], nothing. And the mattresses, where they issue, they gave you a sack, and then you go in a hay pile and you fill it up with the hay. That was your mattress. And sanitary ... it was very efficient because when you left, the next person would empty the hay that you were sleeping and put the fresh hay. And the mattress was washed, the liner was washed and the fresh hay was put in.

Were there leaders in the camp?

Yeah, there were leaders. Because, don't forget at that time, yet we were the first group that start going to Israel.

Yeah.

And there were quite a few Jews who tried to ... but they were like a group. In percentage, I would say, it was 10% of Jews. The rest of them were Gentile people who, every possible country that you can imagine. And they were in transit. They're trying to go home as quick as possible. Some of them, they come to this country and they didn't even want return. So they were kind of dodging, trying to stick around the camp as long as they can until the American refugee authority told him, "Okay, now if you don't want to return to

your home, then you have to do something for yourself and get a job in Rome or some other Italian city.”

Were there schools in the camps?

The camp in itself didn't have. But there was close by. But they had a church and synagogue.

So how'd you spend your time?

I was working delivering this food.

Right. You told me that. Okay, so how long were you there? How many years?

I was there from August of 1944 till the end of 1946. So two and a half years.

Two and a half, three years. So, after you were there, where did you go?

I went to Como.

Oh, that's right. You told me you went to Como. And, you know, I asked you about your marriage and that was pre-war. Now they're about post-war marriage, which is funny.

Pre-marriage war, I thought I was divorced. Post-marriage, now I know I'm not divorced.
[Laughs]

[Laughs] So, after the war, you wanted to live in Italy.

Yes.

And you told me that.

Yes.

And ... but you ... when you came to America, you went to New York first.

Yeah, because my family was living in New York, so I stayed for two weeks before continuing to Kansas City.

How'd you end up in Kansas City? This is the part we really didn't cover.

I'll tell you something. I know I don't have any idea exactly how this road, route or assignment works from the Jewish Family Services in 1949, '48, at that time. I know that I

applied through Milano Joint, American Joint Distribution Committee, for immigration to America. At that time, Winkler, you know Winkler? Henry Winkler, okay?

Oh, yeah.

I was ... he was part of our group and he came too. He was running immigration from Milan office. He was in charge. And we both put our names for our families to come to America. He got Dallas. I got Kansas City because they were doing in alphabetical order. So they would say, like, first ten, go to this city. The next ten go this city. Just at random. People who had a family living in America, you could apply to go to that city. Like Evy.

Right. Sure.

Like Evy had a family in New York. She said that. Now I had a family in New York also, but they ... but when I made application, they were not in New York. You understand? They just beat us to New York by a little bit.

So the Distribution Committee sent you.

Distribution Committee assigned me. But I didn't want to come to Kansas City. So I told Winkler, "You know what? I don't want to go. Why will I go *ferkakte* Kansas City? You go Dallas." Dallas, sounds big to me, Texas, oh well, that's very good. So he tried to change it. Both of us for Dallas or both of us to Texas. It was easier to switch both of us to Kansas City than to Dallas. You understand that? So he did the switching, but couldn't find the opening in Dallas. So I didn't [unclear].

Right.

You got ... you got [unclear], you know, and I told this, my bitterness as a whole to Jewish community.

Yeah.

Because to this day, after 50 years, I was never invited in a Kansas City Jewish family establishment. Never! I was never in the home of established ... I'm talking people who come after the first War or before then.

Right.

Never!

It's just amazing. And I'll use different language than I used before. It's just amazing how they could open up their pocketbooks, but they couldn't open up their hearts.

Unbelievable. Unbelievable.

And they could bring so many Jews ... Jewish survivors, to Kansas City because we had a huge community.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Sure. But they didn't want nothing to do with us.

Right.

See, when I got here, you know, the first thing they say, "You a member of Jewish Community Center."

Right.

Which was on Linwood Boulevard.

Right.

It was a young Hungarian boy who was only survivor. They kill all his family. His name was Andrew Gross.

