

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Ion Butnaru

May 3, 1990

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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Ion C. Butnaru, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on May 3, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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ION BUTNARU

May 3, 1990

01:00:19

Q: We're on. Tape is rolling. Please tell us your name.

A: My name is Ion Butnaru.

Q: When and where you have been born?

A: I am born in Hu_i, a small city from Moldavia. At...December 4th, 1980...1918.

Q: Please tell us about your family, about growing up in Hu_i before the war.

A: My family is from Hu_i. My grandfather was born in Hu_i, my father born in Hu_i. What I can tell you? They make a living being vineyards [**NB:** vintners]. They plant their vineyards. They harvest the vineyards. They sell the wine. They are very good winemakers. As a matter of fact, all my young...my childhood, my young years I spent on the...in the vineyards. So what more I can tell you about? I learn...I was in elementary school in Hu_i, and, uh, high school in Hu_i. I couldn't go to the university, because I was taken to work for the army in 1939--November 11, after the war broke between Germany and Poland.

Q: Let's go back for a moment, please, and tell us about the community life in Hu_i.

01:02:00

A: Yes. Uh, uh, the city of Hu_i, it was a very interesting city from a social point of view. They are, uh, Romanian, of course, the majority. It was a Bulgarian population, who, uh ...they, uh ...they, uh, were vegetable, uh...gardeners. There are a kind of Hungarian people, they are most of them vineyard...vineyards [**NB:** vintners]; and Jewish population. The Jewish population, it wasn't so big. Around thousand, or twelve hundred, uh, families. Uh, the maj...majority of them are, uh, shopkeepers and, uh, artisans--tailors, shoemakers, uh, roof...uh, uh, they... they deal with roofings. And, uh, from a cult...cultural point of view, it was interesting that it was a library organized in the...in the...by the Jewish community, which each of us...almost each generation of boys and girls from the high school, they work as a volunteers in this library. So, uh, they organized, uh...they were organizing, um, the literary festivals and artistical festivals. We...uh, I mean, it was a very interesting, uh, cultural life. There was, uh, small newspaper, which I start when I was seventeen years old to publish some articles regarding the...the city. Epigrams--I liked this kind of thing when I was young. So it was a kind of apprenticeship writing, to this small newspaper. And, uh, I have a cousin. The cousin, he was a lawyer. He...he was a very talented, uh, writer and journalist; and he gave me...gave me the courage to start to do this. I mean, it was the

beginning on my writing career, how to say.

01:04:16

Q: Would you tell us a few words about day-to-day life of your family?

A: Uh, it was nothing exciting. My were...my father was very busy with our vineyard. She...he woke up in the early, early hour of the morning, being there. Because I don't know if you know, a vineyard is taking a lot of work to...to maintain it, to keep it. And, uh, my mother was home. I have a sister, which she is...she is older as me--seven years. She married very young. She moved out from our house. So I was alone. It was nothing... Uh, I had friends--boys and girls from my generation. But we spent all the time, our leisure hours out in the vineyards.

Q: What happened to you once the war broke?

01:05:14

A: As a matter of fact, it happens in this...in 1939, in the summer, I was very sick. I was...I took a cold. I...I caught a cold. I don't know how to say in English "pleurisy"; I have water in my...my lungs. I was very, very sick. But in... later in the summer, in the beginning on the September, I start to recover. And I...I was in our vineyard, because it was fresh air. And, uh, I have received good nourishment from my...my family. So, uh, when war broke, I was home. Uh, I was home, recovering from my illness. And in November, when I first...I received an order to present myself to the...my uh...my, uh, regiment, I could try to postpone the military duty, because I was still not recovered. But I want to do this, because I...I understood there wasn't any reason to postpone. Because anyway I'll be...I'll have to go to...to... to the army. So, uh, in November 11, when the war broked, already I was in the army. And I was tried...uh, I...I trained very hardly. And it was a very hard winter in 1939-1940; and after then, the spring of 1940, I was sent, uh, on the military zone in northern part of, uh, Moldavia where my regiment belongs. I was in the Regiment, 9th Regiment of Infantry from Rîmnicu S_rat. So being in the army, I was trained during the during the summer and we walked to the fortification facing... facing the Russian coming from the northern part of Moldavia. We didn't know about if they'll ...if they'll come; then nobody thought.... But we worked to this kind of fortification all the period of time. And the summer of, uh, 1940, it was a Russian ultimatum asking Romanian to cede the Bessarabia [and], uh, northern part of Bukovina. I was, uh, near...uh, two or three kilometer fr...from, uh, uh, small city--the name is Her_a--which, uh, which never was, uh, in the occupied by the Russian. But it was in the Moldavian part. And the Russians, they were interested to have, uh, bridge in[to], uh, uh, Romania. So they took...they took this city of Her_a, too. And, uh...and after then, we retreat. It was, uh...I retreat from, uh... with the whole army, the Romanian army, from this point 'til Roman--the city Roman. Day and night, day and night; uh, because it was... We were under very big pressure, because behind us it was the

Romanian army from Bessarabia [and] from Bukovina, who has to escape. And, uh, after then, being in Roman--as a matter of fact, in a village near Roman--I, uh...I being Jewish, and, uh, with other people...and other soldier being Jewish, we were expelled from the Army.¹ And I remember, because I was on act...on active duty.

