

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Haim Solomon
October 19, 1993
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Haim Solomon, conducted by Randy Goldman on October 19, 1993 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Arlington, VA 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.

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HAIM SOLOMON

October 19, 1993

01:01:09

Q: I'd like you to start by stating your name, date of birth and where you were born.

A: My name is Haim Solomon. I was born November 5, 1924, in a small, little village of Romania called Bivolari.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your family and growing up in Bivolari.

A: Bivolari was one of the small villages established in the late 1800's. It consisted of one main street, unpaved and a perpendicular one called the Armenian Alley, or in Yiddish, the Kribbe Gass (ph), at the end of which, the Jewish community of 200 families, approximately a thousand people, built an Israeli, Israelita Romana (ph) or public school, no, elementary school. The communal bath was there, the matzo factory, the . . . a few other institutions. And we lived happily as children in the little village, surrounded by about five, six thousand peasants. They would come . . . the street was one after another, little shops, ateliers. The Jewish community consisted of all sorts of . . . what do you call them? Occupations, there were tailors and cobblers and bakers and other such. And stores, of which my parents occupied one in the middle of the street, the middle of the village. On Mondays, Sundays and Mondays, the peasants would come with their produce and sell it for such people who would then accumulate it and send it up to other, larger cities and with the money the peasants would buy what the Jews had for sale.

01:04:06

Previously there were hard times so that when I came on the scene, the atmosphere was relaxed but cautious and nobody ventured out of the city by himself or late at night. It was a nice arrangement, we lived during the day, we stay indoors at night. And we were not then . . . The city, the village, was bordering, about half a mile from a river called Prut, and later that Prut became the border between Romania and Russia.

Q: I want to ask you some more questions.

A: Yes, about Bivolari?

Q: You said your parents had a business there, what kind of business?

A: Dry goods, clothing and behind the store were warehouses, where on many occasions there was an exchange of goods versus produce, that again, was accumulated and sold to a merchandiser.

Q: Did you have sisters and brother?

A: I was the fifth and the youngest of the family. Two sisters and two brothers, older, of course. We had only the four primary schooling, that Jewish school, primary classes and beyond that we would prepare at home with instructors and travel 40, 50 kilometers to the nearest larger city, Iasi, to be examined and qualified for higher grades.

Q: It sounds like the Jewish community in Bivolari was very self-contained?

A: Absolutely.

Q: So you didn't really, other than market days . . .

A: Right.

Q: . . . mingle with the Christians?

A: . . . with the surrounding peasantry, no.

Q: Did you experience any Antisemitism or you . . . ?

A: Not in the beginning, only as war winds drew closer, that they became more aggressive. At my level, my friends, my age group, that before that they would be just friends, and playmates, but in the late 30's became much more aggressive and inimical.

Q: So you're saying that you actually had Christians who were playmates?

A: Oh, yes, because in the back of our house we could mingle with the Christian kids and we be . . . beyond their place was a large field where everybody send their animals to pasture.

01:07:36

In addition to all the establishments I mentioned, the synagogues of course, we had four, five synagogues and they were all divided by the occupation, the tailors synagogue, the cobblers synagogue and so forth, which probably was a social place of the same kind, and the youth that did not, was not impressed with the synagogues organized into Zionist movements, of which not the . . . all parents agreed because it meant that it was a preparation for leaving home and go to Palestine. But events caught up with us. In 1939, the Russians and the Germans made an agreement to divide the eastern parts of Europe¹ and the Russians moved

¹ August 23, 1939 Germany and the USSR sign non-aggression pact in Moscow, which granted control of Bessarabia to Russia. Charles Messenger, *Chronological Atlas of World War Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1989) 19.

up to the river Prut so that the border became half a mile or less from our village and because of doubts by the Rumanians, as to our nationalism, they asked the Jews to leave Ro . . . Bivolari and concentrate in larger cities and that's when we left Bivolari, with everything that we could take and moved to Iasi, 1939.

Q: You mentioned the Zionist group movements, were you personally involved?

A: Absolutely.

Q: And what did that involvement mean?

A: It meant just education and sports activities. Preparation for kibbutz life in Israel, and even that we had three or four different outlooks, religious wing and a socialist wing and a right wing and so forth, as Churchill would say, three Jews have four opinions. But it was nicely . . . treated.

01:10:23

Q: What motivated you to get involved?

A: Motivated? My brothers, my sisters were involved in the same organization and by various Hebrew names they belonged to, to more advanced groups, but basically it was educational in the Zionist, in general sense. We had to, all the ones, lecturers and subjects that we could not encounter in any schooling.

Q: Was your family religious?

A: Yes. We belonged to a synagogue behind our house, but instead of going out through the back Saturday all three, four -- three sons and the father would dress up and walk through the main street, about quarter of a mile instead of going right out from the back part of the house and walked to the synagogue.

Q: How much were you aware, before 1939, of Hitler and Nazism and what was going on . . .

A: Germany . . .

Q: . . . in Poland, Germany and Czechoslovakia?

A: Not really. Parents knew about it and that's when they softened up in their control of these Zionist organizations. Such that starting in 1932, one by not too many, one a year maybe, one person, one youngster would leave the village to go to Palestine, to join a kibbutz. And the whole village would walk him to the end of the other place where he would take off on a bus or a horse and buggy, to go to Iasi, from there to Constanta, and to there by boat to

Israel.

01:12:50

Q: Up until this point, were there any restrictions on Jewish people in Bivolari up until '39? In terms of school, or business or anything?

A: Not really. The Jewish community operated an abattoir, a slaughterhouse for kosher food, for kosher meat and poultry and for that and other services paid high taxes that supported the leadership of the village, and they depended on that so they had to support it, encourage it, all this activities that the Jewish community organized. Every family had his own Christian family friends or vice versa. A few Christians had one good Jew that they encouraged and they supported.