Yeah.

He was maybe, a couple of years older than me. So we said, "Okay, let's go over there and play a little ping pong." So we didn't know. We spoke very little English, both of us. So they said, "How can I help you?" I want to go and play the game. So somebody explain us that you have to wait downstairs. The team that loses pulls out, and the team that, you loses you replace. So we were willing to wait. When finally come turn for us to play, to play, they pushed us around like yo-yos. They never give us a chance to come to the table. We wrecked the place, me and him, and they threw us out. And that was my last association with the Jewish Community Center on Linwood. But is not fault of those kids.

Right.

Those kids didn't see better. These people who supervised didn't see better. This, this thing starts changing drastically when the Jewish Community Center moved here on Troost and you kids grew up and start dating and all of that. Then the picture starts changing. Not that they liked it. But they couldn't help it.

Did you know English when you came here?

Okay. Thank you and good-bye.

How did you learn?

Well, Army did a great deal, I tell you. It's funny thing. When I was drafted, I had to register right away to the draft board. And when I came to the draft board, the first thing what happened is she told me scribe your name, Christian name. I didn't know how to spell Zdenko. So the lady tell me, no good. American name. I said, "Fine." She said, "John." I say, "Fine," again. So I become John. That's why ... Zdenko John Bergl because draft board gave me John. And then, of course, for one year, they left me alone because you couldn't speak English. The following year, when they draft me again, I say, "Hey, I'm a smart guy. I go back again and tell them "no speak the English." And the sergeant tells me, "Don't worry. We teach."

[Laughs]

Three months later, I was on the way to Korea after basic training.

[Laughs] Describe your experiences as an émigré. How did you adjust to the new country?

Well, after I finished with Korea.

Well, what ... wait a second. Why don't tell me about Korea and what it was like to be in the army?

The Korean experience, for me, was the most fantastic experience of my life. First of all, I learn discipline. Second, I learned to depend on myself. And the third made me better American than most American born here. And the fourth, after I came from Korea, I never heard any American call me greenhorn or a refugee or anything. I paid my dues. And I don't want any shit from any American born person no more and I didn't get it. And on top of that, become a really red-hearted American. I mean, we really ... I mean no extreme right. I wouldn't say that. But I'm really for ... if it was up to me, you know what I would do with Japanese product? I would not let them buy or sell us anything. I've lived in Japan, between the Japan and Korea for a long enough time.

So you view yourself as a true patriot?

Yeah. Yeah. I really ... I figure I did, did my part just as much as any American born. So I ... I got nothing for free. I didn't get a free ride. I didn't run to Canada. I didn't run Puerto Rico. You know, because when they drafted me going to Korea, I had the option. It says on my paper you can go back to Italy.

No kidding.

Oh, sure. You didn't want ... you didn't want to be drafted, yes, you go back to country of origin, from where you came.

So this was your major adjustment, being in the Army?

Very great adjustment for me, but once I finished my first year and a half of duty ... I served all together a little over two years - the last six, seven months in Japan - was much easier. But I learned to know Japanese.

What was your final rank?

I was never made it higher than corporal. But I've never been in combat.

Right.

You see, I was assigned to Quartermaster, and even though I was in Korea it was not a picnic just going to foxhole and pick up a duffel bag full of shoes for the boys who the shoes were full of water and freezing, you had to give them ... and socks, you know, and those people in the foxholes, though, cannot move their position.

Right.

So you go way low down in the mud and you be dragging a bag full and then you give those guys, and then you go back, get the fresh supply. Occasionally there's people can get out of the front line to go over to get to the warehouse, but when you are in the position, sometime you can't and when your feet are cold, you are cold, you've got to get it. That's the biggest casualty we had, the frozen feet.

Really?

Yeah. Parka and the clothes was plenty available. But the feet, because you were standing in the mud. That, that was ... that was the hardest part.

Yeah.

And then the other, you know, the Japanese, I never like it and I [unclear] today [unclear].

Was there any discrimination in the Armed Forces?