01:08:56

I didn't have even civilian clothes with me. So they give me some kind of clothes from the...from their warehouse, which didn't fit on me. Which was...I was almost naked. And I receive orders to present myself to the to the regiment in Rîmnicu S_rat. And it was...it was a problem to, uh, to take the train and to make the journey to... to, uh, Rîmnicu S_rat, because everybody, it was military. And who was was dressed like me, know...know...they know exactly that...that I...I was a Jew. So it was...it was very dangerous to make this trip to, to Rîmnicu S_rat; because uh, well, I...I could be beaten or just threw out...threw out of ...of the window--which that happened to many people. So I managed to escape. And, uh, I present the second day I was to the regiment. And they give me...they give me a order to go home, and to wait for new...new...new disposition. I arrived home. And after three days or four days, I receive an order to come back to the regiment on September 1st, 1940. I come back. And I was...I, I was sent to, uh, in the working battalions. It was not yet in the labor camp. All the former soldiers, they have to go to the work...to the fortification. And I was sent to the Carpathian Mountains and, uh, the city...the small city Tîrgu Neam_, working the fortification facing the Hungarian border. That's...this was the period of time when the br...the war broke. And, uh, when in the summer of 1941 I was home, sent back from the working battalions. And I worked in the city [of Hu_i], sent doing kind of cleaning the streets and something like this. Not...not too hard. It was very humiliating, because everybody knows us. But we didn't have another choice.

01:11:16

I remember that the war broke against the Russians on June 22nd [1941]. It was Sunday. Saturday, in the afternoon, all Jewish male from, uh, the age of eighteen to sixty, we have to present ourselves to the police quarter. I didn't know why. So I was there; and there we were locked up. Nobody can leave. We left...we slept in the courtyard of the police quarter in Hu_i. And in the dawn, we're sent to an unknown destination. What was known, it was that I heard going to the villages that the war broke. And we heard the orders that everybody has to go to war against the...the Russians. As...an interesting story which I remember, that we arrived in a small village in a nearby county near, Tutova, is the name of this county. And the village, the name is Bogdana. I can't forget it. And we stood there for one night waiting for some orders. I don't know what kind of order we expected. But I remember, that it was in afternoon of this same day that, uh, an officer from the gendarmerie came to us. And we know very well who the gend...the...the...the gendarmerie is. They were the most

¹ This would have been early in August 1940.

oppressive part of the Romanian Army. But I have to tell you that this man, it was a very kind man. And he told us, "Don't be afraid, as long as you are under my jurisdiction. If I...if I have to go to eat, I'll never eat if I know that you are hungry...uh, hungry." His name is [Gheorghe] Pris_caru. And I remember that after the war, I wrote about this man, in September 1944. But from...from Bogdana, it comes the order to go to a city of Bîrlad. (Cough) I am sorry. And now, in the Bîrlad, we are...we embarked on the train, the cattle train, and sent to a camp--deportation camp. And the city, it was Tîrgu Jiu. And we arrived in Tîrgu Jiu after a journey of two or three days. But on this our journey to Tîrgu Jiu, I want to tell you something which I like to be made...made...make it public.

01:14:25

We stopped in a city--the name is Craiova--to change the engine to go to Tîrgu Jiu. It was in the morning. The soldier opened the doors from the cattle cars. And some of us stepped out, just to take a breathe of fresh air. And a petty man from the... working, uh...a worker from the...from the railroad, come to these people and...and start to mug them, taking their money and things which they have. An engine makes a maneuver, and ...and the neighbor from the train. And the mech...the mechanic from the engine saw this man mugging people. He stopped the engine, stepped down; and he went to this guy who who continued to do it, to mug. He slapped him in the face. He said, "Give back everything!" The guy, uh...the...the guy, he was afraid of [the mechanic], and he gave everything [back]. This man stepped up on the engine, started the engine, and he'll go continue his work. I don't know his name. I never saw him in my life. But I feel that I have to tell this story. In the beginning on the war, when in Ia_i the Jews start to be killed by the Romani...the same people. We arrived in the camp of Tîrgu Jiu.

01:16:18

It was something unbelievable huge. I want to tell you that this camp of Tîrgu Jiu was built by the Polish army. When Polish was destroyed and occupied by the Russian, a part of the Polish Army was evacuated in Romania. So this...this camp was built by the Polish Army. Now in this period of time, the Polish Army left Romania--this is another story. So it [NB: Tîrgu Jiu] was a concentration camp. It was the first concentration [camp], beside other: Caracal, and Lugoj, and Miercurea-Ciuc, and so on. But this was the biggest of all of them. And, uh, this camp, it was a very interesting mixture of people. It...it was divided in four and seven classes...uh, seven departments. And this department one or two, it was ...it was some opposition of the Antonescus--and, uh, generals and, uh, diplomats, which they paid to stay there. And the third class, it was a Legionary--the fascists. I'll tell you that, entering in this...in this camp, I said to myself, "Hey. At least, here I'll be, uh, nobody's yelling to me. No...no ...no...no...no...nobody will call me dirty names, and so on." Walking in front of this, uh, [third] department of the labor camp, which we didn't know who they are--these people, they start to yell to us and curs...cursing us. I said, "Here, too?!" Where there are the Legionnaires. And department four, there were womans. The department five, it was the

evacuees. We stood [NB: stayed] in the evacuees department. It was the department number six, it was the suspects of communists. And number seven, these were the communists. There are separate quarters, but we managed to communicate with each other. Of course, not with the Legionnaires! Uh, after a short period of time, uh, part of us they sent to work in the garden...in the gardening. And another part, there are sent the place...it was, uh, Valea or Valea Jiului, which was, where it was a famous lieutenant commander--Trepadu_--which was the criminal, and after the war he was judged as a criminal. Uh, we stood [NB: stayed] in...in the camp of Tîrgu Jiu with a period of time, uh, four months, almost four months, when we are sent back in Hu_i.