Q: So it sounds like you had a fairly nice, comfortable time until 19 . . .

A: '39, yes.

Q: So you packed up?

A: We packed up and, the big trucks, sat on top and we moved to Iasi. And in a few days we found an apartment on a corner street that, a five street corner, very central and my parents and the older brothers immediately went to, back to the same occupation as we left in Bivolari, and rented a store and started all over again, in the yard good trade. I would work in the store and also catch up on my schooling that I had to neglect before, and there was the Jewish, larger Jewish community, a larger school, with all grades up to the 12th grade and there they had special programs for such students that missed the regular grades and we were able to graduate two classes in one year. Fifth and sixth, and seventh and eighth, so that by 1944, '43, I finished high school.

01:16:21

Q: Okay now, I'm trying to get a sense of what it felt like to pick up and move and then maybe you can tell me a little bit about the Jewish community in Iasi and how you . . . again whether it was self-contained or whether it was part of a larger community, and just how it felt to pick up and leave.

A: Yes, oh Iasi, it was part of a large community and the Jewish community, the town approached 100,000. Here we come from a place with 900 people, from Bivolari. In many other small places, the Jewish moved to Iasi. Not by order, but that was the natural choice. That's where we always traveled to do things that were missing in Bivolari. Even to go to theater or to movies, we would drive or ride to Iasi. Antisemitism, in Iasi it was already open, and we arrived in '39, time went by, until June 21, 1941, when Hitler invaded Russia

and of course that was 50 miles from Iasi, where we used to live, in Bivolari, they crossed the Prut.² We were shaking at the sight of tanks and soldiers and this tense situation and sure enough, within a week, on June 29th, there was a big pogrom in Iasi. The authorities, the Rumanian authorities, issued an order that all Jews must come to the city place, city hall to obtain identification cards or exchange any that they might have had. My brothers went and my father and myself stayed home, he said, "No, we will wait until everybody else got their cards and then we'll go." And sure enough when the people arrived there for cards they were surrounded and enclosed in a large yard, an outdoor movie house all walled in by stone walls, and shooting started. My brothers were among the first to come so they were settled by the wall and they were able to jump the wall and start looking for shelter. They found it in a shed of wood, firewood piled all the way to the ceiling, but they were able to remove the top level, crawl in and replace the front so that whenever soldiers came by, they could see wood, firewood. Myself and father at home in this apartment lived about 30, 40 Jewish families. A large building with a large basement, but unfinished, just a cellar, and that cellar had five, six exits or entries, such that when they came to look for us in one entrance, mothers, female, women, were able to send them away that we already went to the city hall and send us to the other corner of the basement and vice versa, wherever they came from. They came to see that everybody went to get their ID cards and this way we ran through and could see what's going on outside, but we escaped.

01:21:23

Q: I have a couple questions, so they were only demanding that the men and boys?

A: Yes, go.

Q: And who was doing this action, was it Romania police only, was it Germans?

A: Both. The Rumanians were rounding up the people, the Germans were doing the killing, the shooting. They stopped shooting in the morning and about 11,000 people were still alive. They marched them to the train station and packed them into cattle cars and started traveling them from Iasi to Podu Iloaiei again and again, back and forth. And every now and then they would pour lime, which give off the fumes that killed of the 12,000 about half or three-quarters of them, died on the pogrom.³ My uncle was one of them. Some of our friends were in the trains. And the others came out completely disoriented, they didn't know where they were, what they were and it took some doing to find them. In the meantime it quieted down

² June 22, 1941. Hitler launches operation "Barbarossa." Messenger, *Atlas of World War Two*, 63.

³ Four thousand three hundred and thirty Jews who survived the shooting were loaded into the trains, and of those 2,650 perished. All told, roughly 10,000 Jews were killed in Iasi on that day. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v. "Iasi." (add year)

in a few days and my mother and sisters went to look for the brothers because we knew they weren't in the trains and they weren't in the . . . in that courtyard. So, when really things quieted down, five days later, our brothers sent somebody home to notify where they were and mother went and brought them home.

01:23:46

Q: And you and your father were basically hiding?

A: Yes.

Q: Throughout this?

A: Oh, of course. We had little windows where we could look out and see the round-ups. And my most vivid impression is that a block or two down the street, one of the streets was a famous temple and a rabbi and him I saw being dragged, beaten and killed. But then the Germans went on to Russia and we remained to reorganize. Now the Rumanians asked all the Jewish families to supply one person for volunteer hard labor. In my family, I was the volunteer. Why? Because in a round-up of such, they ask for a bookkeeper, anybody knows how to keep books. My brother raised his hand, but he meant to send me and so I worked as a volunteer on hard, or forced labor in a military hospital, formerly a Jewish hospital, but at this time they took it over. In the offices of course, the officer in charge of bookkeeping had difficulties staying sober or keeping books and so he found me, his savior. He could pick me out because at this point we had curfew at six, seven o'clock, in evening or early in the morning, so he would come and pick me up, keep me until late hours and take me home.

01:26:06

Q: Had you any bookkeeping experience?

A: When I mentioned that in, starting in Bivolari, that we had to prepare for exams to be taken in Iasi. And then in Iasi, the Romania system of high school you had a choice to pursue engineering or physical sciences or the other, literary and such. I was in that section of bookkeeping. Simple mathematics, except that the officer in charge had to cover up a lot of stealing and losses.

Q: Was there anything frightening about working there, this forced labor?

