

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Isaac Danon  
November 6, 1989  
RG-50.030\*0058**

## **PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Isaac Danon, conducted by Maron Osthega on November 6, 1989 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 reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

**ISAAC DANON**  
**November 6, 1989**

Q: Would you tell us your name and where and when you were born?

A: OK. My name is Isaac Danon. They call me Mike--my nickname. I was born in Split,<sup>1</sup> Yugoslavia in 1929. I lived there with my family, my mother and father. I have three sisters. One is older than me, two years older, Blanka. And my two younger sisters, one is Sarah--she is about two years younger than me. And the youngest sister, her name is Esther. She is about five years younger than I am. Split is a small town on the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia, about 50,000 population before the war. We lived there with uh there was about 200 other Jewish families in town. We had a rather active Jewish life. We had our synagogue, was one synagogue. We had a social club. I think it was called "Yarden" [Hebrew meaning "Jordan"]. And we had our regular Zionist clubs. We had a lot of friends. Uh, the kids were going to school. I was going, at that time, before the war, the last year of school that I went to was first Gymnasium which was an equivalent to fifth grade. And we had a lot of friends, both Jewish and non-Jewish friends. The, I don't remember any particular uh antisemitism being present in our community. Maybe some individual cases here and there, but not organized and not uh surely, not uh legal type. Although as the things got worse in Europe, there was more activity by some groups that were sympathetic to the Nazis, but uh I belonged to some uh clubs and some organizations like uh like you would have here, Boy Scouts, but it was mostly a national organization for sports and patriotism and there was no antisemitism that I can remember. The war came to Yugoslavia in early 1941. We first were hit by that when my father was drafted into the service, into the Army. They have like a general mobilization. He was forty, but they took him anyway. And uh there was some kind of a palace coup, I guess. The King took over the reign of the government. He was a small boy, became 18, took over the government and broke relations with Germany and the Axis and we knew things were going to happen then. And sure enough about two, three weeks later, the German and Italian forces invaded our country. We were very lucky that we lived in the part that has been claimed by Italy for a long, long time--Dalmatian Province, or the coast along the Adriatic. And when...of course, when they [the Italians] attacked, they took the country over in less than two weeks; and the Italians occupied that part. So that's one good thing that happened. When the Italians took over the country, that part of the country, I can describe the occupation as being benign. We as Jews had the same difficulties or same lack of problems as the rest of the local population. There were shortages of food and other materials and rationing which you expect with a war, but otherwise we didn't fare much worse than the rest of the population, with some exceptions, let me say. For one thing uh Jews could not work in the public life. They couldn't be teachers or officials of any kind. They couldn't work in the offices. And we, the kids, we were not allowed to go to school. But a little ingenuity solved that problem. We took the Jewish teachers and we formed Jewish schools and that took care of that. I unfortunately couldn't go to school because my

---

<sup>1</sup> Also known as Spljet among some Dalmatian speakers of Serbo-Croatian, and Spalato among Italian speakers.