01:19:14

And we are put in, uh, a local camp, into the courtyard of the Jewish community. We are obliged to wear the yellow badge. And we are from time to time allowed to go home and to change our underwear. Talking about this, I want to repeat another story about this, what happens. When I received my first, uh, "approval," how to say, to go home to change my, my, uh, underwear, it was in Hu_i. Uh, I remember that it was way to go to...to my hou...my parents' home. And I know [one is] quite, uh...not a very, uh...not a center of the street; but I said, "No, I have to go through the center of the street." I'm wear the badge, so I ...I didn't care. I want to go see people, and people to see me; because everybody knows me there. And I remember that walking on the street, I saw a girl which it was a very good friend of my young years. And she saw me, too. But she saw...seeing me coming with the yellow badge, she crossed the street. She didn't want to talk to me. And I walked farther. And it was in the center of the street; people usually walked in the center, they stood [NB: stayed], they talk to them. And a friend of mine, uh, which are very close, he was a...a Romanian. And he saw me. And in front of all the people, he came to me and he hugged me. It was just a rebellion, to hug a Jew with a...with...with a yellow badge. And I want to say this, and to be--how to say?--forever. Because I can't forget this. Unfortunately, he died after the war. He was...he has tuberculosis. But doesn't matter. I want to talk about my friend.

01:21:22

Uh, in this period of time being in camp in Tîrgu Jiu, it happened something with my father which it was very important and very difficult period of time. As I told you, my father, it was a very well-known person in city. A very honest man, with a... with a high degree of dignity and pride. If he borrows from somebody...somebody something, every penny he give back. And he kept his whole word. So I told you that Sunday morning, on June 22nd, we were sent to the camp to...to Tîrgu Jiu. So it was Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...somebody knocked to our door. We know--my father told me, my mother--they never even saw these people. And he start to talk: "Hey, Mr. Butnaru! How are you?" In Yiddish. And he said, my father, "I don't know who you are." "Oh, it doesn't matter you don't know me. Don't worry! The Russians are coming. Our brothers will be here. You'll

be liberated!" My father was very... "Who are you, sir? I don't make politics. I don't talk about this. I have my problems." And this man, he continued to talk in this way. And after that: "Don't worry, we'll see each other." And he left. And this afternoon, my father was arrested with another nine people from Hu_i. Leading person, and director of our bank, uh, a bookkeeper, a young lady, a pianist--and they're beaten to death to try to tell, ask them...ask them to tell them where their...they have their communist meetings. And my father was a communist? I don't know if you are talking about somebody who is a...to speak in Hindu language. And after then, [they] were sent in a trial. Because the war...the war zone, it was very close from Hu_i. They was to be to be sent to a military court to be judged. Their luck it was that the military front moved far away very fast from Hu_i, so they they weren't anymore in this jurisdiction of the military court. The, a martial court. So they were sent to a military court, but not, uh, for the front zone. I don't know if you understand me exact. It was a trial in...in the city Gala_i; they sent to this court. How much they hate the Jews, they couldn't do this mockery. So they acquit them, all of them. But they ask the local authority from the city of Hu_i to kept them like... like, uh, hostage, as a guarantee. If will be a sabotage somewhere in this neighborhood of our city, they'll be shot. So when I came home from the city, from the camp...from the Tîrgu Jiu, I was very surprised that my father didn't come to see me. Only my mother.

01:25:24

Everybody, waiting from my mother, for...for my father; because everybody's looking for relatives to come. Uh, I talked to some people who knows me, and everybody said, "Okay. Is okay with your father. Don't worry." But I didn't know to what to worry, because my mother hadn't any opportunity to write me being in...in the camp of Tîrgu Jiu. Later on, I saw my mother come--of course, wearing the badge. And she told me this story that my father is not home. Uh, my father is arrested in a military, uh, barracks, near the the...the border of Hu_i. So after a couple of months, we are allowed to go home, as the...as the...as the local camp was dismantled. And my father was allowed to come home, too; but he has to present himself each week to the police to sign in, in...in a book that he didn't leave the...the city. Uh, in this period of time in Romania, it was the Legionary government with Antonescu. It was in the fall of 1941.² The situation, it was terrifying. My father lost everything--the vineyard, the harvest. It happened to be a very good year with wine, and full of...it was the...the cellar full with wine. And, uh, they start to take the houses and everything. One night was...I was arr...arrested by the Legionary police; and kept arrested....

01:27:32

Q: Excuse me. This happened before the Tîrgu Jiu camp?

² Antonescu declared Romania a "National Legionary State" after King Carol II fled the country in September 1940.

A: After.

Q: After?