No. No. None of that. You know, when you ... when you in Armed Forces in this peaceful time, in the boot camp or even when you're serving your duty out of the boot camp, you would encounter discrimination much more than when you on the combat line.

Sure. Everybody's depending on everybody else. [LAUGHS]

You're damn right! So you ... you know, we ... we had the, three, four guys from, black guys from what is the ... Little Rock, Arkansas.

Yeah.

Big, huge guys. You know what BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] are?

Yes.

Now that son of a bitch weighs about ...

Huge!

And, I mean, you got to be able to carry it.

You got to be a big guy to carry a BR.

I mean, I am sticking to these guys with the BAR because he has the firepower, you know?

Right.

And he had this three chains of the ammo around his neck. And he was like a little Army camp all by myself.

[Laughs]

I said, "If we get hit, I want to be next to this guy."

Right.

So whenever I see him, I didn't care. You know, when going to patrol seven guys, you rotate, because usually get it on the back or on the front.

Right.

So whenever the guy with BAR ... if you move in the back, I wanted to be where he is. Move in the front, I move in the front. Because he looks to me like a safety blanket. So you ask if there is discrimination. No. And this guy, and he was cranky. And he was carrying the browning. "That no good son of a bitch, Harry in his warm bed in Washington. I'm here freezing my butt." But in the, when you're in combat, you can say anything you want, as long as you do your duty. You can curse anybody.

Right.

And it ... and your captain, or your sergeant, they will not open their mouth. They depend on you too.

Right.

So it's a different ball game.

Okay. How quickly did you learn English?

It didn't take very long. I did. I still have a problem grammatically because I never had the higher education as concern English language. But is nothing better than school of hard knocks.

Did you talk about your experiences?

With who?

With your friends, with your family?

I'm still in the contact with lots of people, Steve, that was in the Army. Even the sergeant, that I had, I was in contact with him till a few weeks ago that he took sick, I think maybe died already. He had the sugar and they had to cut his leg off, so ... I was talking to him just a few weeks, but I keep in touch with many, many guys from the Army in California, Wilmette, Illinois, you know ... the, the friendship that you form under these condition are very binding. Very binding. You will not believe it what this ... under this circumstances. This is not like Good Time Charlie, you know. You really, every step that you are together, you really depend on each other.

Wow. What about the experiences in, in... that you had in Yugoslavia and in Italy. Did you talk to the people in the Army about it? Did you talk to people here?

You're talking after the war?

After the war. After the war.

Well, I always talk with whoever is willing to listen about my experiences in the Army, especially with concern Japanese because I learn to ...

I mean what happened in ... during ... during the Second World War ... during the Nazi period. Did you talk to the people in the American Army about it? Did you talk to your friends here about it?

I talked to my friends in the Army because they were interest, you know, because I was so fearful of getting caught as a prisoner, because when I entered American Army, I was not American citizen. So was always feeling that my name, if the Chinese would catch me, because Chinese entered the war in Korea at a certain point. And if they turn me to Russian, they cut my hand off. They wouldn't care that I'm in American Army because I was not citizen.

I see.

So, to that extent, and of course, I ... I don't discuss my Army days as a general practice. But I discuss with people my persecution on many occasions, especially people who ... American people who don't realize how blessed they are.

Did you talk about your persecution with the people in the Army when you were in the Army?

Yeah.

Yeah?

Yeah. Yeah. A lot.

Were any of those people soldiers in World War II?

Everyone who was my superior, went through the ... World War II. Even the gentleman I just mentioned before.

The sergeant?

Yeah. He took me under his wing immediately. As soon as he heard from me ... I was assigned to his warehouse on temporary duty. And when he heard my story, he requested that I stay in his unit.

He was the chief quartermaster in the Army?

Yeah. Yes, he was in charge of all. But problem is, all things started in Tokyo. See? Not in Korea. And then when the winter come early in Korea, like the first snow hit in end of September, and those kids were still in the, in the fatigues, then we went on TDY. You know what the TDY? Temporary duty. And then we ... they flew us with all the supply and the temporary duty never supposed to last more than 14 days. We were there for six months.