father needed me in our business. We had a, I guess you could call it a dry goods store. Very small one uh and most of the Jewish community was involved in either some type of small trades or they were in some of the professions, although we did have some that were rather poor in the community. But anyway, uh during the Italian occupation our life was not too bad with some minor exceptions. As uh I think back, occasionally they would flood the city with some "antisemitic" slogans. I remember some of the instances where my uncle who was a barber, they came with a big sign says, "Jews are not welcome here," and they wanted him to put it in his window. And he says, "OK, you want me to put that. Fine. I'll put it and here are my keys and here are the scissors. You take over. I'm Jewish." So, we had these little instances. One case that I remember and that was the worst case that happened was right after my bar mitzvah was one Saturday and the following Friday; I guess there was some kind of activity. The Germans were coming to help the Italians celebrate, so they [the Italians] had to demonstrate how good they were as far as the Germans are concerned. So the local Fascists came to synagogue and asked everybody to leave, and as people were leaving, they were hitting them with clubs of the uh rifles and kicking them and few little things like that. Although I do remember in my, some older people that were there, they would go out, then they wouldn't bother them. But the worst thing was next morning when we came, you know, we saw what was happening, we were afraid that they might come and take us or something like that, but so we went early in the morning and we saw they had taken all the things out of the synagogue, the torahs, the books and they put them in the public square and they had a big bonfire. Uh the synagogue was in a section called the ghetto which was the real ghetto, the type uh that, uh the word itself means, you know, where the Jewish were kept, but this was right outside the public square so most of the Jews didn't live there. I mean hardly anybody, but the synagogue was there because it was a very very old one. Uh anyway, when we came, we saw that, and then we went to our store and we saw somebody was trying to break in, but our store was so small we didn't even have the glass plates, so nothing happened. But they did go around and broke the windows of the Jewish stores and they looted the stuff, so that was our "Kristallnacht." But the following day the life went on as though nothing happened and we just didn't have a synagogue anymore. But during the whole period before that, like more than a year that the Italians had occupied the country...uh that portion of the country, we lived uh peacefully and normally except for some of these instances. In fact, uh a lot of immigrants--a lot of Jews that were able to escape from other parts of the country that were occupied by Germans and "their quislings"--they also came to this town and this area. And they found a haven over there. Uh as I mentioned earlier, there was about two hundred uh Jewish families in town. Well, after a few months the number swelled to four or five thousand, and then maybe up to ten thousand people that came from other places and at that point the Italians started getting panicky. The Italian authorities, they asked the Jewish community to disperse them throughout the area that they [the Italians] controlled, and then finally they started taking them away to, I guess we can call them internment centers. Both, different areas along the occupied coast and also in Italy proper. Uh I didn't think of this too much, but Italians were really, uh what shall I say, they helped many people. They saved us for one thing, and they and many times when the Germans were, their quislings, the Croatians, they wanted to occupy certain towns or they wanted to take certain Jews away to concentration camps, the Italians would step in and say, "This is

our area and you can't cross." And it was, for them it was, you know, a territorial issue which for us it was a case of life or death. But our problems really started after the fall of Italy. That's when uh Mussolini fell, of course, and the Italians uh signed a, I guess uh - what is it - they capitulated to the Allied troops. Well, in these areas that were occupied by Italians became like uh free areas and it was free-for-all, who was going to grab what. The Partisans<sup>2</sup> came out of the mountains and they took over some. The, the Croatian quislings took some over. The Germans took some, but the town where we lived was taken over by the Partisans, uh the underground resistance. They came out and I guess they compromised themselves, the local population who helped them and who didn't. And I found out that my older sister, she had been working in the underground which we didn't know about even though my sister and I were quite close. But at that time she was uh less than sixteen years old and but there was things to do for everybody during the war. Anyway, uh my sister at that point joined the Partisans and so did many uh local youths. They, the Partisans were trying to get them to join them and go into the mountains and uh I would say a lot of them did join, but we remained in the city and the Partisans tried to hold that city. They had taken, they had uh disarmed the Italian Army. They had some, some arms now, and the new recruits that had joined them, so they were going to defend the city, and they tried that for two, three weeks, but the German troops just came over with their full armor and everything and they took over the city, but not before they came in, we were, we [a]wakened in the middle of the night by neighbors banging at the door and saying - I remember one lady yelling, "Mr. Danon, Mr. Danon," to my father--he was the mister--anyway, "Mr. Danon, the Germans are coming." So we knew that the Germans always take the men first and we were ready to escape. My father and I, we had our backpacks all packed in advance. We put them on, said goodbye to my mother and my sisters and we went away. That's the last time we saw our home. We went into the mountains. And uh we joined the Partisans there. At first not as fighters, but we just traveled with them and did what ever could be done and we traveled with them for a couple of months through the mountains. This was, you, you hide during the daytime and you tippy-toe at night crossing German lines maybe several times, you know, going from one place to another until we arrived to one of the islands uh on the coast. Actually, what people were doing, they were going to the mountains and they would come to the coast and they would uh maybe there would be a little uh rowboat or a little junk and in the middle of the night they would go aboard one of these and go to the, one of the islands. Only the islands weren't safe because Germans could always come over there too. Now we went to one of these islands and we were with the Partisans there and my father and I were, I guess I won't call it conscriptive--we were regular military unit at that time. Uh, I was assigned to a machine shop where we repaired ammunition and other equipment, automotive and what not, and my father was uh, I remember they called this the, the duty that they assigned to him--"ekonom," which, uh, meant supply sergeant. And uh we were there for four, five months, I guess. Time just, it's not too clearly in my mind right now.