A: After. I told you. Tîrgu Jiu, it was on the beginning of the war with Russia. It was the summer of 1941, and I stood in the camp 'til September 1941. In September 1941, I come back. My father was hostage, and I was in a local camp. In the fall of 1941 the camp, local camp, was dismantled. My father was allowed to come home. The Legionary government, it was in full power. We took out...we lost everything--the vineyard, the house, everything. From our big house, we are allowed... allowed to live in a one room in...was near...which was a kitchen. It was all which we possessed. One day I was arrested, I said...I told you, by the Legionary police. And I have to confess, I wasn't beaten. I heard people yelling and moaning, because they were [being] beaten. They didn't beat me. Because all of them, they are former colleagues and from our childhood. And they didn't dare to do this to me. They didn't do this to me. But they are my friends, all of them. So we decided we have to do something. We decided to do something; because the situation, it was very dangerous. And if I was so lucky not to be beaten once, who knows what will be the second time? So one night...one day, I went to the police quarter. I paid a fee; and my father found a friend of ours, and he bribed a police...a policeman from the office to give me the...the auth...authorization to leave the city. And I left the city to Bucharest. My father and my mother left in Hu_i. So in January...no, in December. December 1941. So in the beginning of 1942--no, 1940...1941 ... No. I am a little bit mixed...no, no, no. Yes. Uh, no. There were....

Q: It's all right.

A: No, no, no. In 1941, it was the Legionary movement. Uh, the war started in, uh, 1941 in June, so you have to...in the...to ...to make to edit this part of... I can try to...to tell again.

Q: That's fine. Don't worry about it.

01:30:44

A: Yes. I am mixed a little bit the dates. Because I want to be very precise. So we, uh...I...I was in Bucharest in 1941, in January. Uh, to...of a...to a family...to a relative of ours, very close relatives. As, uh...as they lived near Hala... the place which is Hala Traian. The street, it was Miti_a Constantinescu; and not so far from the Jewish quarter, which is V_c_re_ti and Dude_ti. I remember when the, uh, Legionary revolution...uh, rebellion started.⁵ We heard, we...we are close to...to the radio, listening to what happens on the street. I...I remember the shootings around the house. And, uh, one, I...I...I looked through the windows; and I saw the, the, the Legionary in their...in their trucks, and with with the...the flags and the green

³ The Iron Guard rebellion took place from January 21-23, 1941.

flags and tri-colored flags, running on the streets with their motorcycles. I saw across the street. I watched through the window when a... when a...when a...a car stopped in front of the window. Uh, three or four people, they would go out. Here, they enter the house and, uh, they took somebody and left. And, uh, I remember very vividly that the second day, the second day of the rebellion,⁴ when we heard that the Legionary, they, uh, the gave up, they...they surrendered. I went to V_c_re_ti and to Dude_ti, and I visit them. I remember...uh, house after house, it was pillaged and burned. Uh, I saw...I was in the ... on the front of the morgue, which is situated not close from the River Dîmbovi_a, with the...surrounded by tanks. And people--Jews--trying to enter in the morgue...in the morgue; because they want to recognize the...the relatives, their loved ones, who they are killed in...in this period and then during this, uh, rebellion. Uh, I have very vivid memory of this period of time. I tried, the house which were...where lived, which was not attacked by the...by the Legionnaires. But I remember very well everything. After then, the relatives--it was an uncle of ours--he left to Hu_i to see what happens with my family. Because they didn't want to allow me to go home. And, um, he stood there for a period of time--two weeks, three weeks--and he came back. And he said to me, "I think you can go home now. But, uh...(pause) you'll find your father okay. He is okay now." I didn't know what happens. He had a stroke. He used to go... (Crying) I'm sorry.

01:34:37

Q: It's all right.

A: (Pause) He used to go everyday on a certain point on a street, looking to his vineyard like somebody's going to see a beloved one. (Crying) And one day, coming home, he had a stroke. Somebody has to carry him home on his shoulder. He couldn't walk. But it happens that he was a very strong man; and he...he managed, how to say, to survive this. And when I came home, he was a broken man. He was very...he lost a lot of weight. But he used to walk, and he talked; and it was a miracle. So he didn't know nothing. And the summer, when the war start, I told you that he was very, very hard...very brutal beaten by the officer who...who tried to find out he... he was a communist. But he was...he...he managed to...to...to survive this period of time. So, after the camp I told you, we're in...in the local camp; and we, uh...we were sent to work to clear the street of snow, and the highways of snow. Because I...I told you, Hu_i, it was a very important point to go to the front line. So the highways should be cleared by snow; the...the tanks, and the comm...and the lorries, and the [soldiers] too can walk. And the springtime, we...we used to work in the same, uh, way around the city; and...and the summer of 1942, it was the first detachment of Jews sent to Bessarabia. Which is just a new chapter in my life.

01:37:05

⁴ January 22, 1941.

It was the first labor...labor battalion, labor camp, which I was sent. I was sent...the city, it was Bolgrad, the capital of the county Cahul. The railroad stopped in a certain station--the name, it was Bulg_rica--thirteen kilometers [northeast] from Bolgrad. So if somebody has to go to Bolgrad, has to stop... make a stop in this station, Bulg_rica, and to take a coach or something--which we didn't (laughter) take, of course--to go to Bolgrad. But not...this is not the point where I am talking about, Bulg_rica. When we arrived there, it was in the middle of the summer. And a terrible, terrible stink. It was an insupportable stink. We couldn't understand what is this smell here. And, uh, I asked...we asked people, "What...why is this smell here?" They didn't want to answer. So, arriving in Bulg_rica, we put...we were put in a column around...surrounded by the...the gendarmes, and...and went to the...to the direction to, uh, Bolgrad. We entered in this city of Bolgrad, and it was a Dante-esque view. Try to imagine: You enter in a city--empty city, empty streets. Nobody on the streets. The houses, they don't have doors. The windows are smashed. Everything is pillaged. Just one dog, or a cat, running on the street. In the center of the street, it was, uh...it was some buildings occupied by the Romanian administration. And we asked to stay there, to be sent in a certain direction. We didn't know nothing.