A: It was. But I wouldn't venture out of the office, because most of the wounded were both Romania soldiers and some German. As I mentioned at this point, Jewish kids were kicked out of school and the community had organized it's own schools. High school was down the street from us and looking back, I could just . . . the incongruity of it that under such circumstances, every Jewish child studied music. Kept, every day you could see them walk

down to school with their instruments. I studied the violin and it kept us indoors and we had no radio or television or any other entertainment. This was something other than book . . . books.

01:28:27

Q: What other restrictions were there at this point in the Jewish community?

A: Again, they conducted all the, most of the business, most of the commerce in the city. Again, the peasants that used to bring their produce to Bivolari would now come to Iasi. In fact, the peasantry multiplied because the border now was opened to Bessarabia, part of Russia, and they too would bring their goods and their . . . And many of them became merchants themselves, so they would come to us buy wholesale and take it back to the old Bivolari, that was now occupied, all the houses, by some of the peasantry.

01:29:36

Q: So the Jews were allowed to continue business?

A: Yes, except those that were forced to be taken to first labor. Or, you could even pay instead of going to the forced labor. So, both of my brothers were paying, my father was considered too old. I was young enough to go but as I said, I went to the hospital.

Q: Were there any other restrictions on the community in terms of what you could and couldn't do?

A: Well, we started earlier wearing the yellow star. We starting avoiding the Germans walking on the streets. We could not go to any entertainment unless one took off the star and acted and looked very much like a Rumanian, which we all did, and took chances. Not at night, but matinees of course, we all tried that. Some were punished, were caught and others just knew how to get through the maze.

01:31:13

Q: You mentioned that the people were, Jewish people were caught disobeying whatever decrees were enforced that they would be punished, what does that mean punished?

A: There was a curfew and people would take chances, take, remove their yellow star, identity card and venture out beyond, or after curfew. Those who did not succeed were caught and detained and the punishment was that they were detained for several days without parents or family knowing about them. No telephone, no announcement where they are and for that parents were strict and controlled the family from breaking the curfew.

Q: Now, you said people, what about you?

A: I did, many times, the same thing and I looked more Italian than Jewish or Romania and attended many plays, movies and nothing happened to me.

Q: You didn't consider it rather risky?

A: In the daytime not as much and at night we knew how to go through buildings or alleyways where we would not encounter anybody.

Q: Now, I've got to assume at this time, this point in time, you didn't have too much contact with the Christian community, is that true?

A: No, not at all, absolutely. Except as customers in the store and those were the peasants that came from outside and they knew us and we knew them.

Q: And they remained cordial?

A: Yes. They needed our instruction, our guidance, how to merchandise things, problems. Not too often that we needed to purchase and bring in large amounts of goods and those came from manufacturers that were formally Jewish owned, now they were turned over to non-Jews, ownership.

Q: But the business relationships?

A: Yes, were mutually beneficial, so to speak.

01:34:05

Q: The job that you had, the forced labor as a bookkeeper, sounds like that would be a fairly privileged position.

A: Yes, I paid, we paid for that, too and it was arranged that when they asked for a bookkeeper, our hand will be picked, yes.

Q: What advantage did you have that other forced laborers didn't?

A: Well, I stayed in the city even though I didn't venture out of the hospital. I was there, picked up in the morning and returned at night and one day I was home.

Q: And you were fed, you were safer?

A: Yes.

Q: And your brothers, what were they doing?

A: They were in the business, conducting the business I mentioned.

Q: During this time, did you continue to observe Jewish holidays, the Sabbath?

A: Oh yes, absolutely. Everything was transmuted from the original village through the larger community. Iasi had a population of 70,000 Jews, so originally the ones that came like us, in '39, '40, maybe added another 45-50,000, but there were already the, not ghettos, but communities where Jews lived and could not live any other place.⁴

Q: So all synagogues were opened, people were allowed to . . . ?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay, I'm just trying to get a sense of . . .

A: Absolutely, yes.

Q: Now I wanted to ask you how much you were aware of the war that was going on all around you, if you had any knowledge of the camps, what you knew.

A: Immediately we knew that in Bucharest there was a pogrom. We knew that in other cities, large ones, they removed the Jewish population. We knew about camps and in Poland and in Germany, Czechoslovakia. And optimistic parents would say, it will stop at the border, it will not come here. They will disappear or they'll be defeated before they get to us. So we lived from day to day and prayed and wished and survived.

01:37:35

Q: How did you get information? Through radio or . . . ?

A: Radio, yes. Everybody listened to a different station and some listened to BBC. Iasi was already better organized and the war itself was covered in the newspapers and the German army would drive through every day, every week, with more enforcement at night, we would hear them rumble by.

⁴ The Jewish population of Iasi in 1939 was 35,462 and grew to 51,000 in 1941. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Iasi."

Q: Was there any kind of underground movement going on, you had mentioned there had been strong youth Zionist organizations that sort of thing?

A: Yes, there was some preparations and organizations of what to do and how to do, but nothing of the sort of rebellion or armed resistance or anything of that sort.

Q: Do you remember any of what you were thinking at the time, or if you had any plans or you were just living day to day?

A: Living day to day, really. Like in the other countries, there were Jewish families protected or housed by former friends, Christian friends and many went to live with them, and, too . . . in our childhood we were all, we all had maids. Our maid we left her the house in the village and such connections were reestablished and were necessary, some families send their kids to stay with them.

Q: But you just?

A: We stayed together, yes.

01:40:03

Q: So how long did this sort of day to day living go on and end and things start changing for you?

A: Well, 1943 or '44, as the Russians moved westward and came closer and closer to Iasi, we were not forced, but advised that the front is right there and it could be very advantageous to leave the place.

Q: You were advised by whom?

A: By the community, by the Jewish organizations, that Iasi will become a place of fighting and we moved westward, southward to Bucharest.

