

Mayer Relles: Oral History Transcript

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Name: Mayer Relles (1908 – 1995)

Birth Place: Skalat, Poland

Arrived in Wisconsin: 1951, Superior

Project Name: Oral Histories: Wisconsin Survivors of the Holocaust



Mayer Relles

Biography: Mayer Relles was born in Skalat, Poland, on June 2, 1908, to a family that was beginning to shed some of the constraints of Orthodox Judaism. As a promising young Talmudic scholar, Mayer traveled to other countries when quotas were imposed upon Jews in Polish schools. He was ordained in 1932.

Mayer enrolled for advanced studies at the rabbinical seminary in Rome in 1933 and moved to Venice to accept a rabbinical appointment in 1936. After the Fascist Italian government entered the war, he was arrested in June 1940, briefly interned in a concentration camp, and released a few months later. For the next three years, he worked in the Jewish community in Venice and pursued his studies in the neighboring city of Padua. In addition to his rabbinical studies, he received a Ph.D. in Italian Literature and Philosophy in 1941.



After the Germans occupied Italy in September 1943, Rabbi Relles went into hiding. He tried escaping into neutral Switzerland, but was arrested near the border. He was incarcerated in the city of Como, Italy, until the Italian Underground helped him escape to Milan. Mayer spent several months there before successfully escaping into Switzerland in April 1944.

Rabbi Relles lived in Switzerland until September 1945, when he returned to Venice. From 1946 to 1951, he served Jewish communities in the Italian cities of Ancona and Trieste and completed his advanced rabbinical studies in Padua.

The rabbi and his wife moved to the U.S. in 1951. Rabbi Relles held teaching positions and rabbinical posts in the Chicago area and in Superior, Wisconsin. From 1971 to 1976, he returned to Italy to serve as chief rabbi of Trieste. He later served as the spiritual leader at Anshe Poale Zedek synagogue in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

Rabbi Relles wrote a long manuscript account of his experiences in Italy during World War II and his escape to Switzerland in April 1944. It is available in the Wisconsin Historical Society library. Rabbi Mayer Relles died in 1995.

Audio Summary: Below are the highlights of each tape. It is not a complete list of all topics discussed.

Tape 1, Side 1

- Family and childhood in Skalat, Poland

Tape 1, Side 2

- Family's religious life in Skalat
- Description and history of Skalat

Tape 2, Side 1

- Teenage years
- Religious practices in Poland in the 1920s

Tape 2, Side 2

- Leaving home to study in Lemberg (or Lviv, Ukraine), 1926–1927

Tape 3, Side 1

- Student life at different schools in Lemberg

Tape 3, Side 2

- Difficulties in school
- Service in the Polish army, 1932

Tape 4, Side 1

- Anti-Semitism in the Polish army
- Accepted to rabbinical college in Rome, 1933
- Moving to Italy

Tape 4, Side 2

- Rabbinical studies in Rome, 1933-1936
- Life in Rome under Italian Fascism

Tape 5, Side 1

- Rome's Jewish community in the 1930s
- Accepts appointment in Venice, 1937

Tape 5, Side 2

- Jewish community in Venice in the 1930s
- Italy's lack of anti-Semitic laws before the late 1930s

Tape 6, Side 1

- Life in Venice, 1937-1943
- Outbreak of war and persecution of Jews
- Awareness of concentration camps
- Escaping arrest, 1943

Tape 6, Side 2

- Moving to Padua, 1940
- Arrest and internment at Campagna, 1940

Tape 7, Side 1

- Transferred to concentration camp at Ferramonti , 1940
- Comparing German and Italian camps

Tape 7, Side 2

- Conditions at Ferramonti are comparatively benign
- Continuing studies and teaching while imprisoned

Tape 8, Side 1

- Release from Ferramonti , December 1940
- Student life at Padua, 1940-1943

Tape 8, Side 2

- Community work in Venice, 1940–1943
- Kindness of Italians toward persecuted Jews
- Invasion of the Germans, September 1943

Tape 9, Side 1

- Going underground, autumn 1943
- Arrested while trying to leave Italy
- Imprisoned at Swiss border

Tape 9, Side 2

- Camerlate prison, 1943–1944

Tape 10, Side 1

- Escape from Camerlate prison
- Meeting Italian Underground in Milan
- Hiding in Milan psychiatric hospital

Tape 10, Side 2

- Life in Milan psychiatric hospital
- Escape to Switzerland, April 1944

About the Interview Process:

The interview was conducted by archivist Jean Loeb Lettovsky on October 12, 13, and 25, 1980. The three sessions totaled 10 hours. They cover Rabbi Relles' early life and wartime experiences up to his 1944 escape into Switzerland. He did not discuss his postwar life, immigration to the U.S., or the Jewish communities he served in Chicago, Superior, or Manitowoc.

Audio and Transcript Details:

Interview Dates

- Oct 12, 1980; Oct 13, 1980; Oct 25, 1980

Interview Location

- Relles home, Madison, Wisconsin

Interviewer

- Archivist Jean Loeb Lettovsky

Original Sound Recording Format

- 10 qty. 60-minute audio cassette tapes

Length of Interviews

- 3 interviews, total approximately 10 hours

Transcript Length

- 181 pages

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Transcript

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Key

JL Jean Loeb Lettovsky, Wisconsin Historical Society archivist
MR Mayer Relles, Holocaust survivor

TAPE 1, SIDE 1

JL: Let's start with your family background. Could you tell me your date and place of birth, the names of your parents and grandparents and their dates and if possible, their dates and places of birth?

MR: Well, I was born June 2, 1908. My father, Nachman Relles he was-. I don't remember exactly the date of his birth, but I know he was from Jagielnica in Galicia, not far from Chortkov, if you heard about the Chortkov *Rebbe*. A very small town. My mother was born in Russia, Leah Herscher, H-E-R-S-C-H-E-R, Herscher. My father was a carpenter by trade. In our town and in all the neighboring town, to my knowledge, an artisan like such as carpenter, shoemaker, tailor, smith, and so on, this was the lowest profession. It was like, for example, in our town, a man, if he stole, if he was a crook, a swindler, everything was apparent. He could marry his children if they were nice. He count and have a nice *aliyah*¹ in the synagogue. And he was, He could have been somebody, especially if he had money. My father as a carpenter, was the lowest like all the other, the shoemakers and tailor and so on. A smuggler was good.

JL: What was the reason?

MR: This is the *bal melokhe*.² You know what the *bal melokhe* is? *Bal melokhe*. This was the worst thing. And I remember years later when he put his trade away and he became a builder, but he was never forgiven for having been a carpenter. He had wonderful girls, pretty ones, learned, nice, but he had very few

¹ Hebrew for being called before the congregation for a Torah reading.

² Yiddish for 'artisan'.

chances to- yes, they could have married from the lower — how do they call it in India? The caste. We practically had castes. This was, of course, a doctor was the highest; a rabbi was good; a *melamed*³ was still good; a businessman was very good. Our businesspeople it — there is too much to talk about, the business in our town. Everything was okay. But my father, when he came to the synagogue, it was "Nachman *Stolyer*,"⁴ and they never would say "Nachman Relles." And my father was- it sickened him because he was a man, he had his ambition. He would have liked to be called "Nachman Relles." No, they would always say "Nachman *Stolyer*." And I grew up under these conditions.

JL: Let me just go back a moment to my first question, and tell me the place of your birth?

MR: I was born in Skalat, it is close to the Russian border, five minutes. We would say, I would say three hundred meters from the Russian border. This was Austria when I was born. In 1920, it became Poland. In 1939 Russia occupied it until Lemberg⁵ and it became Russia. And now it is, it remains Russia. We lived, in 1914, when the war broke out, because we were close to the border, because it was a place where there could have been a fight, which means trenches and there was a river, and because the Russians they always suspected Jews, virtually, I mean, rightly suspected that the Jews were Austrian patriots, they considered us as spies, as betrayers. So they sent us away from town giving us twenty-four hours to leave town. I was six years old at that time. After a week they let us go back. We came back. After two weeks they again they sent us away. And so we were driven back and forth. The Russians, they would rob, they would steal, they would beat, they would catch people for- to go to dig trenches. My father was not bothered too much. And during the war my parents were bakers. They had an oven and they baked mostly for soldiers. So we did not starve, we had everything. Of course we would, my parents were always afraid of robbing and stealing and, but never happened. From as far as I am concerned, I still remember I was six years when the war started and after seven, eight, nine, we were under Russia.

³ Yiddish for a teacher in a Jewish religious school for children.

⁴ Yiddish for "Nachman the carpenter."

⁵ Yiddish and German name for 'Lvov'.

Whenever there was robbing or beating, anything which meant trouble, for me it was a holiday because the first thing I would be taken home and didn't have to go to *cheder*.⁶ This was the greatest thing I still remember. In my heart, it was like a Passover.

JL: Let me ask you about something else that you might remember. Tell me about your grandparents. Can you tell me a bit about-

MR: I know that thing, my father's father was a great Talmudist in Jagielnica.

JL: What was his name?

MR: Litman. He came from Podhajce. In other words, there is, I would say the origin of the Relleses are in Podhajce in Galicia. And he had five boys and two daughters. He was a great, great Talmudist. In fact, years after he died they still would talk about him, not only in Jagielnica but all around. But he was against he was a *misnaged*.⁷ Which means he did not believe that the rabbis, those miraculous rabbis, that they were, they talked with angels, that they could give blessings and so on. To him, he said, "A rabbi is a human being like anybody else." And in our towns, in Jagielnica, or Borszczow or Skalat or Jezierzany or [inaudible] in those times one had to be a *Hasid*.⁸ He had to be a disciple. He had to be a rabbi. Didn't matter whether he was a- he would go to the Chortkov *Rebbe* or to the Vizhnitzer or [sounds like: Satmarer] or Stanislaver⁹ — he had to be a *Hasid*. If not, he was like ostracized, isolated. He was very much persecuted by the people of his town. After he died they made him a beautiful monument and I saw it Jagielnica. It was like a nice building. But after, he died. He had five, as I said, five boys. They all left for America. My father was the only one, since he was a very good carpenter. When immigration started in 1908, this is what I was told, people used to go to America, stay in America three years, leave the wife and the children so a little they starved, they suffered, and after he will take them to America.

⁶ Yiddish for a Jewish religious school for children.

⁷ Hebrew for opponent of the Hasidim.

⁸ Yiddish for Hasidic Jew.

⁹ Rabbi Relles is referring to various important lineages of Hasidic rebbes, or religious leaders, each of which derives its name from the place where the lineage was founded.

But my father, in spite of the recession or depression which was there terrible in Galicia, he had always work, and he would not leave the family.

JL: What was your father's mother's name? Litman's wife?

MR: Risa.

JL: Do you remember her maiden name?

MR: No, no. Risa is a first name.

JL: Yeah, I'm sure-

MR: Yeah, Risa is a first name, yeah.

JL: And they're all from the same part?

MR: Jagielnica. I know very little well, about them because I was the last child my mother had and so she was already — my father was about fifty years old, about fifty years old, he's forty-seven years. So his parents- I never remember my grandparents.

JL: Okay, so I assume you don't know too much about your mother's parents either?

MR: No. Yeah, I knew about my mother's parents. My mother had twelve-eleven sisters and one brother. My grandfather he would take, he would hire, or I don't know how you say it, a mill from the landlord of the area. All the fields belonged to a landlord, and he would have that mill, he would work hard, the family would work hard, and he would marry a daughter and gave *kest*.¹⁰ You know what *kest* is, or *kost*. And so they all married. But my mother was the youngest one. Most of them this was, as you know, they would marry and they were promised *kest* two years, three years.

JL: In the house?