01:39:44

Sitting there, waiting for orders, some Jews start to...to walk around. An officer come, uh, uh, with a horse... riding a horse. And he saw the people, uh, walking around; and he start beating them with...with...with a whip. With a whip, so everybody was very concentrate. A friend of mine, he was a little bit older as me--two or three year older. He told me, "Do you know something? I was here in Bolgrad, in...in my military duty in an artillery regiment...the art...the number 30[th] Regiment of Artillery from Bolgrad. And I remember that in a Purim night, Jews from Bolgrad used to go to this regiment and ask the commander to allow the Jewish boys in the Army to come to this Jewish houses to celebrate the festi... the...the festivity of...the festival of Purim. So I remember that the house is not so far. It's very close from here. Do you want to go with me to this house? I want to see this house." And we went. You know, it's a very interesting moment which I can't forget. And I think I wrote about this in my book. Imagine, I went in this house--completely empty. And this guy start to tell me, "In this corner, it was a piano. And on this piano, a young lady plays a piano. And the house was full with people, and the smell of food. And everything, it was alive. And now everything is dead. Only ghosts." And I understand then why it was this smell in the ...in the station of Bulg_rica. It was a common grave, a mass grave. The people from Bolgrad, they are shot and put in this grave. After then, uh, we swear...we went to, uh...to a village, the name it was Cubei. It was a quarry. We start to work in this quarry. A hard labor. We went...we were obliged to make a cubic meter of stones taken from the, from the... from...from the earth. And we worked 'til then late in the fall.

01:43:02

We were exhausted, without clothes. And we are sent by train to, uh, Dobruja [region], to

another famous, uh, quarry. It was Turcoaia. The county, it was Tulcea. The city was M_cin. And I remember that leaving from...from Bulg_rica, from Bul...Bessarabia to...to Turcoaia, to...to Gala_i to Br_ila to cross the River, uh, Da...Da...Danube, it was terrible cold... cold. And I didn't manage to enter in, in, in a...in a wag...wagon, you know. So I stood on the stairs of the train. And I said, "I'll froze. I'll got froze." And I...I...I go down, and I put around me a...a...some rug. I have a rug. I slept on this rug, so it protected me. And I didn't froze. I have this train. So we cross the Danube; and we start to work in Cubei...in, uh, Turcoaia, to the quarry. It was a very hard situation there. We are under the command of a certain Captain Munteanu--a degenerate drunkard, [who] played cards. He...he need money all the time. He took ours...all our money which we still have. And uh...and it was late in October, late in November, when we were allowed to go home for a short period of time to change our clothes, to take our winter...winter clothes. And after the Christmas, we have to go home [NB: to the quarry]. Then I wrote on this card, on a... "I have to go to camp. It's after Christmas." We go back to...to Turcoaia, and we stood [NB: stayed] there over the winter. In the spring, we start to work to, uh...um, at some railroad, to transport the...the... the, uh, stone from the quarry which we...we brought out.

01:46:10

And, uh, it was 'til, uh...'til the '43, late in '43, when we moved to another, uh, camp not...not so from...from our hou...from Hu_i. It was near Bîrlad. It was part of improvement of our life. Because we managed to have some friends in Bîrlad; they brought us some food, some...brought some clothes. So it was a little bit easy for us. We sit over the winter in 1943-1944; when, uh...when we were brought home in summer of '44. And we worked to the highways, to repair the highways near the city of Hu_i. And, uh, in 1944, in August '44, it happens that the Hu_i, it was, uh, occupied by, uh, liberate [NB: liberators]--we can say "liberate," but it's...it's the truth--by the Russian Army. After a day, the Romanians, uh, took over the... the city; which it was, uh, fig...street fights. But the third day, the Romanian retreat...the Romanian Army, uh, surrendered; and, uh, we were, how to say, liberated. And, uh, it was for us, the war, it was over. It wasn't over for the rest of the Romania; but of this part of Moldavia, this part of Romania where I lived with my parents, we managed to...to...to go through this period of time with my sack...sack with bones. So we survived. What do you want to ask me more?

Q: Yah. I...I would like to know what happened to you after the war.

