

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

NELLY B. THALHEIMER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer:	Davida Glick
Date:	November 10, 1988

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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NT - Nelly B. Thalheimer¹ [interviewee]

DG - Davida Glick [interviewer]

Date: November 10, 1988

Tape one, side one:

DG: Would you please tell me where you were born, when you were born, and a little bit about your family?

NT: I was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, October 4, 1929. I have a brother and a sister. We were all born in Belgrade.

DG: What was your life like before the war or before your war years were changed by the Nazi victories in Europe?

NT: We had a pretty good life. My father was a businessman. He did okay. My mother was a housewife, we had a maid, we were rather young but I had piano lessons and French lessons and we did okay. We lived alright, I mean, I guess we would be considered middle upper class or some such thing.

DG: Did your family experience any antisemitism before the Hitler period, if so, please tell us about it.

NT: Well, I don't know too much. I was kind of young. The two instances that I do remember, my father had a pretty nice import-export business in partnership with another gentleman by the name of Moreno Talvi, who was also Jewish and they had to take in, or they took in, a Serbian gentleman who was quite well known in the city. With a Serbian name who was sort of, I don't know how much of a partner he was, but the firm carried his name as well so it was not a one hundred percent Jewish firm and that was done for a reason obviously.

DG: Did you or your family belong to any Jewish organization or to a synagogue before Nazism changed your life?

NT: Yes, my parents, we belonged to the Ashkenazi synagogue. There were only two synagogues in Belgrade, Sephardic and Ashkenazi and we belonged and we participated.

DG: Did you belong to any other Jewish organizations?

NT: I don't think so. I don't know how many there were in Belgrade. I really don't think so.

DG: You had mentioned that there was another antisemitic incident that occurred with your family. Would you please share that with us?

NT: Well, I don't know, it wasn't strictly with my family how much antisemitic. Before I-- after I finished fourth grade in Yugoslavia, at the time in Yugoslavia and I guess in Europe, if you wanted to go on to higher education you had to take an exam, which I

¹nee Bokros.

did, and as a matter of fact I passed very well. That summer before I was to start, the first year of *gymnasium*, which would be fifth grade, the government changed in Yugoslavia, became pro-German and the Minister of Education there came out with a new law, so to speak. They were eventually going to eliminate all Jewish children from public schools. Up to then we went to public schools and no one knew any difference. How were they going to do this process of elimination? Those students who were already in fifth, sixth, seventh grades, you know, who passed fifth grade would just continue and eventually they would graduate and that would be it. Those of us who would just be starting fifth grade, and I was at that point, we would have to take special exams and only fewer and fewer would be admitted. So eventually, I guess, they were thinking nobody would be admitted. We would go to schools and that would be it. As it happened, they admitted one boy and one girl from the whole city of Belgrade, which was the capital of Yugoslavia.

DG: About how many children would have been eligible to go?

NT: That's a difficult question. I don't know, but I imagine certainly hundreds of them, whether it was over a thousand, hundred thousand, I don't know, in that particular grade, probably several hundreds into the fifth grade. I was the girl that was admitted and a young boy by the name of Moisyovich that was eventually killed, he was admitted. The bad part about it was, or the worst part was, it took time for this process to become effective. They didn't know how to handle it and all that, red tape and all this kind of stuff so all of us fifth graders started in school, whichever school we would go to. In my class alone there were about five or six Jewish girls-- we were all girls, it was a girls' school, we were separated at the time-- and we went to school for a good, I would say a good six to eight weeks, until one day the teacher started calling out some names and she had tears in her eyes and she read all these names except for mine and I realized, and I guess the other kids realized too, that they were all Jewish names that she called out and then she actually cried and told the class that we will not be attending here anymore but there is a new school starting for us and we will be getting a better education because there will be fewer children in, etc, etc. And that was my first personal experience and it was a very bad experience because all of a sudden I felt, well, I guess I'm different or something, not only from the rest of the class, but even from-- I was singled out. I guess I was different from even the other Jewish kids. I was just 11 years old or 10 years old, 10 I guess. It was very difficult to understand and I guess that was the number one experience.

DG: Did you discuss what happened in your family?

NT: You mean at the time? Frankly, I don't remember. I'm sure we did and life was accepted. We were assured that we will be alright and that we'll go to school. That was the main thing on my mind at the time and we'll get an education. How my parents really felt about it I can't tell. I don't know, they never said anything.

DG: Did any men in your family serve in any national army?

NT: Well my father served in World War I. In fact, he was a high officer in the Austria-Hungarian army. My uncle, yes, I think my uncle, who was my mother's brother,

the only brother, and he was quite a bit younger than she, he was called up or enlisted over there around the time the war broke out in Yugoslavia for a while and then he was taken prisoner over there and he was sent to camp in Italy also.