MR: In the house. The husband or the son-in-law, his job would be to learn, to study, to pray the Lord, and once in a while to work, to learn the job and so on and so on. Unfortunately, most of these sons-in-law they, whether they learned I don't know, but they used to eat and they ate up everything. And when my

¹⁰ Yiddish for room and board, here referring to the custom of a bride's parents providing a new son-in-law with his keep to enable him to continue his studies.

grandfather became old he became a pauper. But he was in good- in the young years he was in very good conditions because he not only had the mill. Close to the mill, he had geese, for example. The geese, he would have fifty geese or hundred geese. They didn't cost him anything because the people brought seeds and those seeds would pour out, spill, and the geese had to eat. He would also have linen because it was close to a water. The mill was on water. It was like a turbine. And he was not a rich man but he was in very good conditions. In one year he married three daughters, and but after he became very poor and he said, "Well, I am from Russia." He went to Russia back. He said he would go to hire himself to *daven* for the High Holidays to make a little money. And there he came and he was, while he was eating a bone in his throat and there he died and that was that. My mother remained with her mother. And my mother was a seamstress. She didn't know about the machine. Maybe they had already the Singer. She would do everything with her hands and she would tell us she had a little lamp and she would work and work and work until 12 o'clock in the night. She would maintain herself and her mother. She met her [my] father — what does mean, "she met?" She met him because she had a sister in Jagielnica where my father was born. My father worked in Skalat. So my father went home to his parents and she went to her sister to Jagielnica so there was a driver with a horse I remember— I still remember those drivers with those horses — and from Skalat to Jagielnica we're about thirty miles. They had to travel maybe a day. And Mother used to tell us this story. My father too. He fell in love with her but he did not dare to talk to her. He sent the *shadchen*¹¹ and my mother, I don't know, she was a *yosem*, which means an orphan, and she said, "What shall I wait? A girl is like a vegetable, like a flower. If you don't use it in time, it faded away." So she agreed to marry him and they always used to tell us the story that during their engagement she would sit in the back, my father close to the driver, and all the day they traveled and traveled and they would not mention a word one to another.

This was true in those times. A man was not allowed to see his bride or to talk to her until he married.

They were conditions that sometime the bride did not meet the groom; they didn't see each other until

¹¹ Hebrew for a marriage broker.

they went under the canopy. The fact is that after they married, after the *chuppah*,¹² her sisters, her sisters came and the brother, her brother, and they said, "Well, what did our sister do? Marry a *stolyer*, a carpenter! It's a terrible thing. It's a stain for the family." And when they had to give the [sounds like: *tehusa*] *geshenk* which means the presents, they give just small things and what should the other people have done when a brother gave for example a ruble, which meant a half a dollar, so they give even less. The fact is that my mother was very much, how say, hurt. She felt hurt because she liked my father and they went away and they grumbled and they were very unhappy. My father, the next day after the marriage my father said to my mother, "Well, we have fifty *rheinische*." It was something like, I don't know, \$25.00. That's all he had. Why? Because he didn't want to be a soldier. He had to go to the draft so he paid the doctor, so he paid everything he had. Otherwise, he would, He was a carpenter, he made money.

JL: The doctor to declare him not fit-?

MR: To declare him unfit. And so he said to mother, "Well, we have fifty *rheinische*. We have debts?" She said, "Yes, I have debts." So he said, "Okay, we pay the debts." And, they remained with five *rheinische* or something like two and half dollars, enough to buy tools. And he began to work. And he was a very hard worker. He would get up at four o'clock in the morning and work until twelve o'clock. Well, his is the way he used to tell us and Mom too. And they were not liars. At twelve o'clock he would begin to *daven*, *daven* in five minutes, take a piece of bread with an onion and eat and work until four o'clock in the afternoon. After four o'clock they ate a lunch. And after he worked until ten o'clock. In other words, he worked very hard and made money. But as soon as he built the house — not a big house but it was probably a shack — it burnt up. We, our houses in our town, burned up very fast. Especially from the moment their insurance came because people, to collect insurance they would do it. The best time was after Passover, the roofs were all made of lumber and the entire town would burn up in two, three hours. Especially when there was a wind. How they did it, they knew how to do it.

¹² Hebrew for the canopy under which the marriage ceremony is held.

JL: Did the insurance pay it?

MR: The insurance paid and there was also, I remember, instead of a calendar they would talk about the time — for example, "Mrs. So-and-so died after the third fire." This it served like a calendar. Every year. And my father was burnt up. He did not ever, he paid the insurance but the man did not send away the money so he was burnt up; he didn't get a penny. And this is, my father was a very, very unlucky man. I must say he was a wonderful man, a good hard worker. I remember people would come for advice to him. He was very generous. He liked to help but he was very, very unhappy. Nevertheless, we never knew poverty. We always had bread and butter and sometime a piece of jam.

JL: Let me ask you one more thing about your maternal grandparents, What were their names? Your mother's parents?

MR: His name was Mayer. I have, I am after his, I carry his name. My name is Mayer. Her name, was Sarah.

JL: What was the last name?

MR: Herscher.

JL: Herscher you said.

MR: Yeah and that, what of, that's all.

JL: Do you remember their places and dates of birth?

MR: No. Would you like to shut up [the tape recorder]? I want to something which I do not want it here. [tape recorder stops, restarts] I would like to prepare you.

Of course you probably saw at this time, I am a cynic. But I believe I have a right being it and besides, one is what he is. How can I change my nature? I am a cynic and you'll have to live it while interviewing me.

JL: You're an individual.

MR: That's right.

JL: Just would like to ask you, you are apparently a very good storyteller.

MR: No.

JL: I'd like to ask you if—do you have any recollections, special recollections about the relationship between you and your parents?

MR: Well this, like any other child, which means there was Oedipus complex. Of course, my mother, she was my fortress, my rock, my savior. Whenever I had trouble I would go to her. She was a very, very intelligent, very good sense and she was without having read Carnegie¹³ or other educators. She knew all to inspire me, to say "But, Sonny, you are doing well. You can do it. You just have to try." And so on and so on. My sisters, I had three sisters. One married when I was four years and she went to Vienna in 1918. She died leaving two daughters. Ones in—they are both in California now. So I grew up with two sisters. One was eight years older than I and one was two years older than I. The older one was very authoritative and she wanted to run my life, but I always respected her. The younger one was very much in love with me. She loved me so much and I was very [inaudible] to her. That this I can remember. My father, he wanted me to be like his father was, a great Talmud-*khokhem*.¹⁴ A *lerner*.¹⁵ Something special. So he would always humiliate me, he would say I'm good for nothing and so on and so on and so on. Especially on Saturday morning. All week he used to be busy. Saturday morning, before getting up, before going to *shul*¹⁶ he would tell me this, I have to do this, I have to do this, and so on. I loved my mother. I did not like my father. This I can say. And well, I like to call a spade a spade.

JL: I appreciate that. Could you just, little formal question, the names and dates and places of birth of your sisters?

MR: They all, they were all born in Skalat. The oldest one- well we were nine children, but as usual as this used to be a child would be born, after a couple months or a couple years, it would be either meningitis or croup or laryngitis or anything, it would die and the parents would sit *shiva* and after there would be born another, Next year there would be born another child. In other words, from nine we remained four.

¹³ Dale Carnegie, writer of self-help books.

¹⁴ Yiddish for a man who is learned in religious matters.

¹⁵ Yiddish for 'a Talmudic student'.

¹⁶ Yiddish for 'synagogue'.

One married in 1913, if I'm not mistaken. Of course, I cannot remember.

JL: Who?

MR: Her name was Dora, Doyre. She was very beautiful. This is what the people in Skalat would say. She was intelligent, she was a, how do you call it? People who can store? Accountant. And those time they would say it in German, *doppelte buchhaltung*, which meant double accountants. And of course she had no chance. She had very many suitors in Skalat. All the boys were in love with her. This is what the other people told me, not my parents. But her father was a carpenter. And in those times parents had very much to tell the boys whom they should marry or not. Well fortunately for her, her auntie came from Vienna to her parents and she found a boy for her. He was from Ternopol, a small village close to Ternopol. He was a tailor — not a tailor, he would not do — he was a *shnayder*, which means—

JL: Cutter?

MR: Cutter. He was a cutter. And she married him. And I still remember through a dream how old was I, four years at that time, I remember their marriage and I remember the *badekns*¹⁷ and I remember the music and I still remember after the marriage we were so tired and they left for Vienna. My father...

JL: What was his name?

MR: Rudolph Knie, Knie, K-N-I-E. He was very talented. He was not only a good *shnayder*, talented, but he, too, like my father and like many Jews used to do, he bought the draft commission so he paid all, he had 1500 *rheinische* — it was a lot of money, a lot of money — he gave it to the doctor, to the commission, so they remained penniless. And she said, "Well, I'm going to be an accountant so that we can make a living." He said, "No, you are not going to be an accountant. I'd rather be a streetcar conductor." They were in Vienna. In 1914 the war broke out and he got a category D, D- A,B,C,D the fourth category. So he was not taken to the army, not even to be in the [sounds like: Umberland], nothing. He was declared as a man who has his, not paralyzed, it's a man who falls, I forgot the sickness, he falls all of a sudden and, you know, an epileptic. He was, the doctor made an epileptic. I remember that he told the story how

¹⁷ Yiddish for the veiling of the bride in the wedding ceremony.

because when one fell during the draft while being examined, they would take a needle and they would pinch his nerve. But the doctor did it close to the nerve, not go between the nerve and the flesh. But anyways, he was not taken to the army. He was very, very talented and during the War he became a millionaire. Literally a millionaire. In 1918 he was one of the richest people in Vienna. He had buildings, we bought buildings, he had stores, clothing stores, and cafeteria. In Vienna, all the business was done in the cafeteria. The cafeteria was a gold mine. He knew how. He had junk, junkyards and rags. He would handle all these things and he knew how to make the money during the War. And in 1918, after the war, just a night after Austria surrendered, my sister got sick, she had the Spanish grippe, double pneumonia, the doctor, the emperor's doctor went to visit, to treat her. There was nothing to do. She died and left two little girls, one four years old the other one six years. Now they are both in America and one lives in San Francisco, the other one lives in Santa Barbara.

JL: And when was this Dora born?

MR: Dora? I tell you right away, she must have been twelve years older than I was and maybe even fourteen. Because when I was four years she was at least eighteen, yes, yes.

JL: Can you tell me the names and dates of birth of your other sisters?

MR: Sarah was eight years older than I was.

JL: Excuse me, before you continue answering that, I have to turn the tape over.

MR: Yes.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

JL: You were beginning to tell me about your other sister's names and dates.

MR: Yeah, second sister was Sarah, Sara. In 1917 this sister Sarah went to Vienna. Why? Same story. She was not a beauty but she was pretty girl, pleasant. In those times when one was fat, it was a beauty. *Frisch* in German meant two things — fat and beautiful. This was, she was *frisch* and she was eighteen years old, so my sister who really was a millionairess in those times Dora, she says, "Why don't you send her. I will find a boy for her in Vienna. In Vienna nobody knows that her father was a carpenter." And she went there and she was happy, very happy. She wrote wonderful letters and the older sister, Dora, used to write to my father, "Please don't work, Dad, I will take care of you." In fact she sent us money, clothing. We didn't need. My father was all right. But the fact is that she was sick seven or eight days. In a few days she was gone and my sister was there. When she was sick when she died and when she was buried and after, she took care of the children. And she also dreamt that her brother-in-law would marry her. And it seems that she was very much in love with him, too. Of course, he was older, he was probably, I don't know, twenty-eight, thirty years old, I don't know how old he was. But anyways he instead married a girl, a Jewish girl. I forgot her name- Katie, I believe. Her first name was Katie and the family was Insel. Very pretty girl. He fell in love with her. She was in the office, he fell and he, of course she married him not because, probably not because she was in love with him too. He was known as a rich man. He would send his carriage for her with horses in those times. And he was so generous with her and my sister was very, very sick about it and after 1919, a year later, she came home very heartbroken. But there, too, she found a boy, a very nice boy. He fell in love with her. She did not fall in love with him. To her it was just she wanted to marry. He was, he had a club foot. Very nice boy. Of course his father, too, was an artisan. He was a painter, he painted walls, and this was also something. It was a great handicap. He was a handsome boy, a nice boy, and they married and they were very happy. They had three daughters, one more talented than the other. And during the war, they were of course, both of them were deported. Two girls died, one saved her life. I was in touch with her after the war and in 1964, at 44 years of life, she

died in Britain and I got a piece of the paper, of the newspaper, that she was a great personality. She would have be the radio and television and the theater in Britain? She was very talented. I wouldn't say genius. She talked a perfect German, a perfect Polish, beautiful Hebrew. In fact, I have a hunch that she knew the Bible by heart. She died of a heart attack. Her husband, he tried to live without her and after, he committed suicide. I saw his mother and sister in Israel in Karmiel, a new colony, a new town. I saw them in 1971 and they told me all the story. I have letters from her and modestly I have tried to help her.

JL: And the mother?

MR: And I was told that she had it pretty well after the war. In fact, in [sounds like: *bitum*] she was just of only a few of the people who had the central heat, *zentralheitsuung*, which means, in those, we Americans are used to it. There in Poland, it is still a luxury and especial was after the war.

JL: Your talking about letters from Sarah's daughters? The one who-

MR: Yeah, yeah. Dora, her name was Dora.

JL: The orphan girl?

MR: That's right, that's right. She was very talented.