Q: What island was that?

---

<sup>2</sup> Communist resistance forces led by Joseph Broz Tito.

A: Well, the island's called Hvar, H - V - A - R. I can't pronounce r's too well. Uh and it's a relatively large island. It had two little cities and the one where we were in was called Starigrad, which means old city. Uh, anyway one time the Germans did invade that island and there was fear because there was not too much in the way of defense. Uh, and this was in the middle of the war. The Allies were uh stuck down southern Italy. Uh, there was, uh I guess we all read about the Monte Cassino<sup>3</sup> or wherever they were, they couldn't move forward and uh there was nothing happening anywhere else. Even the Russians, the Russian front had stalemated, been stalemated for a while, so this was middle of the war and it could have gone either way and we were pretty fearful at the time. Well, anyway, my father and I guess he wasn't having a very easy time of it. Uh, first the work was hard for him and and there wasn't enough food and the people who depended on him to obtain food, like supply sergeant meant getting flour and making sure the bread was made and uh you know other food uh was provided and clothing and what not--they were always complaining and uh they were blaming him for all the shortages and so I remember uh he somehow disappeared or--I didn't see him for several days and they kept pestering me, uh you know--"Where is your father? What happened?" This and that. I didn't know. And I guess my father had left. He had uh gone some other route. But two weeks later I received a very official uh teletype telling me to report to another island and report myself to the command of the hospital unit. I had no idea what that was all about. Well, I made arrangements to go there, and this was another island called Vis, V - I - S. And this island was uh formed into a strong point by the Partisans. It was the furthest [farthest] island from Yugoslavian coast and closest to Italian coast, closest to the point where the Allied troops were. So this was used by the Allied troops to help the Partisans. At this point, if I can introduce a little politics here, uh the Allies had started recognizing the Partisans as the fighting force as opposed to other, there was a fellow by the name of Dra\_a Mihailovi\_,<sup>4</sup> who was left by the King uh to, I guess, to organize resistance, but he evidently didn't do the job that they expected, or maybe there were political differences and the Partisans were communist-oriented and the other ones were uh for monarchy and so there was a lot of internal struggle, but let me get away from that. But uh anyway the Allies had started recognizing and helping the Partisans. So, this uh island was made into a fortress. They used that to bring the supplies and also there was another point that the Allies were trying to convey a message to the Germans that they were going to open a new front, a second front, at the Balkans and come through there, so they were encouraging the local population to escape, and the local population had developed like an underground railroad you can almost call it. They would get themselves to the coast and from the coastline they would come by junks to these, to this particular island and the uh British Navy would come and pick them up there and take them to Italy, where they had like

---

<sup>3</sup> Monte Cassino was the strong point of a German defensive line that delayed the Allied advance on Rome until June 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Dragoljub (Dra\_a) Mihailovi\_ (also Mihajlovi\_) was the leader of the \_etniks, an anticommunist Serbian resistance force loyal to the royal Yugoslav government-in-exile.