DG: Do you remember how you and members of your family reacted to Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany in 1933?

NT: I don't remember. I was three years old. I can't tell and, unfortunately, my parents have been dead for such a long time and I was so young when they died. There was no discussion about that.

DG: Do you remember any uneasiness about the Soviet-Nazi pact of 1939 in your own family or among friends and neighbors?

NT: I remember some talk about it. But that's all. I would be not honest if I said yes I remember or that, I don't know. I guess at the time parents did not discuss too much in front of the children anyway, so I really can't.

DG: Were you aware in 1941 that Prince Paul agreed to a pact with Hitler and how did you react?

NT: I was aware of it because in 1941 is when all this was happening. In 1941 is when they had the revolution in Belgrade and you know, we burned the German flag and the kids were in school and we were saying "better grave than slave" and all this kind of stuff.

DG: Where were you and what were the reactions in the area where you were to the uprising against the government that had signed the pact?

NT: That's what I was just saying. I was in Belgrade and we went to school. This was March 25, I remember it very well although I was only in fourth grade, I think. People reacted very strongly, but this was Belgrade, this was Serbia, and the reaction wasn't the same all over Yugoslavia, obviously, and kids just left the classrooms and we were milling around and marching all over, even young children carrying the Yugoslavian flag and the flag was burned. The German flag was burned in front of the German Embassy and two days later there was a revolution and well, the rest is history.

DG: Would you tell us about what you knew about the deportations from Backa and Banat to the camps?

NT: We didn't know much because by that time, I was already, we were interned. See, my father pulled us out from our house on March 31 actually before the war actually broke out which was April the 6. Within four hours or five we left. We owned our own house which was quite unusual at the time, only for about a year. He called up my mother and said, "Leave, we might be attacked, we will leave, we might never return." My mother thought he was crazy. We left, we never returned, with five little suitcases.

DG: When you were in the Italian zone can you tell us if there were any Italian efforts to delay or frustrate German plans?

NT: You mean German plans as far as the Jews were concerned? Yes, in fact, we heard that at one point when we were interned, and I don't know if that was '42 or

'43, Hitler had met with Mussolini at Bremen and he didn't demand that Mussolini turn over the Italian Jews, they were his, but of course there were quite a few Jews relatively in South Italy and those who had escaped among the Italians and he demanded for him to turn over those Jews. He did not.

DG: Did you know of any Jews that had married Ustashi and were exempted from mass the executions?

NT: No, Ustashi were in Croatia. I had an uncle, at least we called the man an uncle, very, very close, he was Jewish, of course, but in Belgrade for many, many generations his family, who was married long before to a German woman and, to make a long story short, he escaped twice, went back, didn't have any money. He had a German wife, he thought he would be saved. He ended up in some camp. We never heard from him and at the end of the war when the partisans came back they killed her, no questions were asked. She was a German woman, so she was killed.

DG: Did you have any knowledge or experience of Red Cross intervention in Zagreb?

NT: No, I wasn't even near Zagreb.

DG: So you heard nothing about it?

NT: No.

DG: Were you able to hear about the progress of Allied or partisan military activity during the war?

NT: Yes, we were interned, there were, as I said, about 200 of us in that little town on the island and news somehow filtered through, not always.

DG: Who were the 200 people on the island and did you know them?

NT: They were mostly Yugoslav people, people that were collected by the Italians wherever they were and sent to the island. The island was called Korcula and the little town was called Korcula and we were interned there.

DG: How did they go about collecting the Jews, as you refer to it?

NT: Well, wherever you were we had to register. We were, my family at the time were in Split, which was on the Adriatic, north of the island and it was summertime, big signs appeared all over the beaches, you know, forbidden to Jews and sharks and we couldn't go into the stores, etc., and we were requested to register. We were not citizens of Split and once we registered they had our names, of course, and then they decided a few weeks later or whatever to send our particular group to Korcula.

DG: How were you transported and what were the situations and circumstances?

NT: Not too bad, it's a short trip. It's only, I think about a two or three hour trip by boat and we just had to be there. We took our five little suitcases and then we-- that's where we were. We had to find our own so-called lodgings and we were on our own, fend for ourselves except when they decided that we could not leave the house or wherever we lived. We could not get any ration stamps. Of course, food was rationed.

Considering what happened to the rest of us it was okay. The natives, they helped us as much as they could. We were kids, my brother and I, my sister was too young. We would sneak out and we made some friends with some native children about our age. We would sneak out and get some food or-- in general, we survived.

DG: How were your parents able to get food for themselves?