JL: What was the Sarah's husband's name?

MR: Seidman, no, Isak Sandberg, Sandberg S-A-N-D-B-like, Belogna, E-R, like Rome-G, Sandberg. They both were deported in 1943. They worked for the Germans a long time and they couldn't save their lives.

JL: When was Sarah born?

MR: Sarah was eight years older than I, so I assume that she was born in 1900.

JL: Could you tell me something about the third sister?

MR: Sophie, the third one. Sophie, well she was almost pretty, I would say, and she was taciturn. She was very good. But she had, I would say, a inferiority complex. She started, she did not know anything Polish but she knew, she was an Hebrewist. She knew Hebrew very well. And she married a far cousin. I don't know, third or fourth cousin, from a village.

JL: What was his name?

MR: His name was Doliner.¹⁸ I forgot his first name. Doliner, a very poor boy. He was poor like a church mouse. He was in the army, the Polish army, came back from the cavalry. I don't know how he knew about her. He was not far from Czartkow but he came and well, they fell in love. He fell in love with her. She wanted to marry. She knew she had old parents and she said it. She was smart, a smart girl. She said, "But my parents are old and what do I have to wait?" He pretended to be a poet. He would write poetry, Jewish poetry, Polish poetry. But it wasn't worth too much, in my opinion. My father gave him dowry the way it used to be. It was \$1500 dollars and a *tallis* brought him. Paid the wedding, and the wedding in Galicia was not like here. It's very expensive. They would call the entire town and make a very good meal for them and so on and so on. That man, he knew what he wanted. After the marriage he took a mill — he did not buy it, he just rented a mill. He had three, four brother there was a terrible misery. He was from a village called [inaudible]. They really starved and these boys worked for him. So he would buy the grain, he would grind it, he would sell flour, and he would deliver it in Czartkow. So the boys they worked for nothing, just for peanuts, and I was told that he used even to beat them. They were his brothers. But this was a routine, routine like. And so that he made quick money because he made the money on the grain he bought, on the flour and on the delivery, transportation, all together. And just in a few years he became a rich man. Not, I wouldn't say, a millionaire, but he made it. And to add, to add success to good luck, he made a store for her, small store. Like a grocery store. The neighbors would come to buy yeast for the *challah* and *boyml*, which is oil, and a little sugar and a few boxes of matches and all these things she would have, so that what she made was to live. They made a living and what he earned, he would put away. I know one thing, that my sister Sarah who was not in good financial conditions, she borrowed money from her sister Sophie a few times and he was real tight. Yet he was helping her, yes. And he proved to be a fine man. Very tight, but fine. An ignoramus, but he very believed being a big shot. He was, in 1939, he was taken to the army, in the cavalry, and he was among the first Polish soldiers who fought and died. And she remained a widow. She had two boys, beautiful, I

¹⁸ Check contradiction: [summary and index indicate Risa married Doliner.](#)

remember it, and I never heard about her. They lived in Czartkow and I never — I know she died there.

Was killed or- I don't know.

JL: And when was she born?

MR: She was two years older than I, then she was in 1906. She was very much in love with me. I was her pride and when I was in the army, in the Polish army, she did nothing but crying.

JL: Okay, now, telling us something about Risa

MR: My mother? My grandmother?

JL: You didn't have another sister named Risa?

MR: No. I had two sisters Sarah and Sophie.

JL: Alright, then there was no brother?

MR: I had brothers but they died. I had a brother Litman. I had some, I don't even know by name. I had a sister Risa, too, but she died. She died before I was born. They would be born and they would die. It was just simple like that.

JL: So the only ones of whom you really have memories are Sarah, Sophie and Dora?

MR: Sarah, Sophie, Dora I remember to a dream.

JL: Okay, no were there any other family members in your town or nearby areas?

MR: Not from our cousins. Well yes, I had, of course we had. My mother had and my father had. They all were killed. Yes, I had. My first cousin's son is safe and sane in Israel in Kfar Sava, he's principal of the high school. Very talented man. I would say a genius.

JL: What is his name?

MR: Lachman, Gustav Lachman, Gdalie Lachman. And he told me a story in 1970 how he saved his life. For weeks he was under a ceiling with Ukrainies, they saved his life. He was outstretched, he couldn't breath. Just one position he was for months and months and months. Why? Because a voice came out that he said that after the war he will describe how bad the Ukrainians were to the Jews, so they wanted to kill him and he had to be hidden. A non-Jewish woman saved his life. Yeah, but he is now very good

conditions and the German government pays him a pension and every once in a while pays him hospitalization and so on and so on.

JL: Could I ask you to describe a bit your home and the immediate community surrounding?

MR: Well, we had, we were 1700 souls in Skalat. This is what my father wrote to me, or what he told me my father was with me in 1937. It was a town which lived on smuggling before World War I, when it still was Austria. It means the river Zbruch divided Galicia from the, it was like, it divided from Russia. And the smugglers, they did it by themselves or they had people working for them. From Galicia they would smuggle into Russia things like fabrics, like scarves, like shawls, sometime even all kinds to wear, clothing. And from there they would bring sniff tobacco, smoking tobacco, teas and all kinds of things like this. Yes, they would smuggle to Russia also spirits, alcohol, because in Russia, it was not allowed, decided not to allow drinking. This is, and everybody made their living. Of course we had our carpenters and our shoemakers and our all kinds, but the smugglers, they were people, of course, well to do, nice people. And after- during the war, it's useless to talk about it. After the war the Bolsheviks took over. We had along this river there were trees so that the smuggler could hide. What did they do? They cut off all the trees and the soldiers, Russian soldiers would wear in the winter time, when the ice, because the smuggling would be in the winter —most during the winter time when it was ice, it frozen — they would wear white uniforms and be hidden and when the smuggler came they would catch him. And the punishment was very harsh. They would send him to Siberia. So smuggling stopped. And Skalat, being cut off from the villages which belonged to Russia, it became a ghost town. We had nothing we had no high school, no electricity, we had no tribunal. A neighboring town, Borszczow was smaller than our town. But they had offices so that, for example, a farmer, a peasant, when he wanted to buy something he had to sell his products. He would go to Borszczow, he would sell his products there and he would buy there. So our town just was dying down little by little. And the young people, all they went, who went to Argentina, whoever, wherever they could go. This was our town. Beautiful town, Skalat. Skalat means "a rock." Beautiful to see we had even a castle built by the Turks. Skalat was a very, a town known from

the time of Chmielnicki.¹⁹ Of course it belonged to Poland. And, well it had natural beauties. Hygienically it was very low. We had no sewers. We had no water. The water we had to buy. We had to, water carriers. They would have water carrier meant, he had a horse which was bones and skin and I still remember those water carriers. It was Machael and it was Abram and it was Yankel and they would, and something- I don't know what to call it-they had the bell and they would shout, "*Ayta, ayta, ayta!*" [sounds like: *Vishta, vishta, vishta!*] Which means he would encourage the horse to go. "*Ayta!*" means like "get up!" "*Ayta, ayta, ayta!*" And my mother would go out and say, "*Rey Mechl*], gits *mir a mul vaser*"²⁰ — Which meant two pails, pails made of wood. And well, it cost not too much but we didn't have water enough. And we had no sewers so we had all the things. We had no bathrooms. There was a bathroom for the entire town. One side for men and one side for women and there was a stench on the street always. On a Thursday when the women prepared for the *Shabbes*²¹ you would see, for example, the fish bones and the eggs and the onion peel and the garlic peel and everything on the street. The police, when they caught you pulling out this, they would fine you. But of course you asked the police, "Now where should I put it?" "It's just, can't you see it's pure water?" my mother used to say, and the policeman said, "Well, if it's pure water, why don't you make tea and drink it?" [laughs] And this was our life, our daily life. What else could I say? Then the towns around was more or less the same. How people lived? They had relatives in America, some of them just starved. Some would get merchandise and after be bankrupt. One way or another. It was not living; it was just vegetating.

JL: Well now, let me ask you about the religious life.

MR: Religious life? We had — and mind you, 1700 people — we had twelve synagogues, small synagogues. We had a big *shul*, yes, that *shul* was for those, the big pariahs, the underworld-not the underworld, I would say those who, the *bal melokhes*. The tailors and shoemakers and so on and so on. They were

¹⁹ Bogdan Chmielnicki, 1650-1657, the leader of a Cossack and peasant uprising against Polish rule in the Ukraine, who as hetman of Ukraine sought violently to eliminate Jews from that area.

²⁰ Yiddish for "Remechl, give me a [mul? apparently a measure] of water.

²¹ Yiddish for 'Sabbath'.

there, the *shul*. We had small synagogues besides that. In the synagogue they would go to *daven*. Every Jew, in the morning, he knew he had to go to *daven* before working.

JL: And is that how it was in your family daily?

MR: Yeah, but My father would not go to *daven* every day, but most of them. My father wasn't that much religious but you would see in the morning, you would see young boys, thirteen-year-old boys with those *tefillin* [sounds like: *sekolach*],²² made of velvet with a *Mogen David*,²³ a blue velvet *tefillin sekolach* with the yellow *Mogen David* over it and there was written his name — his sister made it for him and they would go to shul with their *tefillin sekolach* and the parents were full of pride to see them kids going to the synagogue. In other words, I would say, our town was still a religious town. Saturday the stores were closed — besides the barber and the store which sold *sodevasser*.²⁴ Everybody kept closed. Cigarettes, no smoking on *Shabbes*. If somebody wanted to smoke on *Shabbes*, he had to go out of town. And if one was caught, he was very poor if he was caught smoking a cigarette on *Shabbes*.

JL: Tell me something about your own family's religious life.

MR: My mother was very religious. My father — this is what my mother used to tell us and he himself, too — he was religious until World War I. After World War I he became very relaxed. He began to, he did not cut his beard but he used to shorten it. He did not wear the *kapote*²⁵ as he used to, that long gown they used to have. He was a modern man, yes. And he would grumble sometime, he would protest, "Why? Why is it that we are so persecuted? Why the Jews..." and so on and so on. He was a cynic, too, I believe, religiously. But a very wonderful man. He was very, very generous. They would make jokes they would fun of him. For example, there was in town a man it which was Shimshela, "Shimshela Parekh", they used. You know what a *parekh* is? A man who has ulcers on his head. Because in our town they would not call the people by their second name, like Forestein or Sandberg or Relles. Everybody has a

²² Phylacteries with pouches.

²³ Yiddish for a Star of David.

²⁴ Yiddish for 'soda water', or 'seltzer'.

²⁵ Long overcoat traditionally worn by observant Jewish men.

nickname. "Shimshela Parekh," "Berel Opegehit," and "Berl Kapote and Simcha Bachene"²⁶ and so on and so on. So, what, yes Shimshela he had children, I don't remember, he had about a dozen kids. They would be born and die. He lived in a basement and he made a living by going to Chortkov every week and buying a box of lemons and oranges. Well, why did the Jew need lemons or oranges? But a person was sick so they had lemons and oranges. And he would buy it, but he didn't have the money. So he would come to my father and say, "*Reb*"²⁷ Nachman, *ken mikh geb mir a borg*,²⁸ *a gemilas chesed*?" "Gemilas Chesed" meant to give him a loan, of course without interest. And my father used to say, "*Shimshela, far adir*," [speaks in Yiddish with humor, probably something about not being a rich man,]. But my father would ask him, — we didn't know about hygienic paper

JL: What's that?

MR: Hygienic paper, for the bathroom. But this, the lemon were packed with that paper, however you call that thin paper my father used to say, "You know, I am a man, I'm suffering. I had an operation, hemorrhoids. Please, for those papers, see that you keep them for me." And my father always- no one left our house empty-handed. People needed to get a *gemilas chesed*, they knew they would go to "Nachman Stolyer" — but on that occasion, they would call him Relles when they needed a *gemilas chesed*. He was a wonderful man, a self-made man. I remember he used to tell us that he made three classes from grammar school, three grades. Very little. But most of them didn't have even this. But he knew high math: he knew trigonometry, he knew logarithms. That I know because when I was a student he used to do it his way. His old-fashioned way but he learned it by himself. What did he need that math? He became a builder and I remember he built beautiful buildings — mills and in Poland there was a law that every landlord, he had, landlord of the country, of the land, he was obligated to build an alcohol factory. Why? Because he would fatten cows and the potatoes- they would use potatoes and cows and the

²⁶ Rabbi Relles gives a list of nicknames combining a person's first name and a word attached to it.

²⁷ Yiddish for 'Mister'.