I would call it regroupment points. They would create uh units of uh refugees, I guess by location, and take them to Egypt, to the desert to wait for the end of the war. Well, uh when I came, I gotta go back now to my tele... telegram that I received. When I presented myself there, that actually my father had sent it to get me to come there and I met him there again and he told me that he has, he had joined this group that was going to Egypt and he was going to go with the troops and he told me to sign up for it also at the first opportunity and we'll meet there. And I did that and I know he went one time and uh the first opportunity that I had when the British uh ship came--uh, they were small PT boats or something that would pick up thirty, forty people, uh you know, pile us up and go across the Adriatic and we went uh over there. I went there with the British to a...the town was called Bari, B - A - R - I. There was a big city, where all the refugees were coming but from there they would ship us by trucks or trains, mostly trucks, to the other side and further [farther] down south, southern tip of Italy where there were a lot of uh summer homes from the rich northern Italian people. This was in the winter. So they would organize these groups and from there they would take them to Naples and to Egypt from there. Well, anyway, that's where I, I was taken and I met my father there again and we were in those camps uh, waiting for our shipment to Egypt. While we were there, uh there were many people incidentally. By the thousands they were coming from all over. While we were there, we learned that my mother's two sisters were also there in the vicinity and my mother's brother was in Bari uh, with his family, so we had some family that was still alive. Uh, if, if I can go back a little bit, uh--this was about my family, my parent's family. My parents' family, both of them came from a town called Sarajevo in Yugoslavia. Well, my mother's parents came in the early '90's. They came down to Split which was our home town, and they settled there and they had uh whatever they did--I don't remember now--but as I remember my grandfather, he was the "shamas" [sexton] at our synagogue. That was his occupation. But as the children grew up they got married and some went to different locations, and one of my, two of my mother's sisters went back to Sarajevo. Uh so when the war broke out, they were in Sarajevo. So one of them was able to come down to Split and stay with the rest of the family, and they were saved. The other one perished in the war. On my father's side, he had his parents and five brothers. They were also in Sarajevo but some of them lived right outside Sarajevo, in a little town and and none of them were saved. They all perished with one exception, my Uncle David, my father's brother who was in the [Yugoslav] Army during the mobilization and the Germans captured them and they shipped them someplace wherever they had their Army prisoners and I guess he passed as a non-Jew and that's how when the war ended when some of them were repatriated, he was still alive. So when we were talking about who was able to be saved and who wasn't, my father counted twenty-eight of his relatives that died. Relatives meaning mother, father, brothers, sister-in-laws [sic] and their children. So but anyway, back to where we were in Italy. We lived there uh for a couple of weeks and then when it was time to go to Egypt my father got cold feet and he says I'm not going to the desert. So in the morning when they were gathering us all to go to Egypt, my father got me out of bed and we left the group. We booked, uh took a horse and buggy from a local uh farmer. He took us to the nearest train station, we boarded the train station and we went to the town where he dropped us off. It's a town called Lecci [Lecce], L - E - C - C - I [E], in Italy. It's near Bari but maybe about fifteen miles or so. Anyway, and that's where we settled and my father got a job there

