

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MIRO AUFERBER

Transcript of Audiotaped Translation of Interview

Interviewer: Vera Rosenberger

Date: June 16, 1987

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MA - Miro Auferber [interviewee]

VR - Vera Rosenberger¹ [interviewer]

Date: June 16, 1987

Tape one, side one:

VR: My name is Vera Rosenberger. I am from Haifa, Israel. Today is June 16, 1987. I translated the interview with Mr. Miro Auferber from the Serbical Yiddish language to English. The following is a first person account by Mr. Auferber, who lives today in Moshav Kiton, Israel.

MA: I was born in Osijek, Croatia, on November 22, 1913. My first language was Serbo-Croatian. I worked with my father, who was a manufacturer and had a brush factory. My family consisted of my mother, father and two brothers. All of us were members of Zionist organizations. My father was the president of the local *B'nai Brith*, and the vice president of the Jewish community in Osijek. My mother was in the leadership of the WIZO². We, the brothers, were members of the *Hashomer Hatzair*.

The anti-Jewish laws had no influence on our lives. Our reaction to Hitler's ascent to power was one of negation, but the events were seemingly far away from us. We could not imagine that in Yugoslavia, our destiny would be as the destiny of Jews in Austria, Czechoslovakia, or Poland. The Yugoslav agreement, the pact with Hitler and Mussolini, was a prediction for the future catastrophe. On March 27th, 1941, I took no part in demonstration, but I was concerned.

We had a pleasant life previous to World War II, being a well-to-do and respected family. We had many friends. I got married in December, 1940. My wife, Anchitsev, was pregnant at the time I was taken by the Ustashi to forced labor, and was with our child killed by the Ustashi in the spring of 1942 in Yablanitsh near Jasenovac. Both my parents were sent to Auschwitz, Poland, and never returned. My two brothers managed to escape to Italy.

In April, 1941, I served as a reserve officer in the Yugoslav Army in Belisce. At the end of the war I was taken as a prisoner of war in Osijek but I managed to escape and to return home. One night in the middle of June, 1941, I was taken by the Ustashi by train to Zagreb. I was in a group of about 200, 250 young men, most of us under the age of 40. We were handed over on the fairgrounds in Zagreb, where most of the people were taken into custody. Through these assembling camps were taken hundreds of thousands of arrested people. The Croatians were told that they are going for three months of forced

¹This interview was conducted in Serbical Yiddish and later translated to audiotape by the interviewer, Vera Roseberger.

²WIZO - Women's International Zionist Organization.

labor. We Jews were not told anything. Some people said that some of the prisoners got proper papers to leave for Italy.

After two or three days we were sent to Gospic. We were taken to a sheepfold, abandoned by the original owners. There were two office buildings and the stables. In the office buildings were accommodated the women and the children -- all Jewish -- and we men were put into the stables. Our families were left at home in Osijek. The stables were filled with rats. We slept in the open air. We were a group of about 500 men. Gospic was an abandoned village. The Serb population was forced to leave their homes and property. Our duty was to gather the crops. The Serbs who were hiding in nearby forests set the crops on fire. At this time we had only a few guards, enough food, and nobody was maltreated. We worked in hope to be back at home after two, three months.

One day, in August, 1941, we were assembled, taken to the train station, and together with the women and children pushed into cattle cars. So many people were put in every cattle car that there was no place even to sit down. The train stayed in the station for a long time. The first day we had some food, but the second day the women and the children started crying. The situation was unbearable. We were not allowed to leave the car even for our needs. The Ustashi took from us all our remaining possessions, such as shoes, coats, and whatever we had. Then we arrived to a station before Zagreb. I forgot the name. The women and children were left at this station. We continued our voyage for one-and-half more days. We were in a terrible condition when we arrived in Jasenovac.

This time it was a plain field, only two or three barracks were there. There was not enough place for all of us. First we were forced to put barbed wire fences around the camp. After 10 days the Jews from island of Pag arrived. They were tortured, exhausted. Both the old and young people were in a terrible condition. There was no place for all of us. We let the elderly people sleep in the barracks.