²⁸ Yiddish for a loan.

potatoes they would use to make alcohol. I'm not so acquainted with it. And my father would do these buildings and he was very successful in it.

JL: I have to turn the tape around.

MR: Oh.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

JL: You mentioned that your father after the First World War became somewhat less religious. Was there someone in your family totally non-religious?

MR: No. What's the meaning, "He wasn't religious?" It means he wasn't so attached. He didn't live twenty-four hours with religion, but he still *Shabbes* he still went to *daven*. And he was, you know it there they used to have on Saturday, you know, when we read the Torah we call seven people. Here an *aliyah* is an *aliyah*. You call a person, it doesn't matter if I call first or second or third. The first is the Cohen, the second is the Levi, but after you call whomever you want. There it wasn't so. *Shleeshee*²⁹ was for the young people, for the finer people, merchants. *Sheshe*³⁰ was for an old man, a fine person, a learned man, a man who was esteemed, a man who had money and so on and so on. *Revee'ee*,³¹ the fourth, and *Chameeshee*³² they would give to those people, to the *bal melokhes*, and of course my father, oy, he was sick about it. Why couldn't they give him *Sheshe*? Another thing, he would like to *daven*, to do cantoring, to be the *chazzan*.³³ So he would like for his father, he had *yahrzeit*,³⁴ for the mother he was *yahrzeit*, so he was entitled to *daven* so they let him *daven*. But he would want to *daven*, would have wanted to *daven* for his grandfather, great-grandfather and for his father-in-law and mother-in-law and so on. And they just didn't like it. And besides there were other people there also had the right to *daven*. Well, in this case he was a little exaggerated. Well I never, I didn't approve of his attitude because he took it very, very seriously. When they called him they did not give him the final *aliyah*, he came home and he was very, very upset. I would say almost quarrelsome. But this was the mentality of the people there.

²⁹ Hebrew for 'third', here meaning the third Torah reading in a Sabbath service.

³⁰ Hebrew for 'sixth', here meaning the sixth Torah reading in a Sabbath service.

³¹ Hebrew for 'fourth', here meaning the fourth Torah reading in a Sabbath service.

³² Hebrew for 'fifth', here meaning the fifth Torah reading in a Sabbath service.

³³ Yiddish for 'cantor'.

³⁴ The anniversary of the death of a family member, when one prays for the deceased.

Quarreling in the synagogue — this was the first thing before *daven*³⁵ and after *daven* and during *daven*, God forgive him.

JL: Would you say that this contributed to some people's becoming less attached to the synagogue?

MR: No, it was a part of religion. For example, some people wanted importance. So they came and they say, "I would like we should begin to *daven* at 9:00 in the morning." And some people wanted at 8:30. So there was a clock, a big clock with those weights and one would put the clock ahead after the other one came — because the synagogue was always open. And the other one would put it back and of course when they had to elect a *gabe*,³⁶ all the quarreling was always- it always happened. Why? People, for example, were competitors. Where could they take it up? In the synagogue. So, the butcher would quarrel with the butcher and the, I don't know, the man who had a store would quarrel with other, they took it out there. I can detect it here in America in the same way but it is not so rampant here. Of course, people here, in the small congregations especially, like when I was in the Chicago Heights or in Superior or here, the man who have a furniture store does not get along with his competitor furniture store. Or, for example, people, I don't know, lawyers don't get along together and so on and so on. But here they do it in the nicer way. I remember there, especially on a *Simchat Torah*, when they got drunk they really would fight and some people would come in their shabby clothing because they knew they would have to fight. But, of course, I do not want to say that this was all. They also, we had nice people. People who came to *daven*. We had people who would learn, study at the synagogue. We had people who were very generous; they would invite a poor man to come to eat to have on a *Shabbes* or on a weekday. We had all kinds of people. All kinds. But they were human.

JL: You mentioned to me when we met for the pre-interview that your sister Sarah opened a store on *Shabba*?

³⁵ Yiddish for 'to pray'.

³⁶ Yiddish for 'a synagogue administrator'.

MR: Yes, because they had a store, they would sell *sodevaser*. It's, how would you call it? It's a kind of a beverage people would drink and it was iced. The ice they would pick up during the melting of the ice, of the river. They would go when the river began to melt they would pick up that ice. They would have special underground. They would build on top something to isolate that ice. They would put it in store and after, during the summertime they would go. They used to call it lodownia.³⁷ Why? Because *lòd* in Polish means ice and lodownia is a place where it contains ice. This was the only way of having ice. And ice, they always needed if a person was sick and my brother-in-law used to sell this *sodevaser* and also candy. Poland was very famous of having candy, all kinds of candy. After they began to make their ice cream. My sister made ice cream, of course, everything by hand.

JL: Now this was Sarah?

MR: Mechanically, Sarah, she would make the best ice cream. Oh, they were competitors, too, and on those, they call it *slodyczami* Polish, which means the place where they used to sell candy, a candy store. And on Saturday it was open. My brother-in-law would keep it open on Saturday and behind the store, there was a home where the young people would go to smoke on *Shabbes*.

JL: How did the family look upon the store being open on *Shabbat*?

MR: Well, it was after the War. They already started everywhere. Before the war, I never, I don't remember people going without a hat. The head has always to be covered. A *yarmulke* or a hat. After we saw people without a covering to their head. Some people even allowed themselves to go on a bicycle. A bicycle was a luxury. When did you see a person going, a Jew going on a bicycle? Well, if he was a teacher or a postal clerk, a man, you say of nobility, he could afford a bicycle. Jews never had it but after the War they started going on bicycles.

JL: On the *Shabbes*, too?

MR: No, actually, now. That far — we never arrived. No, no.

JL: But how did the family itself look upon this news, keeping the store?

³⁷ Polish for 'ice cellar'.

MR: My mother never approved of it. My father — well, he minded his business.

JL: Now, could you tell me something about your *cheder*? When you began.

MR: *Cheder*? I began when I was four years old or three years old, I don't remember. And my first teacher was Zishe Melamed,³⁸ and he had a wife and he had two children. One was in America and I remember they would talk about it. And the other one was a boy in my age. It was, the *cheder* was composed of one room and that room it was a bedroom, a dining room, a kitchen and a classroom. No floor. It was just an earth floor and I remember always lots of dust. And we used to have a *belfer*.³⁹ The *belfer*, his job was to take the child from home, bring you to school on his shoulders. And this I still remember. We had a helper, a *belfer*, his job was to take the child from home, bring him to school on his shoulders and this I still remember we had a *belfer*, you know a young man, a very strong man, and my mother would give me bread, a sandwich of bread with marmalade, they would call it. It was made of something, of prunes of plums with sugar. And we used to come there. I don't know, we were about twenty children. And every once in awhile the teacher, the *melamed*, Zishe Melamed would take one child, put him through a sitting? He would pinch him. He could not beat but pinch. And of course if the reading was good he would pinch you slowly. It was affectionate. Otherwise he would pinch and it was- What I remember was lots, thousands and thousands of flies. All kinds of flies. Why? Because there, most of it was *pavidle*,⁴⁰ it was marmalade the children would bring in bread. In the summertime — you can imagine! You had flies and flies and flies. This was the teacher who used to teach you reading, to read Hebrew. When after, when you were five years old, then you went to another man, to another *melamed*, Shlomo Melamed.

JL: So the first *melamed* just specialized in reading?

³⁸ Melamed is the title of teacher appended to the man's name.

³⁹ Yiddish for the assistant teacher in a cheder.

⁴⁰ Yiddish for 'prune jam'.

MR: Yes, the *dardake melamed*, we used to call him the dardake melamed.⁴¹ There were two *melamdin*⁴² like these. Zishe and Mekhl? It was a private enterprise. Had nothing to do with the congregation. A man who was no good, who was good for nothing who could not do anything in his life, he became a *melamed*. And it was a maxim a father would say to his child, "What do you want? You do not know anything. You are an ignoramus. You are a *shlimazel*,⁴³ a *lemishke*.⁴⁴ What will be out of you? A *melamed*." And when they said a *melamed*, they meant a teacher. He was good for nothing else. At five, six years we went to, there "Shlomo der Toyber."⁴⁵ Toyber means the deaf. He was deaf. Sholmo der Toyber, arn [Yiddish] . And Shlomo arn der Blinder.

JL: Was he blind?

MR: He was blind from one eye. And these were the *Chumash* and Russian *melamed*. And you begin to learn *Chumash* and you know that they made a special party *Chumash* and it begin with *Vayikra*, Leviticus, the third book. They made a party for *Shabbes* and so on and so on. Now, this was six, seven, eight years. When you became nine years you went to the *Gemara melamed*.⁴⁶ *Gemara melamdin* we had very few. One was "[sounds like: *Avruche der Visner*,"⁴⁷ a very learned man. A long red beard, very handsome man. Very dirty, too. I remember his skullcap was so heavy because he never washed it and he had it day and night. He slept in it. He was a very learned man. A very fine man. And his wife, well, she certainly ran the show. And the same thing. In the same room. We had a bedroom, and a dining room. I always remember a crib there that his wife every year delivered the baby. She delivered the baby when the oldest boy was already twenty-two years old. She still delivered babies. He was a great, great learned

⁴¹ Yiddish for the "early" teacher, the teacher of beginning students.

⁴² Yiddish plural of *melamed*.

⁴³ Yiddish for 'an unlucky person'.

⁴⁴ Yiddish for 'a fool' and a person who is not assertive enough.

⁴⁵ Yiddish for "Shloyme the Deaf."

⁴⁶ Yiddish for one who teaches the Gemara, the portion of the Talmud made up of commentaries on the Mishnah.

⁴⁷ Yiddish for Avruche the Scholar.

man. And this is the way we —we didn't know, in my time we did not know about public school. What public school? There was a war. And so I learned only *Chumash*⁴⁸ and Russian and after I started learn *Gemara*. And, when I was, I remember when I was twelve years old already they used to say in town "Nachman Stolyer has his son, he will be a *Tanna Kamma*,⁴⁹ which means the first learned man. I did not have too much faith in myself. I thought that people were exaggerating, but I had a big mouth. I could pretend being a scholar. In my mind, in my heart of hearts, I felt that other boys knew better. And when I was thirteen years old, I left the *cheder* and I began to learn from myself. We were about ten, twelve boys in different synagogues and there was a great competition among themselves. Everyone wanted to be better than the other in *Talmud*.

JL: But you were not under the tutelage then any more of the [inaudible]?

MR: No, no, no. But there were a few, we had a few learned men. Our town was not all scholars, as some people want to tell us, that in Europe they were all scholars. We had about ten, twelve great Talmudists. People who knew nothing more, but nothing but *Talmud*. Their wives they would work, they would kill themselves. Who did this and who did that and he would sit in the synagogue, *kratsn de bukh*,⁵⁰ which means to sit there and learn Talmud. They would help us. If we didn't know something we would go to them and ask them.

People tell me this. I knew a man who knew all the *Talmud* by heart. When you said something *yede ersht*. But that man, he never did anything in his life. Yes, one thing he did: he used to beat his wife. She would always have blue eyes, blue under her eyes. And this man, how did he make a living? A person had a *yahrzeit* so he would say a *Kaddish*, he would learn a [Yiddish, sounds like: *ber*] *mishnayas* and so on. I really, I don't believe it is too glorious about those people, about those great Talmudists. In our town and in the neighboring towns. People who, they learned Talmud because they didn't know any better.

⁴⁸ Yiddish for 'the Pentateuch.

⁴⁹ Rabbi Relles refers to the name traditionally given to an unidentified Mishnaic sage of the first century B.C.E.

⁵⁰ Yiddish for to scratch the book.

And this is what I did beginning from fifteen years until I was eighteen. We would learn. We would learn at night. We would learn at day. Of course, we played more than we learned. We were boys. In the wintertime we would make figures out of the snow, we would come to the synagogue and play around and fool around.

JL: Were there any older people there to be with you? The *melamed*..?

MR: No, no, no, we would do just mischief. Why? In the synagogue- in the homes was cold. We had misery. What did we know about coal? Nothing. It was wood — who could afford it? And in the synagogue it was always warm and nice. Dirty as dirty can be because I still remember that on *Shabbes* we would have to show [Yiddish] and Noah Katze? 16:35] you know would bring herring and bread a little *branfrn*⁵¹ and we would sing. But the heads of the herring were all the week under the table. We had the *shammes* who was so dirty. A man who didn't have an idea about hygiene. We had a towel to dry our hands when we washed. Why? Of course that towel he would change once a year for Passover. And yes, I must say, the synagogue always had a floor, a wooden floor. Always wash it once a year. And this is the way people lived. You came into the synagogue and you saw old stumps of cigarettes and dust and papers and it was dirty as dirt can be. And I'm asking myself, how did people live?