with the Allied occupation forces as a uh censor, uh read the mail, and I was just hanging around the streets. I had friends. I had, uh don't forget I was thirteen years old there and then. I had a uniform that I brought with me which was an American or British soldier's uniform, like an Eisenhower jacket, a military thing you know and I would parade there with my friends enjoying life, you know, uh, uh as a thirteen year old would, uh showing off my clothes, you know. Well anyway uh there was very uneventful at the time and then, this was June '44, the end of June. Uh, they [the Western Allies] already had, they opened a new front in Normandy<sup>5</sup> and all that and we heard that there was an invitation from the American government for a thousand people, a thousand displaced persons to come to United States and uh OK, we said, "Let's go. Shall we go, yeah." We signed up and this was quick like you know. They took our names. I understand there was a lot of people who signed up but only a thousand could go. Uh we didn't know for sure whether it was just Jewish or not, but anyway we signed up and we were getting ready to go and three days before we were ready to leave, we learned that my mother and two sisters had come to Bari also. Now this is a story in itself the way the refugees would uh--it's almost like uh telephone lines, you know. You would go into the group and you say, "Is anybody here from such and such a place?" And they say, "No, we are not, but we know somebody who is," you know, and we know so and so and oh yeah, but he knows somebody who knows somebody. And that's how we all met you know, after the war. And that's how my mother when she came with one of the groups uh, you know, the British naval vessel, and they told her that we know somebody who is also from Split who may be related to you, you know. And they said, "Well, his name is so and so," and he says, "That's my brother," you know. So we all, we got together and within the next three days the miracle of bureaucracy--they were able to clear my mother and my two sisters and we, uh we were picked up at one point in Bari and we boarded trains, uh different people are coming from different parts of southern Italy and we went to Naples uh in trucks. Well, we stopped off for three days for delousing sessions and all that. Boarded a ship and one of the ships, uh I forgot its name, uh Henry something or other, but it was a ship that was taking the American soldiers back and it was one of the regular troop ships and we were given one little corner with uh, uh, what do you call these sleeping quarters, hammocks, yeah, five deep, yeah. And uh we waited in Naples for enough ships so they can form a convoy; and we departed from there near the end of July. Thirteen days uh on the sea. Several times they thought they saw the German U- boats, and they went through the routine of putting that fog, artificial fog. We as kids, we enjoyed all that. I was fourteen by that time. On August 3rd, 1944, we landed in New York Harbor. I believe it's Bayonne or some place, wherever the troop shipments were uh being unloaded. And we got into trains there and we went overnight. Train stopped in front of a military camp. We got out; and this was upstate New York, near a town called Oswego. This was an old Army base called Fort Ontario. And that's where we spent next year and a half. Uh I can tell you about our life over there, if you want to hear it. Well, uh first, uh well, this was summer time of course, August then. In September was when the schools opened. We were invited to join the schools in the United States. None of us knew any English at the time. I speak a few foreign languages but English

---

<sup>5</sup> Anglo-American-Canadian forces landed on the Normandy Peninsula of France on June 6, 1944.



was not one of them. But anyway we started going to school, and our, our parents were uh just staying there. What bothered us mostly was the fence. We were not allowed to go out except to go to school. We had little passes and we had to return, sign in and out. That was a little disappointing. But basically that's uh what happened. And we spent there until the war was over actually, and then I guess there was a lot of discussion whether we should go back or not. Uh we had signed that we, before we came we had signed uh what kind of agreement with the American government that we were going to stay there for the duration of the war, and then go back. And uh, when the war was over I guess we were being asked whether we wanted to go back. Some people did go immediately because they left their, part of their families. But uh many of us, most of us, wanted to stay in the United States. So there was a lot of politicking and this is another story altogether and this was documented in this uh book that uh was written, let's see, the book is called "Haven," "The Haven," and it was written by Ruth Gruber.<sup>6</sup> She was closely involved in that so she would know more about that.

Q: Can you--was your father involved in the politicking at all?

A: No, my father was, uh actually what happened to my father - he was demoralized at the end of the war. Uh he had this little business that he ran in Split during the war and uh he, when we left, he knew that everything was gone. All the lifetime's work. And his family was all gone. They were killed. And he just gave up on everything. So even when we came out, uh after we were allowed to remain in United States, he couldn't do anything. He didn't work or anything else. It was uh, he was psychologically drained. I wanted to mention something else about my sisters and my mother. After my father and I had left, we didn't know what has happened or how they were going to manage. All we knew is that Germans usually take the men first and women hopefully uh later or whatever, but anyway we were hoping that things could work out. Well, my sisters and my mother told me later their story and maybe I can bring out some of those points. Uh, my mother was in a panic and had these two younger sisters as I mentioned: my next younger sister, Sarah, she was nine year old and then this was the youngest one, Esther, six years old. And I understand that my nine-year old sister was the hero of the family. She led everybody along. She says, "OK, this is not the place. It's not safe here. Let's go into hiding." And she forced my mother to make arrangements to go into hiding. First they stayed wherever our apartment was. Then somebody else took them in, similar to the story of Anne Frank, while the Germans were around, you know. They were still hiding and they would go outside in the streets and see what was happening, and uh that wasn't too safe. Uh then they talked to a person who had a farm like a--this was lots of vineyards in that part of the country. They had a big uh vineyard, maybe about thirty, forty miles from the city, so they had friends who had friends and they took them to this farm which is, you know, you're away from civilization. Nobody comes there. So they were safe there for a while and my mother had some money that uh we were able to save up and I remember when my father and I left, they split up the money, hopefully uh in case either side