So who became your new friends in Kansas City? And how did you make your friends?

Well, here I become Jewish. Because in Italy I was always surrounded by Gentiles.

Right.

I knew more about Catholic Church and serving and mass than a priest. In Latin, because it took in Italy for every study they took, I had to take Latin. It was mandatory. We were never selection. I'm going to drop this. I'm going to pick up this. They tell you exactly what you could take.

Right.

So, and, excuse me, refresh my... question...

All right. So ... so, the question is, who became your friends here?

Refugees.

All refugees?

I really learn here more of Judaism, especially from my Polish friends, than I ever dreamed that existed.

Do you think that your friends here, which is different then what happened in Italy, your friends here being refugees, was that dictated by those being the only Jews that would associate with you?

No. I want to tell you something. They say that, two ... how would I say it?

I mean, you'd ... you'd come out of the Army.

Yeah. I realize. But there was two ramifications.

Yes.

One of these, this, the answer I cannot answer only in one direction, is not one directional. I ... when I come over here, I had the Gentile friends too because I have a friend in Kansas City, Kansas who's father worked for my family in Europe before the war.

Wow.

His dad, come to get married in my hometown. And he got caught there between the first war and he could not come back in America. He was stranded. He come from my hometown. Come to Kansas City. Got to get married. War started. He could not come back. Meanwhile, he married the woman, and as soon as he could, and in '18 war was over, in 1922, come back to Kansas City. Now my father remembered the last name of these people. So when we end up in Kansas City, he says, "You know, I think I remember a guy from Kansas City who used to work for us in the '20, '22, '23, something like this. I think name was [unclear]." We look in the book and we find it. So I become a close friend with his son, who is about three, four years my junior. So I, through him, I expanded a very large Croatian, Gentile, Catholic community in Kansas City, Kansas. But through my parents, who was yearning their Jewish identity ...

Yes.

They were totally surrounded by the Jews. Now Adela Dagerman and us met on the ship coming to New York.

Wow.

Did you know that?

I didn't know.

Okay. And this bonding took place on the ship. But we never know that we are both going to Kansas City. When in New York's harbor we said good-bye, and we stay in New York with my family for couple of weeks, we never dreamt that two weeks later that when we get to our apartment where the Jewish Social Service had prepared for us, that he would open the door of the next door neighbor are Dagermans. And they were the catalyst for which friends of our Jewish friends through them. Because he was Polack. She was Hungarian. So she got together with all the other Hungarian Jews. He got with the Polish Jews. And so we got with the Gutovitz's.

It was more of a neighborhood thing.

Yes.

When you got here.

Yes. Yes.

These were people in the neighborhood.

[Unclear]. It was language that put us together.

Yes.

And its total rejection by Kansas City Jewish community ... established Jewish community. They would not socialize with us. When would have affairs together in Jewish Community Center or any party, or they didn't come, or if a few come, and when the few, they come, they come only as a show to give us a little speech. To wish us good luck. And then get hell out of there. So we were put together by the force and by destiny more than the assigned place.

What was your first job here?

My first job was here working for Copeland Refrigeration owned by Nate Bourbon.

And who helped you get that job?

Jewish Social Service.

Okay.

Vocational Services.

Oh, you got it through the Vocational Services?

Yes.

So you got training first, or you got training ...

That's a story in itself.

Okay.

That's a other screwy uppy by good Kansas City Jews.

Tell us the story.

I worked for the guy for 75 cents an hour and all the black people for him working were making more than a dollar.

Yeah.

That because of a good Jewish refugee, and he rode me as long as he could. So finally, I asked him, "Look, I want to learn a trade. I went engineering school. I gained more on my credentials." He said, "Don't worry. I take care you." So, went by one year, and the second year. And he had the sheet metal shop, and refrigeration shop. And that for me was fine. I don't care if you put me in the union, in the trade union, as a sheet metal worker or as a refrigeration service man. You cannot get. This is a closed union. But I take care of you. And again, nothing. One day ...