NT: Well, sort of on the black market. If there was anything that you could trade for. As I said again, the native people, although they didn't have much, much to eat, they would share with us. They would sneak something in. Since it was on the ocean, the Adriatic, they lived mostly on fish and products from the sea. They would bring us some or if there was something left over and there were a few potatoes we would sneak in.

DG: Were you permitted to fish for your livelihood?

NT: Not really. There were some fishermen on the island who brought in whatever they brought in, but no we didn't. I guess it never came up. I don't know. You could sit on the-- if you could get out you could sit on the edge of the water and throw in a line or something, but to work or go, no.

DG: Were you confined to house arrest?

NT: Occasionally. Every once in a while there was trouble in the woods and on the islands. You know, there were partisans there and a couple of times soldiers would be killed or signs would appear in overnight graffiti against the anti-Mussolini or anti-occupational army and then they would just say, okay nobody leave the house or wherever you are, you can't go out until they decided it's okay, all clear.

DG: Were you guarded by armed soldiers?

NT: No, no, we couldn't leave the island, but we were not individually guarded wherever we stayed.

DG: Can you share any experiences in Split with us for the archives?

NT: Well, not so much in Split, we didn't spend too much time there and except that, as I said, we could not go, it was summertime, there were beautiful beaches we were not allowed and this type of thing. On Korcula though, somehow or other, there was always some news filtering through. At one point we heard that the Palestinian underground is collecting children from Europe and somehow trying to get them at the time to Palestine, just young children. My father came and spoke with my brother and I. My sister was too young, she was only about six or so, and he asked us. He said this is what he heard and this is what they are going to try to do, you know, would we want to go? He actually let my brother and I decide for ourselves. We were 12 and 13 at the time. He did tell us that he has no idea if he would ever get there. He has no idea if we would ever see each other, but he still wanted us to make that decision and of course, we decided that we are staying and we are staying together, you know, what will be will be. I don't think that ever came to fruition anyway because I don't recall anybody from Korcula, any young person, having a chance to leave during that period. Another time that was rather difficult, it was during the end of the war, not the end of the war, but Italy

capitulated in September of '43 and just before it my father somehow managed to take my brother to Split for something. I forget what it was. During that time Italy capitulated and bedlam broke out. Italian troops were just leaving. They didn't care who was left or not and, of course, the island was very close to the shore, only a couple of miles we could see and that's where the Germans were and they could have been there and they expected them there any minute, so to speak, so my family, my mother and my sister who was at the time seven or so, we fled with some partisans, some young people, we fled into the mountains, into the woods up there, and my mother went totally to pieces. She was very, very dependent on my father all her life and we, of course, thought they were dead and they thought we were dead and it was pretty rough about two weeks or so, I think, we were up in the mountains with the partisans until one day all of a sudden, like out of nowhere, my brother showed up. They had made their way back to the island thinking, of course, that we were no longer there and then they found out. That's how we got together and a few weeks later we could not stay on the island anymore because the Germans were coming. There was no doubt about that. We had-- there were about 200 of us and we wanted to get a boat and just cross the Adriatic, go down to Bari, South Italy. Whatever money was left and whatever goods we had collected, but the partisans had a very difficult time understanding why we wanted to leave, after all we were Yugoslav people, we spoke the language, there were people on the island. We were all in danger the same as they were. There weren't any Jews there before, they really didn't know. But we convinced them and we promised them that if we do make it, indeed, to Italy we would send a-- it was sort of a large sailboat, but we would send it back with supplies or whatever because the Allies, the American 8th I think and English 5th, or vice-versa, were already in Bari. Twice we tried because every evening about six o'clock or so there were two German planes. They would just come and fly very low over the water, over the island, over the water and they would start strafing any boats that were around. So twice we tried and twice we returned. The third time-- and they came and we were all, of course, downstairs underneath. The third time the partisans had us. It was one of their officers, must have been a high officer who was very, very seriously wounded and we took him on board and they helped us and we ended up on a small tiny, tiny little island. We couldn't quite make it yet. We escaped that strafing and we were on the island about two days and there was no food there at all. I mean absolutely no food. I remember fighting for a potato for my sister because she was very young and they gave us two potatoes-- I don't know, I think half a potato each which would be two potatoes for the four of us and my sister she could share, because she was young, you know, and this type of situation. But we made it out of there too and that was Yom Kippur. During that time it was Yom Kippur and I sort of made a promise to myself then that if we make it out of there I'll fast for the rest of my life on Yom Kippur. I guess it was the first time I fasted anyway, and I did, and we made it out of there.

DG: How did you get out?

NT: We were back with the boat, we tried again and we made it, we made it across the Adriatic.

DG: Did you take the wounded officer?