Q: Now, I want you to tell me about Bucharest, but one question, did you or your family think that maybe you might be better off under Russian?

A: No, never. No, no, no.

Q: Okay. So how did you get to Bucharest?

A: Once again we packed up and moved to Bucharest. I really don't remember the exact date, but it was in '45, or '44, 1944, at the end.

Q: So what was life . . . where did you find a place to live, what was your life like in Bucharest?

A: Oh, this was after the war and the Russians came in already, '45 the war ended and the Russians invaded or occupied Romania.⁵

Q: Wait, I'm confused.

A: Oh.

Q: I'm confused because before you said you moved to . . .

A: To Bucharest.

Q: . . . to Bucharest to avoid war.

A: Avoid the actual frontier, actual battle, battle lines.

Q: So when you arrived it was, Bucharest was still under the . . .

A: Under the Rumanians, Germans, they were in retreat and it was a matter of weeks that the Russians outnumbered them or took over.

Q: So what was life like in those weeks?

A: Oh, those weeks were just hiding and waiting and expecting and being careful not to fall at the last minute. They were retreating, they were vicious and they were, both the Germans and the Rumanians, whenever they could, and on the roads especially, where people would move from Iasi to Bucharest, Jewish families were devastated and barely left alive. Large trucks of people would organized to move at the same time, so was safer.

Q: This is something you saw?

A: Yes, although. We packed, I was with a truck, but females were in a sedan, in a small car that traveled to bring them to Bucharest.

01:44:02

Q: You weren't bothered or . . . ?

⁵ As a result of the Potsdam Conference of July/August 1945, Romania came under the Russian sphere of influence. (Messenger, *Atlas of World War Two*, 235).

A: No.

Q: Did you know people in Bucharest?

A: Yes, we had family, and pulled up to them for a few days, until we found

Q: Was the atmosphere in Bucharest frightening, did you feel moderately safe, what was it like?

A: Oh, it was expecting that the end of it and going back to what it was and didn't take long for my parents to establish again a store in Bucharest and rent a very good house, and start all over again in the hope that things will really be settled this time.

Q: So under the Russians now . . .

A: Now we are under the Communists and the Russians and blessedly they cleaned out the main characters, all the Rumanian Nazis, all the soldiers that either deserted or did not go further with the Germans. The Rumanian army now was part of the German army and they retreated together.

Q: Do you remember the Russians coming in, what was going on, do you remember what that looked like, how you felt?

A: Yes, I remember it passing by and the Russians would ask you, what time is it and you'd . . . if they couldn't understand you, they asked to look and when they looked, they took it from you, the watch, and other things.

01:46:25

Q: What else? You were telling me a little bit about what it was like when the Russians came into Bucharest?

A: Yes, friendly as they were and looked as, looked as liberators. They were out to take what they needed and what they wanted and when they encountered us on the streets, they would ask what time it was, we all learned to recognize the Russian question, and then tear the watches off your hand, sometimes a ring off your finger and once again we learned to stay away from them, but the Rumanian Communists took over and they too started liquidating the upper class and demanding of the Jews various treasures. They allowed them to engage in commerce for the first year, few years. The period that I felt is not going to get better and because my family, my parents did not think so. They thought the Russians would leave and everything would be the way it was, in fact we will be better off than we are now in Bucharest, we learned to be merchants in Bucharest rather than Bivolari. So I decided to leave, and maybe that will make them come after me. And on December 24 of 1947, I left Bucharest, Romania, to go Israel, Palestine.

Q: Okay, before we get to that . . .

A: Before we go there . . .

Q: That's very interesting story, is there anything more you can tell me about what life was like in Bucharest under the new Communist government for Jews, did they basically give you the freedom you needed, was the Jewish community able to rebuild and practice?

01:49:11

A: Yes, the new Communist regimes, with all the former Communists incarcerated became when . . . became part of a government. They also invited and insisted that the various communities, ethnic communities be represented in that government. And so we had a famous red rabbi that we wanted him to be their representative, our representative and sure enough he guided and protected us, but he also suggested that we start leaving. There were 400,000 Jews in Romania⁶ still and large waves of aliyot⁷ started to move to Palestine at the time.

Q: Now it's not too much overt Antisemitism?

A: At this point? Not really. Every Rumanian tried to show how good and friendly he was and they now needed some validation from us to clear their names.

Q: So this period, from the end of the war until December 1947, you were working for your family or continuing your education?

A: Working for the family.

Q: Now, you decided to go to Palestine. Tell me a little bit about this, how this was organized and how you came to leave.

A: Oh, I would place it . . . or it came close to us in September, October that the large aliyah⁸ is being prepared all the way from Austria and Czechoslovakia people would, kept coming. We still had connections with these organizations that we belonged to and every organization was represented in this large aliyah. And every organization had a quota, or a number of

⁶ According to the World Jewish Congress survey published in 1947, there were 428,312 Jews in Romania after the Holocaust. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Rumania."

⁷ Immigrants to Israel (Hebrew).

⁸ Immigration of Jews to Israel (Hebrew).

people that they could send. And my brothers, older brothers were in the, closer to the leadership and so they were, my middle brother, he was able to place my name on the list of emigrants.

Q: Did they go also?

A: No.

Q: So . . . ?

A: My brother married in Romania, remained there for a long time. Really 10 years after I left, or more, 12 years.

01:52:41

Q: Now, who was organizing this, I know that all of these different groups were part of the process, but . . .

A: I came to recognize, or meet these organizers later on the boats or in the camps, because on the boats they turned out, they changed their clothes and became part of us, they were one of us. These were Israeli Haganah⁹, or organizers, with money from the Zionist organization. That they brought the boats, they paid for the transportation of many emigrants from the surrounding countries. Housed them in and Bucharest and the shipments or the . . . started in Bucharest or was organized in Bucharest.