How many years down the road is this now?

I'm now ... I start working for him in 1950, now I'm going to '53. Just as I was ready to ... '52, I'm sorry. Just as I was ready to go to Army, something to pay your debt. I'm working next to the sheet metal worker at union hall. And I say, "What the hell I got to lose?"

You walked in?

I walked in there and says, "I want to talk to the chief business head." I say my name is *Moyshke Pishkepe* [sic]. I'm a refugee from Europe. I work for Nate [unclear], because

our shop is a union shop." Said, "I would like to learn this trade. I don't know anybody. My uncle is not member of your union because everybody say who you know? Is any member of your family? You know, and then whole big spiel because they make it very hard for you to get in. See, I got one thing I can tell you. " I'm a refugee. I've been through all this stuff in Europe. And I would like to learn your trade." And the guy told me, says, "You know what? Welcome brother." He was a big sweet. He say, "How much you make now?" I told him I'm making now 95 cents an hour. "Tell Nate that from day afternoon, you're making \$2.25. Welcome in the apprenticeship program." And then I serve apprenticeship program in the Emmanuel High School on, on... on, Truman Road, you know where it used to be on? Four years of it, but when I come back to Nate [unclear] I show him the slip that I got this double my salary, the guy almost flip. "I told you I'm going put you in there," he said. You didn't do nothing. I went over myself. Introduced myself, and the guy said, Okay, you're a good candidate, and the rest of it is history. But, never, everything you had to do on your own. I could tell you episodes by ... which because ...

[Tape cuts out and resumes]

Back to your boss.

Well I told him that I got almost double salary in two hours. And he told me, "Oh, you know, I promised you, blah, blah, blah. I'm going get you in union." And I said, "Baloney. You would never. I could have waited forever." If I didn't go do my own. I gave him plenty time to go ahead and talk to me. But, in matter of fact, when I was there, I asked him, "Did [unclear – reference to the boss] ever contact you? And he said no, he didn't. Well, God bless his memory. He give me a job. He never fired me. I always worked for him till the day that he owned the company. So that part I cannot complain. But he give me nothing for nothing. I don't know if the [unclear] invited [unclear]....

Did he ... did he ever invite you to his home?

I came to his home only one occasion and that was on a Saturday. And I thought that finally the ice was broken. And finally, first time that I worked with the guy in a long time. And I got dressed in my best and he was fiddling in the garden. He was fixing up his swimming pool and he wanted to melt some hot pitch to fill up the cracks. And that was the last time I went over there to visit him for any purpose. So I know that he would never socialize. I realize that.

Where else did you work?

I ... you know what, it's a very funny thing. Since day I come to Kansas City, and start working for that shop, I was never worked for anybody else before this shop. When that shop, when [unclear] sold the shop to the Hagar Refrigeration. I went to the Hagar

Refrigeration. When the Hagar sold the shop to Metro Air, I am with the shop Metro Air. So I become like a fixture. Not only equipment was moved from shop to shop.

Mrs. Bergl: "You're not recording?"

Yes.

Okay. So you were a fixture with the shop and you went to ... [LAUGHS] and you were part of the equipment.

Actually, in theoretically and practically, I work all my life in the same organization because went from shop to shop. Different owners but the same shop. Till any time.

What kind of hobbies and recreational pleasures have you come to enjoy?

Classical music.

Yeah.

Traveling. Like sports. Not... follow sports, not [unclear] sports. I used to play soccer, even when originally came here in the Swope Park. But that was like hundred years ago. At least it seems that way, that long.

You know, I remember a long time going to a soccer game and remembering Sam Nussbaum was playing soccer.

Yes. Yes. And Boris.

Yeah. I don't remember Boris playing for sure.

Yeah. Sure.

I remember Sam.

Oh, sure.

What, well you've told me about post-war ... all right. What, if any, post-war events have had great significance to you? The Cold War? Civil rights movement? Vietnam? The '60s? Feminism? Assassinations? What ... what of these things have been important to you?