---

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Gruber, Haven: The Unknown Story of 1,000 World War II Refugees (New York: Coward-McCann, 1983).

needed you know. So uh my mother was paying them whatever, and then after a while these people were also afraid, so they wouldn't keep my parents any more so my sister, she took my other sister by one hand and my mother by another, and they went into the mountains and they traveled on foot without shoes, you know--that's the kind of stuff--through, well there were no roads. Even today Yugoslavia doesn't have any roads to speak of, but you know, you go through the donkey trails and uh they ended up the same way that we did. The same spot, only nine months later. That's my mother and my two younger sisters. My older sister, she, after the fall of Italy, she joined the Partisan fighting unit and she was uh she's, right now she is 4'10" in high heels (laughter), so she's a little girl but anyway she was there carrying her load and uh she tells a story about how they would attack from one side and they went around the other side of the mountain and attacked the Germans from the other side to give the impression that there was more of them. And she got wounded in the leg and she still has problems with that leg. Uh I, occasionally I would ask her stories about uh the war, you know, and they had all these what they called German offensive. First offensive, second offensive, sixth offensive, and she was in all of them as a fighting Partisan. They had both men and women. There was no distinction at the time. Incidentally this sister of mine, her name is Blanka, she never came to United States. She stayed there, but I guess she had a pretty pleasant life after the war. The first wasn't so, and then she got married and they traveled throughout the world and she lived in India and Cairo and uh, uh some place in Africa--I just couldn't keep track of all the places. She studied in Moscow and in Italy and she's been to Israel a few times. She comes here every other year, so she didn't have such a bad life after that, but anyway . . .

Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about your life in Fort Ontario? What the kind of restrictions were like? Uh, what your daily life was like?

A: Oh, OK. Sure. In Fort Ontario, that was when we first came, we were a bunch of, oh what should I say, proud kids. We were not going to let anybody give us the impression that we are poor and uh we needed help from anybody. See, it was little thing psychologically that when we came here, we were greeted, welcomed and all that. But Americans are the most generous people in the world is beyond question. But they are also naive, so they would ask us questions like uh, "You see this--this is bread. Did you ever eat this before?" You know kind of thing--I mean it's mind-boggling. And that puts us on the defensive. So we would say, "Oh, sure, we had it good on the other side," and uh we were a little bit--what should I say--snotty kids. Anyway so we had this fence that prevented us from going outside and that bothered us a little bit. And this was a military camp. There was uh ample opportunity for sports and uh food uh like we hadn't seen before. I mean quantities, you know. We were just coming from the hungry Europe, so life was pretty good.

Q: Was it run by the American military?

A: Uh, no. What they did--this was put under what they called War Relocation Authority.<sup>7</sup> They

---

<sup>7</sup> The War Relocation Authority was charged with administering Fort Ontario under the overall

created a unit called Emergency Refugee Shelter under the War Relocation Authority which was part of the Department of the Interior. This is the very same group that interned the Japanese during the war, if you are familiar with that story.<sup>8</sup> Well, anyway, they were in charge of us. The, the military brought us over to the United States, but then it was handed over to the War Relocation Authority. And they had a civilian administrator that was appointed by this unit, uh by the Authority. Uh, it was a very democratically-run organization. One thing they did teach us was democracy at its best. You know, we elected representatives and we were voting on everything from uh what kind of menu we were going to have to uh who was going to do what, uh, we even were required to take jobs, you know, the grown-ups, not--the kids went to school. That, that was a well-organized uh little town of one thousand people. Uh...

Q: What were the living conditions like?