01:48:23

A: After the war, I need a pair of pants. (Laughter) I need a a jacket. And my father didn't have the money to give me, to ...to buy this. I was young. I want to talk to girls, to, to met people. But I need the pants. So my father give me his only one suit. And we go to a tailor, and he tried to manage to arrange for myself. So I was very well elegant in this period of time. So we start to reorganize the life in Hu_i. We need a mayor. We need a prefect. We

need the police. We need a...a Chamber of Commerce. We need to start to... to open the windows of the stores, and to have a normal life. And we're not...we start to have...to open the schools. I receive a job as a Secretary of the Comm...of the Chamber of Commerce. I entered it; everything it was destroyed and broken. We didn't have...we didn't even have pencil to...to ...to start to write some orders and to give some authorization. We had everything, (laughter) but it was a very funny situation. Nobody...nobody give us order. But we have to do something. But I remember that after a short period of time--is to say three weeks, four weeks, of a kind of republic in Romania--a delegation of the government from Romania come in Moldova [NB: Moldavia] to see what happened there. Because nobody knows in Bucharest what happens in Moldova. So they start to say to us, "Look. What you are, stay...stay in place. You are the policeman; you'll be the policeman. You are the mayor; you'll be the mayor." So, uh, that we...they...the first thing what they did, they organized the Communist Party. Which I didn't belong. I said, "It's time to think about." So 1944, 1945 and 1946, I didn't join the Communist Party. In 1946, I said, "It's any reason to stay in Hu_i? I don't want to do this here. And I don't know...I don't think I have a future." So we moved in Bucharest...to Bucharest.

01:51:09

I tried to have a job. I couldn't have a job, because I didn't...I wasn't a Communist [Party] member. Later...later, in 1947, when the Carol [II], the king, has...was obliged to...to abdicate, it was no other way.⁵ So I said, "Okay, your way. I am a Communist, too." So we joined the Communist Party, and I have a job. And, uh, I was a member of the Party 'til I left Romania. And I remember when I received the citizenship here in America, the guy...the person from the Immigration Office⁶ asked me, "But you are a long time in the Communist Party." "Yes. For a long time, I have to eat." "But how come?" And I said, "Sir, you have a very nice job here, asking me why. Do you suppose if you have this job in Romania, asking people why, you can be or have the job without being a Communist Party [member]?" And he start to laugh, "I know the story." So I was a full soldier. I clapped, when I have to clap. I have to stay ...uh, say, "Hurray," when I have to say, "Hurray." And that was the life. But after the war, it was something interesting in my life, living in Hu_i with a friend of mine. His name is Anton Celaru. I don't know if you know him. He was a journalist working for Informa_ia Bucure_tilui for many years. We stood [NB: stayed] in. We, uh, all here with Titi Fierstein, we, uh, printed then a newspaper. I remember that the newspaper, the first newspaper after the war in this part of the world, has reprinted in two...two hundred copies. And they sold these copy through a window; because everybody wants to have this copy...uh, this newspaper. What I remember about this newspaper is that my first article--which I wrote after the "liberation," [so] to say--it was an open letter to the Major Pris_caru.

⁵ It was not Carol II who abdicated in 1947, but his son, Michael I--who became king when his father fled the country in September 1940, shortly after Antonescu came to power.

⁶ Immigration and Naturalization Service (**also**: INS).

Do you remember I told you, from this gendarme. I said, "I feel like I have the duty to wrote to you, and to thank you now for your humanity. For the human feelings. When we are down, we are nobodies, you told us you can't eat as long as you know that we are hungry. So I am writing this letter to you." I...I didn't know if he is alive. I didn't know where he is.

01:54:15

The story is that people from Hu_i, who after I left the ci...my city, they find him. And they ask him to come to...to live with them. But this is another story. So, uh, I come in Bucharest. I had a job in the Ministr...in the Department of Art. And I was sent in a city Lugoj, in Banat [region], uh, being a Concierge Cultural--a cultural counsellor. I don't know what. After then, I was, uh, brought back in Bucharest. I give, I...I receive a...a...an "advancement" [promotion], how to say it; and, uh, I was General Inspector. I work with Octav Livezeanu and Eduard Mezinceascu. And, uh, after then, I was, uh, a kind of manager of the Department of the Cultural Houses from the city...the Commitee Culturale, how to say; and, uh, I worked a lot of time there. Suddenly, they remember me. And they say, "Hey, hey! Just a minute! Who was your father?" "My father was a vineyard [NB: vintner]." "So you don't have a ...you don't have a...a sound origin. You don't have...you are not...you are not a friend of ours. You are...you are just a com...a road companion." And they...they fire me. And I was without job, with...being a Communist, a member of the Communist Party, without a job. And [they're] telling me that I...I...I am...I am an enemy of the people. Later...later on, I receive a job--the Department of Agriculture. I said, "I don't have nothing common with this. I...I don't know nothing about this." So I have to have this job for a good part of my life. And, uh, because I didn't have nothing in common, with, uh...and I couldn't find a job in the Ministry--the Department of the Culture. They didn't want to give me back the job. I found a job as a Secretary Literary was a...with a...with the circus, which I worked. And kind of a period of time. And they built the new building of the circus; I was the director of there--of this building, of this hall of activity, of cultural activities there. And after then, I moved to, uh...I was General Secretary of the...of the publishing house of the Tourism, with Pop Simion was the director at this period of time. I don't know if you know some...something about Pop Simion. A nice man. After then, I said to myself, "I build enough socialism. The socialism is blowing in Romania; and [it] can blow without me, too." So what I have to do? To emigrate, it was not easy.

01:57:33

Because we had some familial problems with the parents of my wife; so we couldn't leave the country. But I didn't want; I considered I built enough socialism. So one day, see, I said to myself, "I am sick. Not just tired." So I managed--paying a good money--to be retired as being a sick man; and from this position, after a couple of years, I emigrate to America.

Q: Uh, we have to stop now because we need a short time to change tapes.