Q: And how come you were the only one in your family that decided to go?

A: It really didn't, it was a combination of my willingness, insistence and their idea of maybe he's right.

Q: So alright, tell me little bit about this journey from Bucharest, how many people went, how you traveled, how long it took?

A: Very reminiscent of the German method, cattle cars were placed at our disposal. Not as dense, but standing, sitting on the floor. We, we boarded trains in Bucharest, towards a port in Bulgaria called Burgas. Bucharest is about 100 miles from the border with Bulgaria, the Danube river, we crossed that, and traversed Bulgaria southward, towards that port of Burgas. It was only 14, 15 hours of travel, with stops for necessities and drinks or sandwiches, they supplied. And we made it in 14, 15 hours, except for the little kids that had

⁹ The Haganah was a Jewish underground military organization associated with the Yishuv. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v. "Cyprus detention camps."

difficulties.

01:55:51

Q: What was the feeling like being on these trains, was there a good spirit?

A: No, for the elders thought it was very reminiscent of what we knew the Germans did, and we also knew that the British are spying and very unhappy with our movements. The British were still occupying Palestine and still in subservient to the Arab cause and for the youngsters it was the beginning of a struggle against anyone that would still oppress us and stop us and hold us back.

Q: There wasn't a sort of excitement?

A: Oh yes, among the youngsters yes, we were ready to, to do what we saw, we thought needs to be done to overcome oppression. This time from friendly nations.

Q: Is it, was it your sense that you have said that the government of Romania knew that all of this was going on, that it supported it?

A: Absolutely. They collaborated and the supplies of these ships, and oil, and food, they helped prepare these shipments or these movements of people and the trains, they put at our disposal. They claim that to hide the movement further from spies, they had to use cattle cars again and not because they don't have other means.

01:58:00

Q: How many people traveled with you?

A: Well it, ultimately in Burgas we boarded two ships and we were 16,000, maybe more.¹⁰

Q: And one other question, then I'm just going to let you tell me what happened from there, but did you travelling know, sort of the plans of this journey, exactly for where you were going and . . . ?

A: No, no, no, no. It was just leaving the burning site and away from it, and driven by this hope that this is the end of one period and we are going into freedom.

Q: Okay. So, what happened at Burgas?

¹⁰ Fifteen thousand people were aboard the ships. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "'illegal' immigration."

A: At Burgas they asked us to repack our belongings. Drop or leave things that you can do without. It occurs to me that last thing my mother gave me was a pillow, and they claimed that became this is just too voluminous and you just don't need it, we will provide you pillows and indeed, so we left that bag. But no matter what, I took my violin with me and a bag, rucksack, a bag on the shoulders and that's about all, so we carried the minimum and they placed us in two big boats that by now were prepared with shelves in the hulk, so that people were assigned to a cubicle where you couldn't sit or stand, but lie down only, with blankets and facilities upstairs, outside and you had a certain time when you could go upstairs for whatever needs.

02:00:38

Q: We need to change the tape, so.

A: Oh.

Tape #2

02:01:01

Q: You were talking about the boat.

A: Yes.

Q: What was the name of the boat, or where was it from?

A: These boats were purchased in Panama, they were on the Panamanian flag and they were two large freighters which were arranged or fixed up inside with shelves, into cubicles for either families or groups of four, three or four, where you couldn't sit or stand, but only lie down and we had to do that all day and only at night we were allowed to walk upstairs. During the day we could still go to services upstairs and they supplied meals and drinks and, other than the density and the crowdedness of it and the noise, everything went along fine.

Q: The name of the boat?

A: The boat was Pan York, the sister ship was Pan Crescent and later became part of the Israeli fleet.¹¹ We traveled at, we started out in the evening, we traveled all night. On the second day, the British fleet picked us up, spotted us, they could not stop us, so they let us travel until the Israeli waters, towards Haifa and only when we were about a mile from Haifa that they could close in and stop the ships. Having stopped the ships, they turned us around, they took over command. The crew and the leaders of, organizers of these ships mingled with the travelers, so they took over and turned around the ships and took us to Cyprus. They weren't sure where they're going to take us, but they decided to take us to Cyprus and in another day's travel, we arrived to the port of Famagusta in Cyprus.¹²

02:04:04

Q: Now, so you never had permits to go to Palestine?

A: Oh no. No, no, no.

Q: What did it . . .

¹¹ The names of the S.S. Pan York and the S.S. Pan Crescent were later changed to the Atzmaut and the Kibbutz Galuyot respectively. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "'illegal' immigrants."

¹² Between 1946 and 1948, approximately 51,500 Jews were intercepted by the British and detained on Cyprus. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Cyprus."

A: We just signed off in Romania's border that we leave and renounce our citizenship, I guess.

Q: What were you thinking or feeling when you got so close to Haifa and . . . ?

A: Oh, it was a dream come true, just like they described it and like we saw postcards and pictures of it, of the place. A beautiful panorama, a beautiful amphitheater of white houses and green trees and grass and we could see people moving and working or traveling buses, but it was just for a few minutes, few hours.

Q: How did your mood change?

A: The mood changed that again we started singing and looking at them for, for them to feel embarrassment what they're doing, but this was December 25, or 26 of 1947. The state was still no state, they were still in control of the country of Palestine. In Cyprus, they took my violin away and indicated that you will get it back when you leave, but that's another story, I never left through the gates. I don't remember how it came to pass, they divided us into summer camp and winter camp. Cyprus had camps where the British kept German prisoners, and I was placed in the winter camps, not in that port city of Famagusta. Sorry, I was in the summer camp, the winter camps were inland, Limassol -- 30, 40 miles away, in the capital, outside the capital I believe, Larnaca a greek city, inland. This Famagusta in Cyprus is on the northern part of Cyprus. It is across the Turkish border, about 20, 30 miles of water in between. Famagusta itself had six camps with barbed wire all around us and in between them and steps going up and across the barbed wire from one to the other.¹³ Later they provided openings in the fences so the Famagusta or summer camps, at some, some time had 25,000 people in these six camps.