Well, basically, in ... in my ... in my thinking, I'm still quite a bit old fashion. I've a very hard time to adjust to the new music. I don't understand rock and roll. I don't understand punk rock.

Yeah.

I don't understand anything that you kids ... that what people sing and you don't understand what they're singing. Dress code I cannot accept, accept. Cannot understand perform on the stage being half-naked or being dressed in rags. You know, I still have a concept of entertainer in a decent suit or in a tuxedo and a bow tie. You look like a *mensch*. I have a very hard to adjust to it. And politically, I have a very hard time adjust to the feminism. I ... I'm not a chauvinist but it ... they want to call me chauvinist, so be it. But, very hard because, and ... most of all, I have a hard time politically accept the changes what is happening right now with the black people in America, not that I'm against black people.

Right.

I think that they should have every privilege I have. But I want them to earn it. I don't want to give it to them just because they are black. We as the Jews, if we would go ahead and rock the boat every time something is wrong and say give it to us, we're a minority, well, shit, we'd be marching now for the last 500 years in America! We can't do that.

Right.

You have to earn everything you get. And they don't feel that way. And I get very disenchanted when I see the big personality from Oprah and Mr. Tiger Woods and you name, and be fooled by all of them. All of them are beating a drum for some kind of equality. Nobody gave them equality. They earn it on their own and they become successful. And nobody stopped them. So, there are big changes to be sure I have a very hard time. This is not ... this world out there is not my world. It's passé. I belong in the generation that's gone.

Right. So, the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, Vietnam, were things that were ...

Vietnam ... it really ... it was a wrong war because we didn't go to win. That's one thing America has to learn. If they enter anything, they should go ahead, do it. Be done it. If they keep making ... we are the only country who prepare for our mistake. We've done the same thing with Iraq, with the same time with Iran, with the same thing now in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We didn't do nothing and leave everything half done.

How do your Holocaust memories, the memories of the persecution, penetrate your life today?

Well, I want tell you something. Now listen to this careful what I want tell you. The people the German kill in the most inhumane and consistent persecution in the modern history, except if you go before Roman Empire and the Greek Empire and so on, in the modern history, is really undescrivable and unacceptable, especially for civilized people as German. German are brilliant people. You don't have to love them. But they are brilliant.

Yeah.

Absolutely no question about, the most brilliant people of Europe. Not only intellectually, but even is a ... as a working force. Now, they cannot bring back a single... bring back a single life that they destroyed, that's gone. But from the day that this war is over, this is the only country on the earth that has tried to atone for their sin. In a billion of dollars, now listen, Steven, already the second and third generation of Germans that didn't have had nothing to do with the Holocaust, they paying through the nose for the sin of the grandfather. But is Japan who start killing and slaughtering people bigger number than the Nazis ... and we didn't give a shit because they didn't touch Jews. It didn't affect us.

Well, I don't even know that it's so much that they weren't Jews. They weren't Caucasians.

Well, well ...

So they didn't even count the numbers.

Okay. Well, it really, they done it in such a fellowship. And they never, never paid anybody anything. Those people on top of it have the guts to ask compensation for American government because they're putting in isolation. Not concentration camp. In isolation for security during the war and they were made to pay them for this duration. This is country, you know, because I'm making the comparison because you ask me of the Holocaust. I'm comparing the Germany is today the only political and economical friend America and Israel has. Israel doesn't have a better economical partner than Germany. They got billion of dollars in Germans. They're investing these billion in German. And the biggest buyer of Israeli fruit is not America, it's Germany.

Wow. Are there ... are there sounds or smells that you experience today that remind you of when you were a kid? Are there things that bring back memories? Are there things that bring back memories of, of having to give everything up and leave Yugoslavia?

Steve, that is one thing I never cry about over spilled milk. But it was, it was, so I never, because if you could become very bitter and bitterness has no serve purpose. I'm ... I'm more bitter over the ... over the event that I don't have a control than the thing that I have the control and I didn't do it. You understand? Like I didn't have the control that the Nazis come into ...