01:59:45

[A: Okay. So I immigrate to America. I have this point...] **[TEXT IN PRECEDING BRACKETS NOT ON VIDEOTAPE]**

TAPE #2

02:00:10

Q: We are on tape again. And I'd like to ask you to describe for us the conditions of arriving in Hu_i immediately after the war.

A: You know, I...I tried to recollect this period of time. It's... You know, never...I didn't think never about this. But it was a kind of explosion. A kind of rejoice. You have to understand, from a psychological point of view, this situation of this specially of the young people. Suddenly, from the bottom of the society, you were somebody. You have to have...you can...have the opportunity to have a job. You have a certain position--a certain position which you can never dream to have. You are a human being, too. You walk on the street, and people salute you. And I remember something which I like to tell you. There is something which I just forgot. One evening, I walked with a friend of mine. A girl. As usual in the center of a small city, everybody know each other. And walking on the street, that was a group of three or four boys--old hooligans. I know them. And they saw me coming with the girl. And they blocked my...my, uh... I...I couldn't go through them. It was only one way to do this--just to go around them. In the same way in which I did all my life. And I said [to myself], "This...now, I don't want to do this." And I said, "Sorry. I have to go through." And they parted, and I went through them. It was the first time in my life then when I said, "I am somebody. You can't stop me." It was for a short period of time. After then, I learned my lesson. The same Janet with another haircut, in Romania. But anyway, it was a very...very interesting period of time. People get married. (Laughter) Everybody wants to ...to get married, to...to have a family, to be together. Uh, everybody is...uh, a lot of people went to Bucharest, or to Ia_i, to start to...to study. We worked there in...in...in our city. We have our friends. Myself, I...I...I thought I have to...to...to get to get married. But that happens like in life...as in life. And I didn't do this then. So it was a very interesting period of time. But shortly, a lot of things changed. People there are poor. They are poor. The ...the war paid... Everybody paid a great fee in this war. So, uh, nobody had an opportunity to do something to improve the life, of condition.

02:03:52

And the meantime, Moldavia was st...st... stricken...strucken by a, uh, drought. It was a fantastic famine in Moldavia. So when...when we... I was in Hu_i and Bucharest; from leaving Hu_i, I tried to send something to my parents. But it wasn't enough. It was a very high inflation in Romania. Everybody had...has to pay million. They...they print mill...paper--bills, money--for five million leu.⁷ Only, for five million you can buy nothing. Absolutely nothing. So it was a very hard period of time in Romania. And the famine, and the people there are go...going from one part of the country to another part of the country.

⁷ Unit of Romanian currency.

And I remember when I received my first job, in March 19...in 1989 [NB: 1949], in Lugoj, in Banat [region]. In Banat, it wasn't famine. It happens it was a luckier... luckier part of the Romania. And I went to a restaurant and I asked to give me something, some, uh...some food. I couldn't eat, because it was period of time when I didn't [have] what to eat in Bucharest. And so it...it was a very hard situation in Romania. Very hard. I don't talk about the political situation; because from the political point of view, it was start to be hard from the end of 1980...1948 and beginning of 1989 [NB: 1949]. It was a period of changement, from the political point of view. But as individual, it was hard to live in Romania. We didn't have what to eat. So for me, when ...when...when my boss in the Department of Arts told me, "Where do you want to go to have a job in province?" I said, "Everywhere it's something to eat!" So they send me to Lugoj, which is a heaven for me.

02:06:04

Q: Could you describe, please, your arrival in United States?

A: Arrival in United States?

Q: Your coming to America.

A: We arrived...we arrived on the...on the October 27 or 29-- something like this. In the fall. Hey, it's interesting, what I...what I felt for the first time. Uh, we, uh...we, uh...I, uh...we receive a... We are transferred from Kennedy Airport to, uh, La...LaGuardia Airport; and I received a room in a motel. It was hot. It was stuffy. No air. And as a Romanian, I went to open the doors. But the door, it was locked. I went to open the window. The windows there are locked. And I said, "Where in Hell you can have a little bit of fresh air in America?" And my daughter said, "Look, you have the air conditioner. Turn the air conditioner, you have fresh air." It was my first contact in America. But before all this, the man from the Customer [NB: Customs], he opened I brought from the American Embassy from Paris a... a yellow envelope. And the lady from the Ame...from Embassy from Paris told me, "You have to give... Uh, don't open this envelope; because you have...there are very important documents here. And, uh, you have to give to the Custom." And I give the envelope to the Custom, and they open the...the...the envelope. And he gave to me, to my wife and to my daughter my...our "green card." And he said, "You are a resident in America, and you are all welcome here." So I, as an American resident coming there in America. Because we came to be unified with our family. Uh, I remember, regarding our arrival here in, uh...I remember that I had a discussion with the director from HIAS from Paris--a certain Schwartz (ph). Gentleman Schwartz. And he told me once, "You have... you'll have problems to accommodate in America. But don't be...don't worry. Go to Boston. You'll find there people there who they are not related with you. They'll help you. They don't let you down." I looked to this man. And I said, "Maybe he knows what he's talking about." But I was...I was very afraid.