02:08:35

Q: What were you thinking?

A: Oh, I stopped thinking, now we started action. Having left a burning Europe and having seen where we wanted to go, we started organizing and preparing for whatever is needed of us. We started with the help of Israeli shlichim¹⁴, we started preparing paramilitary organizations and training and studying Hebrew and engaging or preparing to engage in escape from the camps. The camps were serviced by the British, but they employed Greek, Greeks for cleaning the camps, providing provisions to the camp, so there was a daily

¹³ There were five camps near Famagusta and seven outside of Larnaca. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v. "Cyprus detention camps."

¹⁴ agents (Hebrew)

exchange of comings and goings, of bringing in materials and taking out waste products and that was enough for our organization. By now we were organized with representatives from Israel and we were called the Haganah, and with contacts with these Greeks that like us in Israel, were trying to get rid of the British control of the island. So in exchange of their help for our escapees, for every one of us, they received a gun that the Israelis brought from Israel. That's the curiosity of arms tradings, the Israelis would buy them from the British and give them to the Greeks, so they can fight the British. That's how armaments travel.

02:11:07

But we engaged in, first of all, observations of their movements. The camps were surrounded by two fences of barbed wire and in between, this concertina barbed wire rows. And we began to escape through the barbed wire. My specialty was to crawl into the concertina, so that when we split it, it doesn't start running away, because every 50 meters there were guards posted on towers. So this is where we started taking out youngsters of military age, every week, every night, eight to 10 people, bringing back the wires and tying up the fence back so that nothing can be suspected. As the youngsters left the fence, they would walk to a road where the Greeks would pick them up and take them to an orange grove, many orange groves around there, and house them for a time, when we had 40, 50 escapees collected together. At that point, Israeli fisherman would come, with permits to fish in Turkish waters and by pre-arrangement with lights and signs, we were able to board them and take them on little fishing boats, to Israel. Many times we were caught by the British and the punishment for that was to interrogate you, for which they always got the same response, that nobody organizes us, we just get together and decide to leave. The punishment was to transfer you to the other camps. We thought we would be strangers there, but there we were waited for and after a month or so we would do the same thing there, so that in punishment we would be returned. After several times and many funny exploits, it turned out that the safest place to escape was through their camps. They would be sleeping in tents the British and we would pass through there and get out of the camps. Right through the fence, just the fence that bordered to their encampment.

02:14:44

Q: You'd go through the British tents?

A: Yeah. Sometimes, that was one of my escapes, that we could not make the contact with the Greeks and the arrangement was that we find a grotto, a big hole in the ground and hide there. Except that one patrol, British patrol was playing soccer on their patrol and their ball wound up in our hole. When they came to a tree, they found 20 youngsters. And other escapades, we dug a tunnel. We lived in tents and a few, some British huts, metal huts, but they were for tables and for mess halls and half of them we filled with the soil that we dug out from the tunnels. And we took out about 1000 youngsters this way and one night I indicated that I'm not coming back and I tied up that fence from the outside and joined the 10

people that we left. After a few nights there, stayed locked up in these orange groves during the day and at night they let us out, roam around if we wanted. After a few nights they had 60 people and a boat, I remember it's name, Karish (ph), came, and we waded into the water and boarded the boat. All blankets, wrapped up in blankets, quietly moving on to Israel. But I had time to look at the watch and it was exactly a year since I came in, so I couldn't, since I came into Cyprus. Cyprus was again very well organized with all the professions and all the stores and all the organizations and medical treatments and infirmaries in every camp and very well . . . even a theater we had there.

02:18:24

Q: The living conditions weren't too bad?

A: Tents and quonset huts for mess halls. As part of that Haganah, and as people left, at some point I became the camp director or commander and the most difficult task was to keep the Bulgarian Jews from the Rumanian Jews, and everyone wanted to be in the kitchen to cook their kind of foods, so we had committees and rotations so everybody tasted the other persons food. The British were still in Palestine when we came and we couldn't come into port, so we tried various places until they found one spot in Netanya, which we climbed a hill and landed on our faces to kiss the ground.

02:19:53

Q: Must have been quite a feeling.

A: Beautiful. Buses were waiting for us and we were transported to military recruiting camps.

Q: I want to stop you here, because I really don't want to interrupt the story, but I have a few questions about Cyprus, because you were there close to a year.

A: Exactly a year.

Q: It sounds like you were very busy, so . . . ?

A: Yes.

Q: The idea of being detained in Cyprus probably wasn't burdensome for you maybe as for . . . ?

A: No, because I was so busy days and nights and I knew it cannot last forever and I knew that I could have done what I did at the end, have done it earlier, but I stayed as ordered, as commanded.

Q: Were there organizations other than the Haganah and the British who were involved in camp

life, in the administration of these camps?

A: Hmm-mm. (indicates yes) There were opposing organizations and there were fierce battles among.

Q: Who?

A: Oh, we had the LECHI¹⁵ and the Irgun¹⁶ and the right wingers and we were mostly of the government policy the middle road.

Q: What about international relief organizations?

A: They were all the medical establishments were funded and supported, maintained by the HIAS, HIAS Organization.¹⁷

Q: You had pretty much what you needed there though, in terms of food and everything?

A: Oh, yes.

02:22:29

Q: And you said there was an active cultural life, with classes?