JL: What did the synagogue look like physically, besides all the dirt?

MR: It was just like any other. Only the *shul* — this was the *shul* — looked like a holy place. It was around, was empty, and it was a nice place. But also the *shul*, I remember it burned up. Why? Because people, smugglers, they considered that place the best place where to hide tobacco, sniff tobacco, and they left it there. They had the candle — we had no electricity — and the candle burned and in a few hours, it burned up completely, and this I remember.

Yes, I remember after the war, for example, we had all kinds of money. We had [in Ukrainian], which is Ukrainian money, Austrian money, Russian money. Of course the dollar was the highest. And people would just do business. But the *shul* was the best place of business. And I remember '21, '22, '23, '24

⁵¹ Yiddish for 'brandy'.

there was such a prosperity. Of course it was a cannibal prosperity because it was an inflation, but people would make millions, millions and millions. They were of no worth, but people would ask, "How can one do not to make a living?" Everybody made a living. Until 1924, 1924 a depression started and it was terrible. And I would say most of the business were done in the synagogue. People learned there, people *davened*, people quarreled, and people did business.

JL: So life went on.

MR: Because if you had money, squilted money, old money and you wanted to straighten it, you put it in a book, it was the best thing. And I remember once a man did it and he lost, and he forgot to take the money out and he came, he almost fainted. But fortunately he got the money. It was still there. And these things are true, I am not inventing it. It was a kind of life, survival. Otherwise how could we survive?

JL: Now you said that you started studying with the other boys from age 13?

MR: Yeah.

JL: Until when?

MR: Until I was eighteen. I studied with a boy, his name was Yosche Fisch. Actually I initiated it. They came from another town. His father had a leather store. And I initiated it. He knew very less than I and I initiated him in *Talmud*. I knew *Talmud*, but I don't know, people say that you inherit things from your — I probably inherited from my grandfather. I knew *Talmud*. He knew just nothing. He was very religious. His father was very religious. And in six months he overran me. He started to better. Why? Because I was always nervous. I had a terrible thing: I started smoking, very stressful. And not always did I have a cigarette. And when I had no cigarette I could not learn and when we had a question, something we could not get out, he would sit there and sit and grumble and grumble and say, "I got the idea." And this was my worse thing. When we had a problem, and he ninety-nine times out of a hundred, he-

JL: Solved it?

MR: Solved it. This was my greatest unhappiness. So I tried making up, studying, taking the book to study the *Talmud* at home and he got aware of it and he protested and we had to give an oath that we won't learn

at home. But he broke his oath and I broke this oath. This boy was the source of my greatest unhappiness. When I saw this man, he was a very little, small boy, that he was going from strength to strength in *Talmud* and I was just vegetating. This is what I believed.

JL: So you kept up these studies until you were eighteen?

MR: Eighteen. Eighteen, what happened? Oh, I was seventeen, I don't remember, I learned there is also apprentices, I learned with a rabbi in Borszczow. But it's a long, it's not of great importance.

JL: What kind of thing was it?

MR: He was a man. He was modern. He learned in Hildesheimer⁵² but he was a learned man, too. His father was a *rebbe* in Stryj and my father said to him — actually,

JL: Did you live with him?

MR: No. I lived in a private home. My father paid well and actually my job was he was supposed to teach me. He taught me very little but he guided at me. And I was actually kind of a servant. I would go to buy tobacco for him. In those times they didn't have cigarettes. Tobacco, I would go. He needed a person, so I would go to call 'em. I would go to buy stamps. I was his servant and he would teach me. And the most, the free time I did — was he suggested that I should learn *Talmud* by heart. He said, "If you learn *Talmud* everyday a page by heart, and this is very easy once you understand what's all about, in seven years you will know *Talmud* by heart." He, well, he pretended knowing it by heart. I don't know whether he really knew or not. I learned very little from him. I was a summer, and winter I stayed home. I don't remember. This was in 1924.

JL: '24?

MR: That's right. In the wintertime I came back home and I studied in the synagogue.

JL: Again?

⁵² An orthodox rabbinical seminary in Berlin, the Rabbiner Seminar für das Orthodoxe Judentum, commonly known by the name of its founder, Azriel Hildesheimer.

MR: Yeah. And as I said, I had a name among all the boys. They were about ten boys, Talmudists. I was one, they would consider me the best one because of my big mouth. I used to ask questions and this and that. And there was a boy, he came from Lemberg to his cousin, to Skalat from Lemberg, this boy he graduated from the seventh grade grammar class. In Poland they had seven classes, grammar class.

JL: He went to a Polish school?

MR: A Jewish boy, but he learned in a Polish school.

JL: Secular?

MR: Yes, secular. And he was very much proud of himself. Yes, he had a very high opinion about himself. Because in our town, who graduated from the seventh grade? And he came to learn the synagogue and he knew very little and the boys would make fun of him.

JL: Very little *Talmud*?

MR: Yeah. So I took him. I said, "Come, I will show you." And I initiated him. And so I made a deal with him. He would teach me- I was at that time seventeen years old. He would teach me now Polish and I would teach him *Talmud*. So I would learn with him all day in synagogue and I did not lose you know, because while you teach, it is a help for you because it gives you an incentive and you understand it and you have ambition to explain it. It helped me, too. He used to come to my house and teach me. I had to learn the alphabet. But he had a very great sympathy for our cat. So instead of teaching me he would play with the cat all the time. The important thing was I learned reading and when I knew how to read I used to devour Polish books. Reading without knowing what I was reading.

JL: So you didn't really know the language?

MR: *Fik opa*⁵³ We used to talk Yiddish. So I read and read and read and read without understanding. But little by little, a little bit here, a little bit there And after that Yocshe Fisch, who learned Talmud with me, both of us hired a private tutor. His name was Yocshe Fisch but our teacher's name was Lazar Fisch. And this teacher taught us Polish. And he said the same thing, "You want to learn Polish? The best thing:

⁵³ Interjections. *Fik* is Polish for oops.

you take your book and you learn by heart. Once you have this word in your mind" — because in our town no one talked with you Polish. The people, Jewish people talked Yiddish, Yiddish. And the Polish people talked Ukrainian. But there were very few Polish people. The majority were Ukrainian. So everything was Ukraine. So we began to learn. I remember we had a book of zoology and I still remember the first page by heart. And here we began again. That boy, Yocshe Fisch, he was better than I. Began again. He was my trauma, that boy, because I was very, very much jealous of him, envious of him. But we were inseparable, he and I. After I went a year I fell in love with a girl. And that girl was not interested in me. She had another, she a boy.

JL: I'm sorry I have to stop you here.

MR: Oh, it's okay.

JL: I want to hear the story.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

TAPE 2, SIDE 2

JL: You were beginning to tell me about the girl you fell in love with.

MR: Yes. Schwartzmach, I don't remember her father's name. It was a family, a man with a second wife. He had children from the first wife, three, and one daughter with the second wife. He was a poor man. He would go from one place to another selling his dry—he had dry goods. So on Monday he would go to Mielnica there to sell the things. It was like, we called the *yari'd*. It's like a fair; and Tuesday would go to Koralovka and Wednesday would — all the time he was on his back and forth. He didn't have his own transportation so he had to hire. He was not a rich man. No, he had four children with his first wife, one was In Israel, Morchie and there was [sounds like: Yishai] who went to Argentina. And he had two girls with his first wife: Anya, which is Channah, and the other one is Suri. I fell in love with Channah. And I was seventeen years old and I just fell in love with her. And she had no interest in me and I was very much upset. I felt just as we say in German, *eine einseitige liebe habe*.⁵⁴ I felt so upset. So at that time I decided to leave town because I felt I would—I felt I would get meshuge.⁵⁵

JL: Were you still in Skalat?

MR: Yes, they lived in our town. Not in our town, in our house! My father had a house, he had a big house, one store and why he built it? So when he would come old, he won't be able to work, the house will help him to live. So they were, they rented that place — I don't remember, two rooms and a kitchen, something like that. And I fell in love with her and she, well, she was just cold. Not only but she made fun of me and I was very much ashamed and so on — you know, in a small town. So I decided to go to where to go, to Leopoli,⁵⁶ Lemberg. Leopoli was a town at that time about 200,000 people, a town, high schools, university, polytechnical and so on and so on. And well, there they had, they called it

⁵⁴ German for 'to have an unrequited love'.

⁵⁵ Yiddish for 'insane'.

⁵⁶ Latin for 'Lvov'.

kurs,⁵⁷[speaks Polish] which means I was told there is an institution, private, a man, his name was [sounds like: Kenigsberg], a baptized Jew, Kenigsberg, or Doctor Kenigsberg, Professor Kenigsberg, he hired a school, you know, rooms, little classrooms, from the German *gymnasium*, a German high school. In the morning they would learn German, and in the afternoon all those who dropped out from high school and in Poland it was very easy to drop out from high school as it was very hard to get in. So there were classes. He hired the best teachers. You had to pay and to pay well. It was pretty high. And there they would teach you all subjects to take exams to take a test at the end of the year or the beginning of the year so that you can get in. And this was, most of the students were composed of soldiers, not soldiers-non-commissioned officers. Corporals, sergeants and so on who dropped out and they wanted to advance so they were — they were old, they were spinsters, employees. Polish people, too, but mostly Jewish. And my, my job was there, my intention was to go there and to hear to those teachers and after a year I would make my exams to go into high school. As I said, it was very hard in Poland to go into high school, especially for a Jew. There were two kinds of high schools: government high schools where you didn't pay anything, but for a Jew it was almost excluded; or private school. The high schools, the governmental high schools were of more value everywhere. In Poland to have a high school diploma was more important than to have a university diploma. And this is a fact. Well, I went there. The classes would begin at four o'clock in the afternoon. They would last at nine o'clock. And the teacher would come. We had like a schedule like any other school. A class was had between twenty and thirty students. The professor, the math professor, physics and so on, the best teachers that would come and teach you and ask you from time to time. And I went there. At that time my father wasn't so rich. Why? Because the inflation destroyed him, you understand? The inflation. Yes, you could make a living. And don't forget, they had a girl, my parents had a girl to marry her. Sophie was not married yet so they had to save money for dowry and all the rest, the bills and so on and so on. So my father gave me fifteen zlotys a month. Fifteen zlotys, but the school alone cost me thirty. So what should I have done? I came to

⁵⁷ Polish for 'course'.

Lemberg, it was the first time I went by train. First time in my life. I came to a town after a day traveling from eight o'clock in the morning I arrived there to Lemberg at five o'clock. [tape switches off due to knock at the door, resumes] I never saw a streetcar. I arrived. I never saw a streetcar. First time I was traveling by train I had all I had in Lemberg was a friend, a very good friend from my town. They were very rich people. And he had a sister there, very rich, and he came to pick me up to the train and after, I expected him to say, "Well, you'll stay with us." We were very good friends. And he said, "Where do you want me to take you?" I was ambitious. Of course he was not in his house. He was with his sister. He to, it was he who told me about that course. He went to that course. How do you say? And when he went to take a test he flunked. A Jewish teacher, Blader, mathematician, flunked him and so he couldn't do anything. Anyways he said, "Where do you want me to take you?" I had another friend, people who came from another town. Shapiro, his name was Shapiro. His brother had a taxi, you know, but he had a chauffeur, you know. A taxi will take people around, but he had a chauffeur. So he wasn't rich. They had one room in a big, big house. A house hundred, I don't know, four or five floors. And he gave me the address and I went there. I said "Take me there." Ulica [sounds like: Grodzka], the street was Grodzka Street. And raining, oy, terrible. I arrived there and I began to ask, "Where is Mr. Shapiro there?" If I was smart enough I would have gone to the man who takes care of the building, what do they call it?

JL: Superintendent?

MR: The custodian. Who knew about the custodian? Maybe I went. No one knew where Mr. Shapiro lives. Finally a man came, a Polish, this I learned [Yiddish name of Pan Shapiro], Pan Shapiro in Polish, and finally the man says, "I am Pan Shapiro. I am Shapiro." I say, "You have a brother So-and-so." "Yes." "Could I see him?" "Yeah." And he brought me. They had one room. And that boy gave me a reception like a brother. I slept there two days after. They said, "Well, there is a [sounds like: Via Zródlana] there is a place where they" [inaudible]— he read it in the paper or he saw it announced — "they were looking for a tenant." So he took me. That was a street where they had the gas station, you know, gas? The burning gas.

JL: For cooking?