We never got back our belongings that we had left back in Gospic, although we had been told that we would. Gospic was occupied by the Italians. The time was June, July 1941. We were among the first group of prisoners in Jasenovac. We had no knowledge about what was going on. We left Gospic voluntarily, thinking that we are going home, and only on the train did we realize that we are wrong. There was not enough food in Jasenovac, but at the beginning we were still strong and healthy. Later the people had diarrhea and became weak. However, there was no maltreatment nor killing of prisoners. One day the Ustashi commandant of the camp gathered about 100 young men for work on the embankment against foot of Sava River. We walked along the Sava River to a village called Kratia [phonetic]. I believe, I and Langfelder are the only two survivors from this place and from this group. Langfelder is today in Israel and lives in Bet Nekofa. We stopped near the forest. There we built our barracks. All of a sudden we knew how to do everything. We were under guard of the Ustashi but this time they did not hurt us. This time the peasants from the nearby villages brought us cornbread. There was no other bread. We spent about five, six days there.

And then one early morning, while it was still dark, they wake us and led us away deep in the forest. We walked for about two hours. All of us were Jews. Behind us went a cart with tools, hatchets, saws, etc. There was an engineer who told us that on this street we have to build the embankment. We were forced to cut down 100-year-old oaks and take out the roots. We were instructed by experts from sawmills and factories. At noon we received some cooked potatoes or cooked corn flour. Then we were not starving. After a month the people were weakened and became ill. The guards began to beat us. The weather got cold and the rain began. The guards started to take away our shoes, coats, and all the warm clothing. If somebody was not able to stand up any more, he was killed with rifle butts. The rains became more intensive. The Sava River began to flow over, and the condition did not enable outside work. Those who were still able to walk were returned to Jasenovac. Before we returned to Jasenovac, new people were continually [unclear] either to the camp in the forest. The old and the weak were killed.

We who returned to the camp, Jasenovac, called the forest the Forest of Death and Horror. In this forest all of us were Jewish, except for a small group of streetcar conductors and drivers from Zagreb who were separated from us. One day they disappeared. Not one of them returned. The building of the embankment was finished. Six or seven of us were ordered to take apart the camp, to put the wire fences on a barge, and sail this on Sava to Jasenovac. We had no thoughts to try to escape. In this time in Jasenovac were many people, mostly Serbs, whose villages were destroyed and the men brought to the camp. No women were held this time at the camp. The camp of Jasenovac included a brick plant, a factory for chains, and the sawmill, with necessary tools to manufacture boards.

After our arrival in Jasenovac we were assigned to work in one of those working places. This time the Ustashi behaved to us properly. The steam engine which was supposed to provide electricity didn't work. They asked for somebody who knew how to activate the engine. I applied for this job and together with engineer Bloom we put the engine to work. We had electricity. The time was November, December 1941. I spent the days and nights at the steam power plant and was safe from cold. Too many people were in the camp. Hundreds of prisoners were ill and died from weakness, hunger and cold. It was snowing and raining. The Serbs, the majority of us, were not able to wash themselves, to clean themselves from lice.

The Czechniks arrived in January, 1942 on the other side of the Sava River. They called to the Serbs to flee from the camp and to join them. The Ustashi's answer came immediately. They closed us in a few barracks, with not enough place, without water and food. We were held in this condition until they got reinforcements of more Ustashi. After our release, there were hundreds of dead left. It was the beginning of January, 1942. They appointed a new boss, an Ustashi, at the steam engine. I disappeared from there. At this time there was no administration or any written evidence about the prisoners -- their names or numbers -- at the camp. Only at the beginning of 1942 did the Jewish inmates set up offices and began the registration of the inmates, prisoners. Until then there was no need

for mass slaughter. The people died from illness, weakness and hunger. They were killed by punishment or just for fun. Not only the Jews were killed, but mostly, even more Serbs. The Jews were better at helping each other and getting better jobs.