02:09:11

Later on, when I wrote and I published my last book, Moshe Kopf and His World, I wrote a short story about this encounter with the man with a straight face. Uh, I think I said it's a tribute. I remember my social worker--a lady. He [NB: she] has a small...a small office in Boston, in the Jewish Family [Services]. And I talked to her so many times. And I says...every time when I left from this office, I said to myself, "If somebody has the opportunity to record the echoes of the voices who talk to this lady [in] this small office, it'll be a universe of human sufferings!" And I said, "I have to pay [NB: repay] this something for this lady." And my first publish...published, uh, piece which I wrote, it was an open letter to this lady--"The Unseen Diploma." She had behind her her diploma as social worker. But I talked about her soul, her wonderful, uh, human feelings. So I wrote a piece, which is in my book, too--"The Unseen Diploma." And there are a lot of people who tried to help us. And with my broken English, when I start to talk to people everybody's saying, "Oh, your English is very good!" I know how good is my English. (Chuckling) But I know those people try to understand us. They give us shelter. They give us food. They give us hope. You understand...have to understand something. I discover my identity, not living in Romania so many years. I didn't left Romania a young man. I don't want to say I'm a old [man] now, but I wasn't young then. I discovered my.... I suffered like a Jew in Romania; but I didn't know I am Jew, because I never considered. I was a Romanian! Here, I discover I am Jew. And I discover the whole story about the Holocaust, and what happened in Romania. Here, in the United States. You know, I had a job at Boston University.

02:12:12

Being here in America, I said--and I...I didn't have [a job]--"Without a language and a good English, what I can do? The only thing which I can do is to be a kind of a bookkeeper or accountant, or something like this." So I attended a university course, which I finished with A+. And I have a diploma in accounting. So I was in accounting, but I am a writer by profession. So each...each lunch time, every day...absolutely every day in my lunch time, I went to the library and make research in trying to find out about the Romania, Romanian Jew, Romanian history, and so on. So...so I start to write my book, The Forgotten Holocaust.⁸ This book is not my book. Each line, each word, each page--I did it. I written...I write it. But this doesn't belong to me. It's the book of my generation, of my people. And being here in America, I had opportunity to read it...to write this. Living so many years in Romania and going so many years in the library of that academy in Romania, making research from my books which I wrote there, I never think about it. Because nobody give me the opportunity to see a newspaper, a piece of paper regarding this period of time. So if somebody is...can accept this euphemism "born in the second time," I am born.... I emigrate, because being a Jew in Romania.... Here in America that I discovered [myself] to be a Jew, living here in America. This is...it was something which which I can't forget. It is not to...to say, "Thank

⁸ I.C. Butnaru, The Silent Holocaust: Romania and Its Jews (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992).

you, America. You did this, so and so." This relationship between me and America, it is another kind.

02:14:20

A kind of a... And I have to tell you something. My character...my character, uh, Moshe Kopf, in my last book, he used to live in Romania. And he has to exp...to ...to talk to somebody, to express himself; but he was afraid. So he wrote a letter to himself. And the second part of my book, when he lived in America [**NB:** Romania?] waiting for the America visa, he wrote to a friend of, uh, him letters in Romania. Arriving in America, he wrote letter to the same le...uh, friend. And it is a letter which is very important to this problem--me and America. My relationship with the United States. Moshe Kopf, walking in New York one day, met a very interesting person--Christoforus Columbus. And he start to...they start to walk, to talk together. And Moshe Kopf said to...to...to Christopher Columbus, "You know, Master, you did a great job discovering America. But, you know, if you are doing something to be good, you have to do it in a right time. You discovered America too late!" And Christopher Columbus asked him, "What means, 'too late.'" "Of course it is too late! If you discovered America when the Jew were liberated by Moshe [**NB:** Moses] from their...their slavery ...slave situation in Egypt, instead of cross the Red Mer [**NB:** Red Sea], you can part the water in the Atlantic here. He is ..." How to say? "He knowed how to do the job. He can part the water in the Atlantic, and the Jew can arrive in America. And he can avoid so much persecution, blood, and tears, and so on." And Christopher Columbus said to him, "Maybe you're right. Who knows?" And he depart from him, and he go back on his, uh, pedestal. Moshe Kopf, leaving Christopher Columbus, he thought...he said. And Christopher said, "Come back. I want to tell you something. Go back and discover **your** America. I discovered a territory which is America. But everybody who is arriving on this shore has to discover his own America. Two Americas are not the same." No sir. I discovered my America here. And I am very grateful for this.

Q: I think that this is a beautiful end. Uh, thank you very, very much for coming.

A: Thank you. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk.

02:17:14

PHOTOGRAPHS

02:17:16

- (1) Village scene. Ion's family in Hu_i, circa 1922-23, in the vineyard belonging to his uncle--shown on the far right of the picture. The vineyard originally belonged to Ion's grandfather, and was given to this uncle as a wedding present between 1912 and 1914. From left to right in the photograph are: Ion's aunt (his father's youngest sister), an old woman whom he identifies as the mother-in-law of his aunt and wife of the man on the far right of the picture, Ion's sister (now living in Israel), Ion's aunt (his father's oldest sister), Ion's cousin Solomon (nephew of his grandfather), Aaron Butnaru (Ion's grandfather and the family patriarch), Ion's grandmother, Ion's cousin Mathilda (then a small child), Adele (a friend of Ion's sister), Adele's father (owner of the vineyard), Ion's Uncle Yerachmiel (brother of his grandfather), Sarah (a small child--probably a cousin).

02:24:26

- (2) Ion at age 22 in December 1942. Just after this photo was taken, he left home for a labor camp in Turcoaia, in the Dobruja region.