MR: Yes. At night it was a place for the prostitutes, for killers and robbers and that was the street. He brought me there in a place. I forgot the name of that man and lady, they had a small child, a girl. The buried a girl not long ago. She was a seamstress. She had a machine, a Singer, yes. Not like my mother. And he would repair umbrellas. Very nice people. Poor people. And I remember fifteen zlotys, just what I got from my father, this is.

So all day can imagine it was clapping and clapping and clapping and she cried for her little daughter and she was hysterical and he was upset and they would quarrel. And I'm telling you what wonderful people! Wonderful people. So I, yeah, I began to study, with that, to attend that class.

JL: Now You lived there and you studied?

MR: I would live there. At four o'clock I would be there in Kochanowskiego Street. Beautiful, beautiful building, it was for German students. German students of German parents who lived in Lemberg. They were Polish, probably Polish citizens, but they were Germans by nationality. And I had to walk three quarters of an hour. I couldn't afford the streetcar. My father gave me more than fifteen zlotys the first month. My food was bread and I would go to eat. I would buy like here, buttermilk. They used to call it sour milk, *kwasne mleko* And with a little sour cream on top and bread. The bread was just delicious — *Kulikowski chleb*.⁵⁸ It was made out of town, Kulikow. Very good with *kiml*. I liked it and I used to eat this. I lived. It wasn't enough. In school there the course I attended I did not give me too much because I never learned, I was never in a classroom. The teacher would come [speaks gibberish to explain how he didn't understand] write on the blackboard, you know, chemistry, math. I did not understand one word.

JL: How was it that you were accepted into that?

MR: They accept anybody. This is something that you don't have to take an exam in. As long as you pay up. Yes, that Kenigsberg he gave me — it was thirty dollars a month. He gave me for twenty dollars. He understood my situation, you know. He was a fine man. And there we had all kinds of teachers, Polish

⁵⁸ Polish for 'bread from Kulikow', a town near Lvov.

people. And who took a great sympathy for me was a man, his name was Romanofsky, Polish teacher. Very handsome man. One of the best teachers. Later I learned that he had two Jewish girlfriends he lived with. And the priest even brought them to court for that. Anyway, that man he was crazy about me. Why? I would learn by heart Polish, you know. I was learning poetry by heart and this is what he liked and maybe he liked me because I was Jewish. But I did Polish very well, but the rest was very bad. My problem was still I could not live there. The people were wonderful. I could not learn there, you know. And the stench from the gas. It makes, outside you feel the gas, the *gazownia*.⁵⁹ There at the course I met a boy, his name was Teller. Isaac Teller. I know he lives, I don't know where he lives now but I know that in 1947 I was told that he lived in Israel. He was a *buchhalter*, an accountant. That boy was also a little Talmudist, you know. We used to sing Jewish songs and so on. That boy lived in [street name, in Polish.] There was a husband and wife. They had a bedroom and a kitchen. He would sleep in the kitchen. He was a matchmaker. He would leave at nine o'clock in the morning; he would come nine o'clock in the evening. He was all matchmaking. And she would go to her sister's and stay all day there. So you practically, you had nobody there. All day you could learn and study, and it was so quiet. A quiet street, a wonderful street. It was *Boczna* Kleparowska, which means a side street, a byway, you know of a big long street, Kleparowska. There, they had the beer factory; and there they had the barracks for the soldiers, and so on. And that boys says "Well," I told him my problem, my sleeping conditions. He said, "Well, they have a sofa in their bedroom and I heard they would like to rent that, too. Why don't you go?" "Okay." I came there and they accepted me. I gave them fifteen zlotys They gave me to sleep and coffee in the morning. Coffee? Coffee meant oat coffee. She would burn coffee.⁶⁰ No sugar, no milk. So I had to provide the saccharin. But saccharin you had to buy at the pharmacy.

JL: Quite expensive though?

⁵⁹ Polish for 'gas plant'.

⁶⁰ Rabbi Relles apparently means that she would burn oats to use as a substitute for coffee.

MR: Yeah. Anyway, I came there. The man, later I found out he was a pederast. You know, an old man, sixty-five years, you know he would make passes to me, you know. I had to leave. But not at the beginning. And he taught me first about, why what about soldiers bread? "Instead of buying that *Kulikowski chleb* which is so good, you have soldiers who beg. They give you for nothing! For a few pennies they give you bread. Why don't you, you just stay outside and you will see." And this is what I did. I went out and I don't remember how long I waited, a soldier passed with a bread, like this, two kilo bread. It was very old, very old. Old, you know, dry, but it was bread. And I bought it for ten cents. Instead I would have to spend a zloty. And such a bread I had. After? What happened? A man came with this boy, to interview this boy Teller. He made an application to go to heat, there was a place for students, Ulica Bolimow Street, the street was Bolimow. There for ten groschen — you know ten groschen was once cent in those times, something more, nine groschen, one American cent, you know, nine zlotys a dollar — you understand, for that, for ten cents, you would get a lunch. To live it was too much and to die, vice versa. To live too little and to die too much. What would they give you? They would give you a little soup, water soup, a little piece of meat you needed a microscope to see it, and a small piece of bread. Very small piece of bread. This was the lunch. It was ostensibly, how you say, ostensibly for the students but everybody could eat there. Where did it come from? From the Jewish congregations. Whenever couple married so they would give that much for that Bolimow. And yes, you had to wait there hours because they had one waiter. And that waiter, I don't remember how his name was but I remember they had writers and big counselors and the big shots there, you know. And That man would [Speaks in Yiddish, translated]which means, "Please excuse me, you have to wait. There is enough food for everybody. Everybody will get." Okay, but it was, it meant something for ten cents. So my problem was almost solved because I had lunch, I had two kilo bread. I would bring a piece of bread, you know. And appetite did I have, I'm telling you! Practically I forgot what chewing meant. I would swallow everything. And it was pretty good. [inaudible], meanwhile, I got a lesson. What's his name? Rappaport. He was a *dayen*⁶¹ in

⁶¹ Yiddish for rabbinic judge.

Ve'a Sloneczna. He had three boys and all three *hasidim*, all three Talmudists. He was a *dayen*. He was in his fifties. He married a young woman she was in the thirties. I remember she had a little baby in the crib, and one of those boys wanted to learn Polish. So I came. I was recommended and we understood the language because I was a Talmudist. Not as good as him — but he was very sharp. And I used to teach him. I used to come there at ten o'clock in the morning and used to teach him until 11:00, 11:30. He paid me 15 zlotys a month. And not only this because after I used to teach, that lady would say "Pan⁶² Relles, would you like to have a little potato soup?" I answered her the first time, "A sick person you ask and a healthy person you offer it." [laughs] Which meant I would accept it enthusiasm. And she would give me not only potatoes but there was a good soup and bread and all kinds of things, you know. After I got another lesson — [name, in Yiddish]. This was a son of a miraculous rabbi. The same thing. They were so, you know, wonderful. I taught them and I made money but I didn't have time to prepare my lessons and I didn't have time to go to Bolimow to eat that lunch. So I arrived late. Sometime I arrive late there was nothing. Sometime there was so much left that I would get two kilo meat and I couldn't eat that much — because they want to get rid of it. You understand? In other words, I solved my problems, my eating problems. I solved my, how would you say it? My apartment. The boy, that boy, what's his name? Teller, he left. He went to another place. And this is the way but I didn't do anything there in the course. I didn't know physics. There was a teacher, [sounds like Rafalowski], a man about seventy years old. He was wonderful, a wonderful teacher, one of the best. But I did not understand one word of all the physics.

JL: How did you get through?

MR: Well, that it, there. You understand your answer, there. They don't grade you, they just prepare you. They give you an opportunity. If you take the opportunities, okay. And if you don't, this is nothing.

JL: What is there at the end, a diploma? Or what?

⁶² Polish for 'Mister'.

MR: They don't give you any diploma. They don't give you anything. They just prepare you. After, if you want to enter high school you have to make an application for high school. You have to make an application to go to one and they see what you have, what you already made because most of those people they had classes. They graduated from grammar school. Some of them had a few high school classes, too. Those were people either they flunked or they were sick. They remained behind and they had to catch up. But with me it was a break. I never attended school.

JL: So how long were you there then?

MR: A year. No, wait a minute, I went it was from September to sometime March.

JL: A year?

MR: No. Not a year.

JL: What year was it?

MR: It was a year, '27 right? Or '26, I don't remember. Wait a minute, no, no... '27. There I was, I was attending classes, I had learned nothing. I had one interest for Polish and I learned it by heart and I knew Mickiewicz and Pan Tadeusz⁶³ and I knew Polish literature. I was doing so well that Romanovsky, Professor Romanovsky, always he would end, "Pan Relles" — there he would say "*Pan*," Mister, you know, because you were grown-up people. I remember a girl she was sixty years old, [sounds like: Bashuvena.] She was a spinster, Miss Bashuvena I still remember her. And so what happened? It happened that March there was a boy, a Ukrainian; he would give me a hard time. And once I was putting my coat on — it was cold — and he held my sleeve, you know, not letting me to put it on and I said, "Leave me alone," a few times. He didn't leave me alone. So I pushed him and I gave him a push to the blackboard. On the blackboard was the map and the map fell down and was torn. And Professor Kenigsberg, the organizer, the I don't know, the head of it, he came just in. "Who tore the map?" So they all pointed at me. And he said "*Pan* Relles, you will have to pay for the map. If not I will...." I don't

⁶³ Adam Mickiewicz was a Polish poet and nationalist of the nineteenth century, whose best-known work is the epic [Pan Tadeusz](#).

remember what he said. There were scandals before. Students they were Ukrainian, they were arrested. There was a boy who committed suicide because he, I remember that boy, he was in love with a girl and that institution got a bad name. So he did not listen to me what, why and what had happened. So I went home and I said, "Good-bye, I'm not going to that course anymore." So what did I do? I had thirty dollars a month and I had March, April, May and a part of June to make the exams, and if I wanted to make the exam in September I had July, August. Five more months and thirty zlotys a month, which I didn't have to pay to. "What do I need 'em?" I said. "I'll be an autodidact. I'll learn by myself." So what did I do?

JL: Let me stop you here, the tape is ending.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 2

TAPE 3, SIDE 1

JL: You left the course?

MR: I left the course and next day it was Purim, I remember that day. I left the class—this tape, is okay? [inaudible, regarding technical issues with recording equipment] and I went to a store Borekh, old books. It was Pausaz Hausman. I don't remember how much I spent. It's relative of course but I bought everything, of every subject I bought three, four books. So history [laughs] was four books. Physics the same thing and everything the same. My lady —Sternberg, Mrs. Sternberg —where I lived, her nephew was a student of philosophy but he was a mathematician, too. So she said to him, I knew that for math I needed a teacher, everything else I could learn by myself. It's like Talmud. You'd repeat it again and again and you learn it. And he came and he began to teach me. I don't remember how much I paid him, I paid him- but I could afford it because I made money. I made money and food I had that much. And I began if you can imagine from three o'clock to ten o'clock, instead of going there and listening and not understanding one thing, that Professor [sounds like: Raguste], math teacher, here I had a teacher, if I did not understand he gave me again—he was not a big mathematician but for me it was good. I had to go to the seventh grade. Eighth grade you know is *gymnasium*, after eighth grade you make maturity, you graduate from high school. I had to go in the seventh , in other words, I would have to stay in school two years. So I had to make six grades besides the grammar classes.

JL: In those five months?

MR: Yeah. I knew a little bit. I knew, well as a matter of fact I started learning. Math I was never good. I never understood because it was not only math it was geometry, too. In sixth grade you already learned logarithms, you already learned, of course equations, second and third equations, and geometry, planimetry. He did his best. I learned very little, but I was very successful in the other subjects. What does other subjects mean? Polish history, universal history, zoology, botany, Polish, German— what else? Well, it was six, seven subjects. Yeah, geography. My worst were math, geography and botany. The rest I did very well. In physics I was so sharp studying these books that I knew more than a student has to

know. For example, there are equations to make for work and for energy and for this and for that—I knew things to make, you understand, I even other equations which they did not teach, I knew by myself. I felt, In physics I felt I was an ace. Same Polish and history. When it came to other things. German? What Jew doesn't know German? You don't forget that Polish and German are different. The Polish people don't know German. To them a German is *Niemiec* and the German language is *Niemka*. *Niemieccz* means a mute. Because Polish and German are so different, it's like day and night. So, no matter what I knew I knew more than they needed. And I learned and I had time, you know what I did? I would change, I would study at night and I was sleepy so I went to sleep and I got up and this is the way I learned. Now when I came to a school, a private school— Szkoła Jordanowska—the proprietor was [sounds like: Vergeneza], the man who organized that school. He had to teach us, he rented a house, a palace—

JL: Where was this?