A: The living conditions were barracks which were boarded up to fit family units. In other words, they would take one large barrack and sub it into maybe three or four units. For instance, there was five of us. My mother, father and myself and two sisters. And we were given two rooms and uh they had sink, one sink. You know they had put in some plumbing in there and uh we uh had no problems with that. The only thing that bothered some of us was the snow. It would pile up ten ten feet high, you know. I had come from Adriatic coast which even in winter it's a very mild climate, and here this was snow covers the ground the end of September and you don't see the ground until late April or early May. So, this was uh a little bit different for us. But I looked back on those two years that we spent there, uh a year and a half, as some of the very pleasant part of my youth. Uh in school we, most of us excelled because we were really used to uh stringent demands on our academic performance, and we came to the United States here and the only, the only difficulty that we had was learning the language. Well you learned the language under total immersion in six weeks, you know. So we were doing pretty good and we made friends with some local people. Not too much because simply we were not allowed to go in and out. We just go to school and back. And later they would give us passes; Saturday afternoon we could go to a local movie, but heck, they had movies inside for us, you know. Only, maybe not first-run movies but there was something going on every night recreation-wise. It was really a pleasant life all around. . .

Q: Did it turn out that most of the people there were Jewish?

---

direction of the War Refugee Board, which was established by executive order on January 22, 1944 and active in transferring refugees from southern Italy to camps in North Africa and to a so-called "free port" at Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York.

<sup>8</sup> In early 1942 more than 100,000 Japanese-Americans living along the West Coast of the United States were deported to concentration camps in the interior.

A: Yeah. There was, out of a thousand people when after all was said and done, some dropped out so there was about nine hundred and ninety-two people,<sup>9</sup> I would say nine hundred and fifty were Jewish and the thirty or so, forty were not. But we had people from I forget how many countries, seventy countries. They were from all over. Oh, that was an interesting thing. You want to make an announcement like they would say there's going to be a movie tonight - and they would come and you have to say it first in German, because I guess German was the most widely understood language. And Serbo-Croatian is the language of Yugoslavia. And there was about three hundred people from Yugoslavia. And logically so, because they, the route that people came, but uh, let's see, they, uh they were not too powerful I guess in our politicking within the camp but there was Italian was spoken because we came from Italy. Yiddish was a very prominent language. Serbo-Croatian. Uh there were a lot of Polish people that had left Poland and gone to Belgium, you know, through their uh water route from Danzig and what not. And they spoke French and Polish and Yiddish. And uh it was like a United Nations walking on the streets there, except for the kids who spoke English, and we tried not to speak our own languages. Anyway, that's, in a nutshell. . . .

Q: . . .the Jewish life was there in the camp?

A: Oh, in the camp we had uh Jewish life of course. There were uh two synagogues. Like anything else, you have two Jews; you have three different opinions. And we had one conservative and the other one was ultra-orthodox and uh we had uh services, regular services and we had a uh choir. I am pretty observant, I would say, and my family was, and uh I guess many people were not, so you knew there were always services at the Orthodox "Shul" [synagogue]. But ours was strictly Friday night or Saturday morning and it was a military chapel and uh the way the chapel doors were made they had crosses on them, so some people objected to worshipping there because they didn't feel comfortable with it. So they started their own, you know, internal, but it was, Jewish life was not restricted or not promoted any more than anywhere else, but we had, Jewish uh papers were coming from New York and uh I would say in camp the life was absolutely, uh was not only congenial but it was conducive to uh culture, uh cultural development and everything else. Educational programs galore, you know. Recreation. It just uh, it was fantastic. Uh for some people who were professionals this was a delay in their advancement, but for me I was moving right along. I had finished fifth grade in Yugoslavia, and during the war like three years I hadn't gone to school, so five grades you don't retain very high education. So they put me here in seventh grade, and not only all that period that transpired that I didn't do anything academically but also I was with uh older people, so six months I was moved to eighth grade and in the next six months I was in the ninth grade and so I was getting what they called high honors and uh we were all pretty good. I wasn't the best. I mean there was, my friends, each one was competing who was going to do better.