The leather factory -- Alkali [phonetic] was born in Sarajevo. His first name was Sylvio. He was in his '40s. He was a professional football player who lived in Spain and came to visit his parents with the intention to save them. Instead he was caught, together with his family, and taken to Jasenovac. His father owned a leather factory before. Sylvio Alkali was a charming and capable man. He convinced the Ustashi that they could use the huge amount of leather collected at the camp for shoes, boots and handbags. Almost from nothing he organized a leather factory. He assembled Serb cobblers or people who knew something about making shoes or knew something about leather. He took also hundred Jews who knew nothing about this profession and taught them to work. He brought in a professor of chemistry, Avraham Dimayo [phonetic], a Communist Jew from Belgrade. He was a teacher in a professional school for leather workers. We worked in this factory for three years. The factory developed incredibly. They employed furriers, shoe makers, boot makers and glove makers from the nearby villages. With our products we were able to support ourselves. The Ustashi brought to camp from the Serb villages cattle, sheep and horses. The meat was used for food supply for the army. The skin of the animals was given to our factory. Alkali had a good relationship with the butchers and they left on the skins some meat and fat. This saved us from hunger. This was the leather factory.

In spring, 1942, the Ustashi brought to Jasenovac thousands of Jews. As they arrived they were immediately liquidated. This liquidation went on from February, 1942 till the middle of 1942. Our families were brought in. From tens of thousands of Jews only a few hundred survived. Only very few people could be saved, mostly those who had some useful profession. Only a small group of people who knew each other helped each other work in better condition and had more and better food was able to survive. And we learned gradually how to survive. Some people from foreign countries, who forgot to speak Croatian, were in factory. They spoke French, behaved well to us, and had a good relation with our chief, Alkali. The leather factory needed wood for heating the stoves, for hot water, which was essential for working on leather. The factory needed a big supply of wood. I spent the month of spring and summer in the forest with the forest group of workers, cutting trees and supplied them to the factory. This work lasted until the rains began. In the forest the prisoners were killed, or died from typhoid fever. I got sick too, but continued to work. It was like this till 1944.

Then it was obvious that the war is near its end and lost. The leather factory was not any more important. We worked only casually till April, 1945. In April, 1945 began the liquidation of the entire population of camp Jasenovac. They destroyed the buildings and our group from the leather factory was too in jeopardy of final liquidation. We decided not to give up, not to allow ourselves to be killed without any resistance. We attacked the

guards from 250 of us, only eight survived and fled. This time all the other camps were already destroyed. We were the last. I joined the partisans, the Yugoslav People's Army.

In November, 1945 I returned to my hometown, Osijek. In February, 1947 I was arrested and without any reason and without any sentence put into jail. Then my brother-in-law, who was a high-ranking Communist, close to Tito, intervened. I was set free. Until today I am tormented by shame and by guilty conscience because I was so naive and stupid, to give up and let myself be dredged off to forced labor and later to Jasenovac. I thought that with this act I could save my family. I had been married only one year. My wife tried to escape to Italy. She was caught and brought to Jasenovac, together with our child. I was forced to use all my connections to see her. She even shouted to me that I didn't have to fear for her. She will manage to escape. The next day she was killed. Those were the worst days in my life, when I heard that she arrived in Jasenovac. I was helpless, unable to save her life, knowing that her destiny is the same as that of the others. Certain death.

In Jasenovac occurred many terrible events. Sometimes they, the Ustashi, drove out the people from the barracks and then shot every tenth of them. At times they called out the students only, or the lawyers, or the physicians, and then killed all of them. It was their fun, their pleasure, a joke. The Ustashi intellectuals -- teachers, priests and others -- were the worst, more cruel than the primitive ones. They read German newspapers, they incited the others to atrocities. They were worse even than the Germans. The people who had some useful profession had better chance to survive. The others, who were not able to work, perished. Thousands of Jewish youths were killed, because they did not know how to work. My opinion is that those half-primitive people, Ustashi, hated the Serbs, who were the majority, about 700,000 to 800,000, in November at the camp. They were slaughtered. The number of Jews who arrived to Jasenovac was about 20,000. But most of them were immediately killed. A few hundred succeeded to stay alive, but at the end, at the time of the total liquidation, most of them were killed. Some of them were killed in attempts to escape, to flee. The Serbs never took a revenge for their slaughter.

[tape off then on] for, and the other is not important. [tape off then on] I had been married only one year. My wife tried to escape to Italy. She was caught and brought... [Vera continues to read manuscript which is a repeat of the above.]

VR: Mr. Miro Auferber emigrated to Israel in 1948 and lives with his family since then in Moshav Kidron.