A: Right, yes. There was a place where you could go and find your clothes, American clothes. Food was abundant. Our place was on the sea, so that three times a week, the British would open gates and let us go into the water. Not so in the other camps. As I said, we had an orchestra, 60, 70 players, we had a theater. Houses of prayer, whoever wanted.

Q: Were there displaced people there from areas other than Romania terri . . . ?

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of condition were they in?

A: Much more depressed, much more defensive, much more scared, the older people. They ...

¹⁵ Lochamei Cherut Israel or Stern Group, armed underground organization founded by Avraham Stern in 1940. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Lohamei Herut Israel."

¹⁶ Irgun Zvai Leumi (National Military Organization), militant anti-British minority faction, 1944-1948. Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: B'richah* (New York: Random House, 1970).

¹⁷ United Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society.

in fact, they would not want us, it was like the draft, more or less every youngster had to come to us to be trained physically and many of them opposed it, because they were afraid. Even though we had no armament, we had wooden guns and make believe battle gear. But it was preparing for what came next. We didn't know that the Arabs will invade, but we were preparing for it and the contact with Israel was already on a daily basis, we had every day news of what's going on and when it's going on. This was December '47 to December '48 and in May the state was declared and the British were supposed to leave.¹⁸

02:25:11

Q: So you had contact through some sort of radio or?

A: Not really. The Israeli teachers that came as teachers, they lived in the city and they had the radios and their contacts.

Q: A lot of the other detainees, were many of them out of the camps?

A: Yes, some of them, yes, not too many.

Q: Was that kind of shocking, I mean, you hadn't had that experience.

A: No. They were known to have come from, just this, from Poland, from Czechoslovakia, from Hungary. They came to Bucharest to board the boats that took us there, these people came from other places, other routes. In fact, when we came there, we found a large number of people that came with other boats, one of them the Exodus boat. Famous U.S. novel of "Exodus."

Q: Did they talk to you about what they had been through?

A: We listened to them talk about themselves and how, she killed a German that was trying to rape her, this one beat that and so. Some two brothers lived in the forest by themselves for many months. We knew who they were, but there was no attempt to interrogate, squeeze them out. They slowly approached us and joined our intentions or our preparations.

Q: What about the German prisoners of war you said were on this island, did you see them?

A: No, they were taken out before we came, in '45, '46.

Q: In terms of the camp administration, we know that technically they were under British

¹⁸ May 14, 1948 -- Israeli declaration of independence. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "independence day, Israel."

governments, but were there camp committees run by the Jews?

A: Absolutely, sure, yes, yes, yes. We had so many lawyers and doctors and pharmacists and artists, that turned back to paint, sculpt. It was nostalgic to leave the place, it was really. Even though we were incarcerated, we were free to do what we needed to do.

02:28:39

Q: I think one other question I have about Cyprus is, you were helping all these basically young people get out who were being trained for future work in Palestine or in Israel. Were girls among those people who got out, or was it mostly just boys?

A: Boys. Even though girls were training by their own volition and, but the coming out, that in danger, engendered risks and again the British would subject us to interrogations, how and where and when, and some of them were not so peaceful. That's where I realized or I learned to laugh and sing, that when, after an interrogation I started singing and the interrogator couldn't believe, "You bloody Jew, you love life. You must be full of it, full of life." So, he was very nice to me.

Q: What did you sing?

A: "Am Israel Chai."

Q: Did you make close friends at that time, who worked with you?

A: In the camps, yes.

Q: Anything else that you want to say about Cyprus or that experience?

A: It's a beautiful island, we roamed around it, as I said, but once we got lost or we didn't make contact and we had to find our way or wait over one night, oh, one day and at night go back to the point of contact and be picked up but instead the British picked us up, British patrols. So I learned that the Angora cat originates in Cyprus and you could see them all over and they have orange groves and all the fruits that we lived on.

02:31:36

Q: So you arrived in Netanya?

A: Netanya and there buses took us to Beit Lid. It's right across Netanya about 10 miles eastward and there we were dressed in military outfits and became soldiers in the Israeli army. But first job was again because I was enlisted as one of the camp commanders, a command in the recruiting camp, introduce newcomers with various language problems.

Q: You spoke good Hebrew at this point?

A: I spoke Hebrew, I spoke Rumanian, French, Yiddish and I had to learn Spanish quickly, because we had many Spanish-speaking. But a lot of Moroccan and North African immigrants that spoke French and Hebrew.

Q: So what was life like in, this was actually now Israel?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: What was life like there?

A: I spent three months in this recruiting camp and then they had to assign us to units and I already wanted to study medicine, so they assign me to the military hospital. And Tel ha Shomer, and there I served for 2, 24, 30 month, and left first to the University in Jerusalem. They had no medical school, but you could start with biological sciences or other sciences and in the meantime I started inquiring about coming out here.

Q: To study?

A: Coming to study.

Q: It must have been a fairly exciting time to be in Israel, right after it became a state.

A: Oh yes, absolutely.

02:34:29

Q: I'm just trying to get a sense of what that was like.

A: Well, where I landed and where I was, I had a taste of the negative part because I had young kids hands and without legs and every time they wanted to get better so they can go back to the front and fight again. And, oh, that was a joyous and a sad condition that I stayed on. Some of my dearest friends are still those that I made there. Some of them very prominent conditions now, positions.

Q: What do you think, after having grown up in Europe, went through the greatest difficulties or challenges in living in Israel or just the biggest adjustments you had to make?