Right. I understand. So the war affected your attitude and practice of religion, really, in the end, didn't it?

Yes, it did. Yeah.

Okay. During the war, did you ever stop believing in God?

No. I never stopped believing in God.

And I think you told me you belong to B'nai Jehudah?

Yeah.

Okay.

That's another problem with me. I don't attend very many services. And I like B'nai Jehudah a lot. If I were to have to choose a Kansas City Rabbi I like the most, would be Rabbi Cohen of Beth Shalom. I think he's the most brilliant ...

Very nice guy.

... humanitarian human being that you can find out. But Zedek, he would be good rabbi. He could be [unclear]. He [unclear]. It's politic, politic, politic. I don't want a politician. I want a rabbi. Is that so wrong?

No. What's your favorite Jewish holiday?

Pesach.

And what traditions from before the war that ... what traditions that you celebrate before the war do you share with your family here?

Well, you know, like, like I say when you start this interview. Being that we're such a small community, Jews that are were living, everything about the Jewish holiday become very important because the rest of the year we didn't ... we didn't have opportunity go every *Shabbes* to the *shul* ... so the holiday, we were waiting from bigger holiday to the other to show our Judaism and practice. Because we did take the time to go to the other town for the services. We did dress up. We were trying to traditionally have the Jewish meals and get together with our Jewish family. You know, we had biggest Jewish family in Zagreb. So it become, it become for us very important because it was not only opportunity as the Jews to celebrate the holiday but become a big family get together.

What do you attribute your ability to adjust to a normal life after the war?

Very good question. I don't know how well I got adjusted to the life after the war, but I did the best I can. Till my retirement, I was very active in my work during the working hours and after the working hours I had a little circle of my private friends and I was doing the service and so on so that kept me good and busy. And then as gradually I was getting older, and being that my work was mostly performed on my knees, low, my cartilage in my knees got completely worn out. So I realized that I would have to take a early retirement,

even a few years before I was eligible. But through my labor movement and then I had to give it up earlier than I would like to. But I never was ... I never had the problem with boredom because I always was busy with something or reading. I read very, very much, and different languages. I'm very much interested in the history. I'm very interested in music. I'm very interested in sports, even the sports are declining at a very fast pace for simple reason that when I watch any, any competitive sport, when you ... I see bunch of millionaire competing ... [unclear]

It makes you sick!

... but is no more ... those guys are right now prima donnas. You don't have no more a guy who is there playing there all the hard because he wants to establish them. There's no purpose. He's established. If they fire him tomorrow, he's ... so what's the purpose go watch a basketball game and you see ten millionaires in the court? How can you like that you see a guy shooting a basket and you go over try to pro-rate how many times he throw a ball in the basket, and say every time he throws the ball, if he misses or not, that's \$5,000 a throw.

Is that good?

Is that decency? So this is the reason why my interest in sports is dropping drastically. I've become more attached to the college sports and to the Olympics again, preparation. I'm member of Olympics committee and I'm very active in it because it's still amateur to a certain extent and it doesn't worth this billion dollars, except for the networks who are selling the time.

Do you think that... that people take their American freedom for granted?

Oh! I think that every American ... I think American go over and supposed to put the fund on side to force every American to go overseas to third world country for one month... for one month. I want him to feel how to live in the hot water, without a shower, without a toilet, without McDonald's, without Pizza Hut. I want them to find, to fend on their own. They would be better American when they come back. They would stop bitching, believe because they don't know what they have it. It's unbelievable. I mean, I can see from my family, when I bring them here to America and I'm taking to Pizza Hut. \$3.99 all you can eat. My little nephew, 17 years old, he was there for three hours! I mean those people from Pizza Hut, they were taking a picture of him eating pizza. And I didn't stay. After a while there, I said you are still eating, so I left. I told him, I come back in an hour. I mean, this Pizza Hut, if they would open this thing in a third world country, all you can eat \$3.95, they last one week.

[LAUGHS]

[END OF RECORDING]