Q: We have just a few minutes left. Uh, is there anything specific that you remember, any

---

<sup>9</sup> The official number was 982, 368 of whom were from Yugoslavia.

incident from your time with the Partisans uh that you would like to share, or anything else that you have not yet talked about?

A: You know, let me see. There could be a few points. First of all, I--as we were talking earlier, I tried to remember--there there were some people who were uh compassionate and who were good and helpful and did something for us. For one thing, the neighbors who came in the middle of the night, knocked at the door and told us about the Germans coming; how they knew it I don't know. I think they were connected uh with the local Nazi groups in some way. Uh the neighbors above us, they were strictly Nazis from way back, but anyway, these other people, they must have learned from them. They told us so, that may have saved our lives, my father's and mine. Also the Italian uh people whoever they were at the time, like if it weren't for them, I mean all these Jews who came from other parts of Europe that were saved, if it weren't for them I don't know how many more would have perished. Uh but there was an interesting episode uh during the Partisans. Uh, my father, I told you, he wasn't handling it too well; the work was hard and all that, but he had a bad experience uh one time. Uh, he's religious and every morning he would say his prayers. Well, uh he would go outside the farm where we were living and do it, say it out loud, his prayer, and he would cover his head with a kerchief, and he would put it around his ears to hold the kerchief like this, and a farmer must have seen him, and he reported [him] to the Partisans. Now to put it in the perspective, there was a lot of problems with uh people uh, I mean the Partisans were never safe because somebody would report them to the Germans and they would come and, you know, the, the spies were all over, so this peasant thought that he was uncovering somebody that was talking. He looked at my father and he noticed the ears. There was a a hanky over his head, so he reported him and they came and took my father away, and this was a kangaroo court kind of thing, and uh they say, "OK, admit that you were talking on the earphones and reporting to Nazis." He said, "I'm Jewish. What do I need to tell them?" And they said, "Comrade Danon, we know everything. We know it all. It's been told to us so you can't hide it anymore. Admit it. It will be easier on you." And this is the thing that broke the camel's back I guess, the straw that broke the camel's back, but there were incidents like that. Uh a few of them you know, and that's why he left.

Q: He just ran away at that point?

A: Sort of, yeah.

Q: Can you tell me anything about how the Jewish community coped with all these refugees coming in?

A: Oh yeah, that was interesting. Uh, the, all these refugees that were coming in--at first they were on their own, but then later many of them just had no means of uh support, I think the international uh Jewish uh community stepped in, and I think it's B'nai B'rith was one of the groups. Another one was uh Societé Israélite Mondiale--something like that--from Switzerland. They were uh sending uh some money to the Jewish community in Split to distribute. Third way was that the people who were coming in, they were, we, our family

was assigned two different families that would come and get their lunch. Uh, one family would come three times a week, and another one would come three other days a week. You know, in other words we would cook instead of for five people or six people, we would cook for eleven people. And uh that's how it worked. That's how some sustained themselves. Others had some, uh something that they had brought with them. Some had some gold coins and there would be a lot of trading and and some would go into some kind of business, uh business meaning that they would go to one store and say, "What are you selling? Maybe you give me some samples," and they would go offer to another. I know one guy was uh taking peanuts and roasting them and making little bags and selling them, you know. And it was a meager existence, but they managed and of course this little support that they would get every two weeks and I remember there was once or twice that the money didn't come from Switzerland, so we, the locals, were asked to make a heavy contribution. Uh what is heavy, I don't know the numbers, but you know, enough so we can make the distribution at least until something comes from Switzerland.

Q: Where did these people live?

A: Uh, that's the thing--some had families but uh after a while, you know, there's just no room and uh where the synagogue was, there was some--not synagogue, I'm sorry--where our club was uh the social club was, the social club was filled with uh mattresses and uh blankets and they slept on the floors and I guess they would rent a farm someplace and they would fill thirty, forty people in there.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You're welcome. I enjoyed talking to you.