A: Well for 30 months I had the best of everything; food, clothing and anything we needed for 10, 11 hours of work in the hospital. I was supposed to make rounds two month in every specialty, every ward, but I started at the orthopedics and the paraplegics and I stayed there

for 30 months. I couldn't leave that. I didn't want anything else. In the meantime the family came. Nineteen forty nine my sisters came and '51 my parents came, only one more brother who then stayed there until 1959, in Romania. I left Israel in 1952, November, when my sister had a daughter and I came to say good-bye to her and she asked me, when are we going to see you, and I said, I will come to your daughter's wedding. And I did. Many times I was there, but I came to the wedding too, and there I met my wife. It was in 1970, and have been happily married since, to another Rumanian girl, Malva. She's a physician and works for the Veterans Administration here and we have two sons, Ethan and Sofer, or Steven, and they are both at the University of Maryland.

02:37:56

Q: And your specialty?

A: My specialty, I have been working for the Food and Drug Administration for the last 30 years with a specialty in botulism, a very poisonous bacteria when found in food and that's my specialty. The Food and Drug Administration has drugs and foods, I am in the food section, protecting the American consumers from any problems that might arise.

Q: When you came to the United States in 1952, was life difficult for you at all, what were your first impressions, was there any culture shock?

A: Culture shock is correct, because language was difficult and in my first year I had professors who allowed me, maybe to show off their ability to do so, to take exams in French. And classes that I took in history, government, they wanted to test I . . . maybe they didn't know what I wrote there, but I . . . first year was difficult. But then my advisor, who was a student of Weitzman's (ph), took me under her wing. And in another class, in history, my professor asked me to stay after class and he was amazed with, fascinated with my name. Because Washington had a friend by this name, Haym Salomon and when things got bad and troops deserted because they had no blankets and no shoes, Haym Salomon in Philadelphia went out to the Jewish community and collected \$600,000 and bought blankets and shoes for Washington. I didn't know that, but this history professor kept me really in his palm. He couldn't believe that I would bring back to him all the situ . . . conditions of the Washington struggles in Washington armies.

02:40:40

Q: What school were you at?

A: I landed in Detroit and attended the Wayne State University.

Q: Now did you . . . was all this organized before you came over here, did your family?

A: Oh yes, I had a brother here already in Detroit, Henry.

Q: So that made the transition a little easier?

A: Easier, much easier. Although if I had the money I, if I could muster the money I would have gone back. It's just that I didn't have enough money to go back. I mean the period of adjustment was such that, overwhelming, could never do it, could never make it, so would be better to go back.

Q: Why was it so overwhelming?

A: Number one, to live on their back, was a question of they were, my brother was already married, he had two children and here I came in to a . . . not such abundance or prosperous situation.

Q: Was the lifestyle different here?

A: Not the lifestyle, just the financial difficulties of staying here. As a student I was not allowed to work, so I was a burden to them for a year or so.

Q: Were you . . . did you ever feel conflicted about leaving Israel after struggling so much to get there?

A: No, no, no, no, because in the hospital they all recommended me, all the big doctors, they recommended me because they saw in me a good doctor.

02:42:47

Q: You never thought about moving back?

A: No. I do more here than I would have done there.

Q: When you sort of look back at this earlier period in your life, 50 years ago. . .

A: Yes?

Q: Do you think that you had certain qualities that kind of gave you the courage and the strength to get through bad times?

A: I think so. And it's with me even today. I could spot danger and avoid it. I could take the last chance, complete avoidances going backwards so you measure the danger, you measure the difficulty, and chance and dare to overcome it, and you never stop growing or facing unknown situations that need solutions and such.

Q: Was there something in your upbringing, in your family life that gave you this?

A: Maybe being the youngest is enough to overcome everybody's indulgence, everybody had pity on me, everybody did things for me and it makes you feel helpless, and it's nice when you are six years old, but when you're a grown up you want to prove your own worth.

Q: How important was religion to you throughout all this?

A: Tradition, not so much as religion. As a youngster you have no time or . . . for religion, although before and after Israel I became a scholar of archaeology and Bible and all the aspects of religion. For 12 years in Detroit I taught Hebrew. And as such, I became a certified Hebrew teacher, but I needed some scientific outlet for healing the world, for healing people through biology, microbiology or medicine, or other ways.

02:46:11

Q: That's really, that's quite a statement, that you needed some way to heal people.

A: Absolutely. I saw People hurt and no one could help them. And mostly what I did in that camp where we received all the outsiders, the various origin people that needed direction and instruction, et cetera, somehow part of it.

Q: Are there other aspects to your life today, and the way you live it that you feel are a result of these early experiences and disruptions?

A: Well, I lost 10 years of my life and so, during that period, so I'd tried to compensate somehow. I need to extend life, my own, by exercise, by mental exercise. But in the meantime, and in Washington, as well as Detroit, I became totally immersed and engaged in organizations, like I was on the executive board of the Jewish National Fund, Zionist Organization of America, the Jewish Community Council. I was the first chairman of the Jewish Community Centers Coffeehouse and a co-founder of the Washington Committee for Soviet Jewry. We learned to experience that it doesn't need an army of people to move projects and to move causes, but just a few good men, a few determined people and wherever there was a fire we ran to put it out.

02:48:48

Q: Are there are certain images, when you look back that will always be with you, that still haunt you?

A: In Iasi, that scene of the Stefanesti, the rabbi from the temple called Stefanesti, frail and scared, beaten to death. Or in Cyprus, various scenes when we crawled into the boat that

took us away to Israel. And traveling throughout the land in Israel, getting to know every tree and every stone and studying the places. And when you get married and then start a family, your thoughts turn to the future and so we raised two boys. There is a reference in the bible to the generation of the desert, those Israelites that left Egypt and were not supposed to get into the promised land, and supposed to die in the desert and so we thought, I thought that I'm part of the generation of the desert, but I did come back and I'm alive and fulfilled reserved and happy.

02:51:06

Q: Thank you for sharing.