MR: In Lemberg. Lwow.

JL: You went there after you studied?

MR: Darling, I was there, a year.

JL: You finished, yeah

MR: I stayed there.

JL: Yeah.

MR: From September, this was in 1927, from September to March I attended that course-

JL: Right-

MR: -preparation course.

JL: Okay.

MR: But I had to go into a high school.

JL: Right, So you're telling me you got into that high school?

MR: Yeah. I had to go in but it's not so easy. I came to the man, I forgot the name of the principal and the principal said, "You have to make an application. And after the application you have to pay seventy-seven zlotys for the examen." And after, "What are you? Do you have other, these, how do you call? For your grades?"

JL: Report card?

MR: Report card? "Do you have report card?" "No, I don't have report card." "This okay." "How okay?" I didn't know, this is I forgot to tell you is the worst thing was that to be in the seventh grade you had to be seventeen years old. If you were eighteen years old was good. Nineteen years was good. Twenty years was too late. For 1908 I would not enter for seventh grade. For eighth grade, people from outside could not come in. And this I knew. They called it [speak Polish], which means age over-aged. Why? Because he was afraid, he said if you are twenty years old and you are going with girls seventeen years old you will teach them bad things, so we do not want you. Now I'm going to tell you something which I should not tell you, but now it doesn't make any difference. I was born in 1909 and after that [inaudible], well I was 1908. This was on my age certificate, June 1908. If I presented this to him, to the principal, he would say, "I can't help you." No, only in very rare cases they would allow, if I could show that I was sick but really sick. So I talked it over with my brother-in-law, Isak Sandberg, my sister Sarah, he too was very good in everything. He said, "You stupid man. You give me your certificate, your birth certificate." I gave it. He had something, a liquid, he put over the liquid and everything disappeared, and there he wrote down 2 June 1909. And you could not recognize a thing. He knew to imitate that. I brought that to him, to the principal and the principal, "That's okay," and took everything and I had to give my examen in June, the beginning of June, beginning of the vacation, but I was not prepared. I had a boy student later, his grandfather- he was a very bad student, my goodness his father was an idiot, and his grandfather was a member of the hospital, of the Jewish hospital on Rappaport Street. So I said to him, "Listen," -not to him, to the mother of the boy, "Listen, I need a favor. I need a certificate from a doctor that I am sick and I cannot make the exams in June to be allowed to make 'em after vacation." This

could be done if one was sick or for other reasons. Okay, so she told her father, her father talked to a doctor, the doctor invited me and he gave me a certificate that I am very much anemic, and that I should not learn now, I had need absolute rest. So, I could make my exams in October. Not October, September. Middle September. Yes, but going to make the *examen* does not mean that I passed because you have to know. But I said, "Now, you man, you have June, July, August. At home in Skalat, I wouldn't stay in Lemberg. And your mother will give you the best food and will take care of you and you can do all the learning. You are great!" So I packed all my dirty stuff, my shirts and my pants and everything, and I left the place and I went to back home for the vacation. In my town Skalat, if I said I am going to make the exams after vacation, they would make a laughing staff of me. So I came home and I said, "I made the exams, I am accept." You know in our town to be accepted high school, the seventh grade, not too many boys or girls were fortunate to do this. In other words I said a lie! I lied to my father, to my parents. I said I made it already.

JL: How did you study?

MR: This is what I said to you, I am going to tell you something which I should not say. I just said, "I was accepted," and in town it was something—"That boy!" But I knew that I had to learn and I learned. I still learned better and better, I didn't learn too much, you know. You are at home, it's a small town, you begin to learn and it invites you to go out, such a beautiful sun. Why don't you go to it to have a bath there in the river, in the Zbruch? Why don't you go, you know? I began to date, you know and so on. Well, after the vacation I went back to Lemberg- you want to ask me something?

JL: No. Go on.

MR: I went back to there. Everything was all right. I presented myself and I began, my first exam was Polish. Polish, there was a man—we say the Polish are anti-Semites—that man was a Jewish man. He was a bachelor. He had a beard. In those times who had beard? He had a cane, you took the handle out and there was a weapon. In other words he was a kind- phenomenon. He began to ask me Polish, and I remember what he asked me, I remember the question, I was very well prepared Polish. I knew it I loved

that subject. It was the literature when Poland had the golden epoch, in other words Poland was declining, losing independence, and all those poets and writers came and to revive the Polish people, to tell them that they should do something, rejuvenate and so on, and I loved it. And I did something special. When did a Jew have *dobrze* which means "good." My speech wasn't so good. After I came physics, oh I came to him and I said, "Please could I stand instead of sitting" I say, because I am nervous. He said, "Well, you have to write." You to write on physics he gives you to write the formula, how do you call it? The equation. Okay, so I sat down. He began to ask me, and each question I talk and talk until he said, "That's enough." I did not write one word. Why? I knew everything by heart, okay. German, so-so. Kuscinska, it was different teacher, she wasn't so happy, because "*Sie sprechen jargon zu mir!*" Okay, and everything was good, but when I came to botany I didn't know a word and the man says, "Oh, [(recording cut off) Ivanici, such a wonderful man. [laughs] He asked me, "What is it?" He showed me a plant, and I say, "It's a tree". My Polish was poor in speaking, I knew literature. And he said, "Oh, If Relles says this is a tree, Relles will not be a botanist." But he ask me zoology, zoology I knew, so one covered the other and he was a very good man. He gave me a, you know, the lowest grade but I passed. When I came to geography and history, there was a teacher [sounds like: Pashkotski], he was a *paskudnik* [Yiddish for nasty fellow]. He was known as an anti-Semite. The papers would write "The known anti-Semite on the Jewish street". So he began to ask me geography. Whatever he asked I did not know. No he wanted me to show him on the map. I knew geography but not the map. I lacked, you know, I lacked practice, I lacked smartness, I don't know what I lacked. I didn't sit on the bench. So he said to me, and got tired of asking me; I couldn't show him anything. He says, "Do you know the residence, the capital city of Poland?" I said "Warsaw." And, "Where are we?" We are in Lemberg, in Lwow." "Thank you." And I knew I am killed, so I said to him, "Sir, you did not ask me history." He says to me, "If you don't know geography, how can you know history? But I will ask you," and he began to ask me history I knew. He said, "Well, you know history, I'll see what I can do for you." And I came to the next day, to the principal, said, "What's with me?" I said, "You're in trouble." I said, "Yes, I know-

geography.” He said, “Well, geography wouldn’t be bad; one subject we could let you. There’s another subject.” I said, “Which one?” “Physics.” “Physics?” I said, “No sir,” I said, “If I did not get the highest grade, I get second highest. I knew it.” He says, “Well,” he says, he was an old man; “we usually believe the teacher and not the student.” I said “But I would like to confront Professor Pribulsky because I answered all the questions, and I didn’t even write a word because I didn’t need it.” He says, “Well, you catch him and bring him here. We will talk.” I went out, and as usual, I’m always the lucky man. He just came from another class, and I said, “Professor Pribulsky, what’s the matter? I understand that you gave me an insufficiency.” He says, “Well, I do everything according to my conscience.” I said, “I never doubted it, but I think I answered all the question.” And he looks at me and he says, “Oy!” He said, “I made a mistake. It is Samed” I remember the names.” The boy Samed, got... he change me for Samed. Says, “No, you have,” he said “the highest. I couldn’t give you higher otherwise I would have. I’m going to correct it.” This saved me, because this man said there after the person said, “You know, he chanted a hymn of glory to you.” You know they always have a conference and Pashkotski, for geography he wanted to flunk me, but he said, “history I was very good, excellent, because he was an anti-Semite outside, not in school. The accepted me and everything was alright.

JL: And math too?

MR: Well now, there I had to pay seventy zlotys a month, and what else happened, that school was the worse school. It was not recognized by the government. In Poland it was such a law when you came to the eighth grade, when you had- first of all you had no exam to make for [sounds like *alembik*]. What does *alembik* mean? It meant zoology, botany, [sounds like: *propedeutika*]—you know what *propedeutika* is? I don’t know either, it’s something like logic, psychology and logic, I don’t remember, it was-. Before you started to take your exams, you had this was *alembik*, it was a beginning, it was like an appetizer. After, this was if the school was not recognized by the government, you had to make written exams: math, physics, German, Polish, Latin, and all the subjects, you had to go,—there were about fifteen subjects—you had to know everything by heart. This is, and you had to take you exams in front of a other

commission of other professors who don't know you. But if it was recognized by the government, even if it was not governmental, if you had a good grade—which means not necessarily 'A', [but] a 'B'—if you had it you were not asked, you were not examined. You understand? There was no alembik. There were only three written tests: Polish and German and math. There were so many privileges, you understand, when it was recognized. To give you an example, that high school where I studied, the Szkoła Jordanowska, out of sixty-three students, four students passed and the others flunked because it was not recognized by the government. They sent, how do you all it? The body which watches over the schools? The superintendents sent people, other professors instead of sending one person, so for me it was very bad, it was a very bad situation. So I had friends, the brother-in-law of that boy who came to pick me up, you remember? Who came to pick me up, Mercer, his brother-in-law, Asheim Dr. Asheim he says, "Why don't you go to the Jewish high school?" They had a Jewish high school. We had three types, we had mathematic type, we had humanistic type, and classic. Mathematic meant no Latin and no Greek. Humanistic meant Latin and no Greek. Classic meant Latin and Greek but less math. They had, it was a very good school. I said, "Well, it's now too late." "I do it, don't worry! You won't have to pay seventy zlotys." He knew I wasn't, I couldn't do it. "And you will have easier two years from now to have your maturity, your high school diploma. I know there the teachers, I know this, I know that." So I listened to him and I made an application. This was at the beginning after I made the examen here. This was in September. In November, end of November I get a call—a letter, I don't know—from the high school, from the Hebrew high school. It comes and I come there and the principal says—of course I ask humanistic, which is Latin and math, that type, the second, the middle type—and I don't remember his name, the principal of the Jewish school says, "Well, I have here from the superintendence to take you to our school, but you have to take an *examen* because we have a higher grade." There was 'A' The high schools had "A", 'B' and 'C'. 'A' for the governmental school, this was the highest grade, and why? Because they had all the instruments, they had all the facilities, they had everything, all the comfort—it was a real high school. 'B', never get b, meant private. Private could not compete with 'A'. After the 'B'

there was [Polish word] which meant it wasn't so good. Either the homes were not aired well, or they were too small, or the sun did not arrive, or the physical laboratory wasn't good or the chemical laboratory wasn't good. [possibly: *baczenie*], it means that you have to be careful, but that *Wi niewski Szkola Jordanowska* where I took the examen, that was 'C', and you know something? It became 'C' after I took the examen. You understand? When I took the exam it was still 'B', but the man came, the superintendent came and found something was in disorder and he took it away. There was politics too. So he says, "You have to take a test." I said, "I'll take a test."

JL: Was that 'A', 'B' or 'C', the Hebrew one?

MR: The Hebrew one had 'B', 'B' or [sounds like: *bizazasesheim*], I don't remember, but anyways it was still recognized by the government. You still could be freed from subjects to take exams, you still would answer before you teacher, the teacher who knew you—your weakness, what you know, what you did not know. Still there, only 10% would flunk and not 90%. Anyway, so I said, "I take the exam." I wasn't prepared. He says, "Well it's too late. It's the end of November." "That why did you call me?" In other words, I antagonized him and Dr. Aschendorf, you know, went and he gave in so he had to admit me. Well, I came to take the examen and they gave me Latin. Yeah, I told you Latin, there I wasn't good, Latin, I wasn't good but I knew by heart, and you know *Puraleweski* my teacher, he liked when I recited the *Aeneid* and the *Ovid*, you know and the *Horace*, [speaks in Latin] this was everything, you know, he didn't care. But I came here, there was a female teacher, she began to ask me. I really did not know Latin. And after it came to math, I did not know math. How did I make it there, math? I tell you, there was a Jew, you know, who became a Christian, *Blader* in the *Szkola Jordansowska*, in that Polish high school, when he came he gave me something to write that the beginner and the first grade grammar school could have answered because he saw that I did not know math, but he became a *goy*. Why? Before he was terrible to the Jews while he was a Jew but he became a *goy*, he favored!

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 1

TAPE 3, SIDE 2

MR: They said, "You would be good for the fourth grade." But the war would not allow me to go even to sixth grade, even to seventh or nothing. So I was just out.