NT: Oh yes, we took the wounded officer. He was unloaded over there as soon as we got there and they took him to the hospital and the American and British armies, they did just what we asked them, they loaded the boat up with medical supplies and the captain took it back. And we were interred, not interned excuse me, but we were in a camp in Italy, that was September or October, October, I guess, of '43 till we came here August of '44. It was actually a camp in Bari. It was a prisoner of war camp. It was built by the Italians for our prisoners. Forty-eight people in a room, you know they were bunk beds, they weren't beds, there were two boards, you know, for two people in the bottom and two people on top and we got one of these units because we were five, because my sister, three of us, we would be on top and my parents would be downstairs, but that's the best they could do.

DG: Who was in charge of this camp?

NT: You got me there, I really don't know. I think my brother would remember better. I know that the Red Cross came in and they brought clothing and food. In fact, we all got very, very sick the first few days because they brought margarine and this type of food and these cans, Spam, or whatever it was, meaning very well, but we were pretty starved and we started eating and we all got sick.

DG: What country was in charge of your camp?

NT: I think they were the British and Americans together. They were certainly-- I don't know if they were just the Americans, no we had British doctors there too from India and all, so I guess it was-- because both armies occupied Bari and were there so I think it was sort of a unified effort.

DG: Were you free to do what you wanted while you were there?

NT: Yes, we were free to do. There was not much we could do or any place we could go. They provided us with shelter, they provided us with food and there was not much we could do.

DG: Was everyone in the camp Jewish?

NT: The great majority, the great majority. There were a few people there, refugees, who were not Jewish. I imagine they were political refugees, but the great majority were, yes. And there were people who originally came from France. We had some friends we made who are still in the city now who are French, or were French at the time.

DG: How did they get there?

NT: I don't know how they got there. You know, people made their way down. This was in south Italy, to Italy over the Alps or through the Alps and eventually people just walked, made their way.

DG: What were your reactions when you first learned that you were going to

the United States?

NT: We were very happy. We, of course, thought that we were only going for the duration of the war and to sort of recuperate. In fact, this is what my parents, my father had to sign because when FDR decided he was going to bring 1,000 refugees from Europe, you know, big deal, he was going to bring a whole thousand for R & R, rest and recuperation, we had to go back. But not until we came here to the camp did various Jewish organizations, and some others, start working on it and a few people went back from Oswego, New York, that's where we were, but that's another story. There's a book out on that story. I don't have to tell that story. I have that book right here by Ruth Gruber. She wrote a book called Haven.

DG: Did your family consider at any time going back to Yugoslavia?

NT: No, not really, not when we, not when we were all together. We had nobody and nothing left there. Very few people did. We were over 900 or so up in Fort Ontario in camp, which was also a camp. A few people went back, mostly to Yugoslavia, or maybe just Yugoslavian people and they had some children left or who had some relatives left in Yugoslavia who they found out was still living, this sort of thing, but no.

DG: So the ones that went back had reason to go back because there was family there, but those who did not have family there did not?

NT: That's correct.

DG: Were there any special Jewish organizations that were unusually helpful to you?

NT: You mean here in the States? Oh yes, there were a number of Jewish organizations that came out to help us. HIAS was one of them. Since we were so close to, not Buffalo, upstate New York, ORT came, a lot of organizations came. The government sent in the Friends, Working Friends, they worked with us and they sent us to school. We were able to go to school in Oswego, NY. We had to come back into the camp, but we went to public schools. As I said, that's another story.

DG: Are there any words that you would like to address to generations to come based on your experiences that we will have in our archives?

NT: Generations to come, I don't know, I have a hard time. I have three sons, thank God, and they are wonderful young men, but they don't seem to be too, too involved and there is this tendency to forget. And in fact, my middle son, the lawyer, we were just talking about something the other night, I don't know what it was, and he said something, "We don't know, the Holocaust is so far behind and you know, we don't feel it." I guess we were talking about the political situation here and the forthcoming elections with Jackson and all this kind of stuff. That bothers me greatly. Even my brother, who has been pro-Palestine before there ever was an Israel. And we had nothing here, when we came here we belonged to Hashomer Hatzair, the youth groups and things like that, even he said, "It's enough now we have to go on, not forget, but you got to live your own lives and go on." Which I agree with, of course. But I feel very strongly that we have

to build the memorials, we have to keep up the libraries and, I don't know, I don't see too much support and that bothers me. It bothers me greatly.

DG: I can understand that. This tape will be kept at the archives at Gratz College. It will be securely locked and, if at any time, you want a copy of the tape or you would like to hear it, we will be happy to facilitate that for you.

NT: Yes, I would like to have a copy.

DG: Alright, I want to thank you for your cooperation and hope that your wishes come true.