JL: You did never get in then?

MR: No. Why? They flunked me, partly because I forgot the material. In four or five months I forgot the material. Secondly, the Wi niewski were very wonderful to me and I started from the good subjects which I knew. Here they started from the bad subjects. Thirdly, they also were interested, the Jews, to show that they are better than they are strong, to show the anti-Semites that they mean business, you understand?. And then, and fourth because I was a little arrogant and so was Dr. Aschendorf. There were many reasons. And, also, there you had to pay, too, and they knew that I left Wi niewski because I didn't, I wouldn't, I couldn't pay. So I went home and I began to say, to think of suicide, to contemplate suicide.

JL: How old were you by then?

MR: It was '27 — nineteen years, yeah. No. I was born 1908, twenty, twenty-one...No, no, nineteen years. I contemplated suicide. And I began, got up in the morning, I stopped shaving, I stopped eating, only smoking and smoking and smoking and would walking on the street like a madman. Yes, I was penniless. So after a week--

JL: You were back in Skalat by this time?

MR: No, I was in Lemberg.

JL: Oh, you were in Lemberg. I see.

MR: I was in Lemberg and I started drinking. Finally I wrote a letter to my sister, the older sister, she lived with us in one side, and I said, "I went and I fell." In Yiddish you say *gefaln*. "And I fell in a way I cannot get in. Now, the first thing is I need twenty zlotys to come home. I need for the ticket and I am planning to learn something, like to be a barber would be good. This is what I'm going to do." So my father writes me back, "My son, you tell me you fell. It's ridiculous, 'you fell.' This is life. You are on the bench, under the bench; on the horse, under the horse. I'm sending you not twenty zlotys, I'm sending you five hundred

zlotys telegraphic and I do not want you to go to high school— learn." Why he was ashamed that I would come back with a whip without a horse you understand. What would people say? Because in our town they lived: [In Hebrew]What will people say? And the same day, an hour later, I got five hundred zlotys telegraphic. By telegraph, so again I went, My sister says later, "How about going back to Wi newsa, to that school? Maybe they'll take you." I never thought about it. I came there. He said, "Well, you know, I don't handle it," because he had a principal. "You will have to talk to him." I came to that man and he said, "You have to come to take exams again at the end of the half year in January. Go, where do you have parents?" I said, "In Skalat." "Go to Skalat and learn and get ready and come back for exams." This was '28. Now, I had to come in '28. Now I was in November. You know, November?

JL: But weren't you then too old already, even according to the forged documents?

MR: No, I had to go back to that some grade where I made the examen, the seventh. You understand? No, I wasn't too old for the seventh grade. I had to re-make the examen which I made already. I was accepted but because I went to the Hebrew school and they fired me, they flunked me, I had to re-make all the examen. Now I go home and I say nothing. This, I have to tell you. I went out and I met the professor of physics, you know, Pribulsky, tall man, red hair, red cheeks, red. "Huh, how are you, huh?" And I told him the story. "Well," he says, He recited Isaiah's word: [Hebrew, from Isaiah 49:17]— "You destroyers, they come from you." Why? Polish school did accept me and the Jewish school did not and in such a way. He says, "Why don't you go?" He was a teacher in Szkoła Jordanowska, but he was principal in the eleventh high school. This was mathematic, no Latin but lots of mathematic. He says, "You will learn. Come at the end of the year to me, to my high school." And I say, "I won't be prepared. I can't make it. It's math, it's lots of math, no Latin, I have to undo.." And he said, I still remember, "[Hebrew]," which means, "I will help you; I will give you a push." This gave me so much. I came home, again to the bookstore, again books, and I began to learn, learn and nights and sleep from twelve to eight. I slept my eight hours but during the night I slept and this was 1928 at the end of 1928. This was '28, mo, it was '27, but in January it was already '28. Such the U.S. people they tell you that 1928 was such a cold year,

cold winter, that people would die, it was, life was impossible. It went down to seventy below. And this was what happened in Lemberg. The telephone wires, telegraph torn, the streets were empty, the stores were frozen, the water everywhere frozen. They used to have six, seven thousand casualties everyday. So the school was closed. They would open one day and three weeks closed. This saved me. Why? Because when you were off at the all the examens in one day, that's too hard. But when you have an examen and after you have a week time, you have time to prepare, to brush up. And this my examens, instead of lasting two hours, they lasted five, six weeks. And it was again I was lucky. I knew certain things by heart. Latin, for example, I wasn't bad in Latin. And Herr Blader in math, he would kill himself for me. [chuckles] He never asked me anything; he gave me grades, yeah. I was lucky. I can't say that I was a good student and I was well prepared, but I entered again. You want, I can show you my report card from that school?

JL: So how long were you in that school?

MR: I was through the end of the year.

JL: Half a year?

MR: Yeah. But I got for all the year, you know, seventh grade, and I was in eighth grade. Went down for vacation, you know, for vacation I went home and after vacation I came back. No school. The school fell apart. I paid them, I don't remember ninety zlotys for inscription, but it wasn't so easy to give me the ninety zlotys back. I said, "Listen," I say, "I have a high school, Borszczow, who is fourteen kilometer from our town. I would like to go there."

JL: A high school?

MR: A high school.

JL: In where?

MR: Borszczow, in a small town, smaller than our town. Fourteen kilometer. "I would like to go there but I need your help. I need a recommendation." Because to go and to pass from one high school to another in eighth grade, first of all you have to get the permission from *curatorium*. He says, "This I cannot do."

JL: What is the *curatorium*?

MR: *Curatorium* is the superintendents, superintendents. When you said the *curatorium*, it's as if you would say, I don't know, God himself. It was different there than here. There you had to have your uniform. Every high school a uniform. And as boys, if he was caught in this uniform during lesson time by supervisors — they would go around in town — especially if he smoked a cigarette, he was kicked out and couldn't anymore go to high school. You don't know there, how it was there. Well anyways, what happened? He says, "I can give you a recommendation to the principal [sounds like: Yameli], who is a good friend of mine. He will help you. But you must have a permission to the *curatorium*." Yeah- you tell me to shorten but, it's very hard. I have to go back! [Jean Loeb Lettofsky laughs] Namely, the second part of the year, of course, Pashkotski, my professor of history, who didn't like me at all on account of the geography, when I came back he says, "Ahh, here he's back!" [laughs] Somebody, a big Polish man escaped and after he came backs. "Like that man, you are back!" And that Professor Pashkotski, he could not see me. He ignored me. Every month students would write forty-five minutes an essay on history. He taught Polish history and universal history, and he would do it this way. He would come, The students were so afraid of him, you know, and they used to say he was a drug-we don't know-a drug addict. And he would come in and he would write down, "The destruction of the Bastille." You have to write on the destruction of the Bastille. Or he would say, "The Greek revolution, 1828." I used to write. I did pretty well writing, but I would write everything, not about the Bastille. Everything. You understand? I would begin from Adam and Eve and the hour would pass and when he saw my things he would cross over, "Not to the topic." So I got an 'F', you understand. It came the end of the year, he comes to me. Other subjects I was pretty well, doing well. The day before I got something, I got in trouble with Polish, yes, but I didn't know whether he gave me an "F" or not, I suspected. A few days before the end of the year when they asked — we call it in Polish *promocja*, which means he gives you a chance, ask you the last time — he comes and say, "Relles," he says, "how many subject do you, is flunking? How many flunking subjects do you have?" I say, "Sir, as far as I know, I have a suspicion that I have in Polish a 'F'.

The last time I didn't answer so well." Because when he says "*Siedza, siedz pan*," which means, "Sir, you may be seated," that means you have an 'F'. And he says, "In history is a dog." I remember this is "*Historia jest psem*." In other words he was going to flunk me in history. I said, "Professor Pashkotski, you never asked me." He says, "Man! *Czlowiek!* Man! What do you mean to say I didn't ask you? You wrote six or seven essays. You didn't get one good grade, one sufficiency. And when you write I talk with you entire hour so I should talk with you now at least ten hours to — and now I can't. But I will ask you." And you know, I knew history very good because I studied it with a friend, with a certain Sharpe you remembered, he studied to. And I had ten books of history, the same subject, you know,. And when he began to ask me, you know, I was afire. My Polish was bad but I said everything from his book because one of the books was his. And he asked me in front of the principal and when it came to the end, he said, "I have nothing." So he began to ask Polish literature. Why? Because Mickiewicz was a poet and also made history. He constructed the legion [against Russian rule in Poland]. And at the end he says, "I have nothing to ask anymore." And when we went out he said, "But you are a walking encyclopedia." He used to teach in the ninth high school, the government school. Next day the students came from my high school, they wanted to know that Relles, that Jew, who was to Professor Pashkotski a phenomenon. So when I had my trouble to go to Borszczow I came to him and he wasn't home. It was seven o'clock in the evening and his wife she was a beauty, I'm telling, a rare beauty, she gave me a book and she put me in his office and I waited. Finally at ten o'clock, ten-thirty he came, that anti-Semite and I told him my story that I am back and I heard Wi niewski has no school anymore. And he said, "I know, unfortunately." "And I need recommendation in the superintendents." He said, "Well, I don't have too much to say to the superintendents," he says, because he was an *Endecja*, he was of the old party against Pilsudski. They had parties, too. In other words, he was candidate once to be the Minister of Culture and now he was just a teacher because he was an *Endecja*. It's the anti-Semitic faction, but they had not only anti-Semitism, they had other things, too. He said, "I have nothing to say today. I am nothing. But," he says, "make the

application to the superintendent, take the number," they call it *matrikula*, "and drop it in my box and I will see what I can do for you."

JL: And?

MR: And when I arrived to Borszczow, you know, Yameli already said, "Well, you have very good recommendations. Wi niewski gave me a letter saying that I am very diligent and I maintain myself and so on." He said, "Only this, only here you won't be able to have lessons, teaching, tuition. You won't be able to make a living." I said, "I have enough."

JL: In Borszczow?

MR: In Borszczow. Yameli he was a wonderful man. He was a *Endecja* too, an anti-Semite, but outside, not inside. He had a clubfoot, you know, but a fine man. And he said, and I got Professor Pashkotski. Everything was already. And I began to take exams.

JL: For Borszczow?

MR: Yes. Now. there was a professor, his name was Liess, a Polish professor, and he flunked me. I had a Jewish professor in German, Getselt, and he flunked me, too. But I had the rabbi — that rabbi, you know in that town, that was my Rabbi who taught me. Remember, I used to be his servant. So I went to him and he called Professor, what's his name? Getselt, the Jewish, I mean the German professor, Geselt who taught German and he said to him, "Give him a chance. Give a chance to Relles." Well, he wasn't so sure or this...you know, we used to say, [sounds like: "*A her in ruv*,"] it means I listen to him, "The rabbi, what did the rabbi mean?" But it was Yameli, you understand, it was Yameli who wanted me. And after the rest of the examens I took every once in a while. There was a mathematician, Wekselbaum," he was a Jewish, math and physics, but a Jewish boy. He was so wonderful. He gave me the questions, [laughs] he answered the questions for me and I entered there.

JL: And how long did you stay there?

MR: And there I stayed eighth grade, it means, well ten months. And I stayed and I went to maturity, you know, mature and we were, I don't remember how many, but I flunked. So I had to repeat the year,

another year. I flunked — and you would be surprised — Polish and German. I knew both subjects. Why did I flunk? Because they had to flunk another boy, Prokopovich, who was Polish, and there were more Jews than Poles so they had to find, you know. Why? Not because I knew German so well, no. But the Polish students knew nothing German, you know. In relationship to them, In comparison to them, I was a luminary in German. And when it comes to Polish, he never forgave me that I didn't know the Polish when he asked me and I didn't know. But after I made up and he would never forgave me. And the trouble with me was my writing was bad. He taught for Prokopovich too, and Prokopovich I did not know. In other words, I deserve, so I had to repeat that year.

JL: Did you remain at the school?

MR: And I repeat it and I made my maturity, you saw it, and I'll show you my grades. I had the Polish *dobrze*, which means good. And I'll show you that.

JL: Now what year was that?

MR: This was in 1931.

JL: Okay, then you told me, when we talked last time, that you went to study law.

MR: Yeah, now after maturity I went to study law. And I studied law, I came there. Well, in Krakow. Krakow there were two teachers. Now, in Krakow you had two thousand students on the first year. They had to pass only two hundred. So you had no chance. There were two professors, one a certain [name, in Polish], a religious Jew, an Orthodox, he would go every *Shabbes* with *tallis* to *daven*, and a Polish man, [sounds like: Kutrzeba]. Kutrzeba means in Polish, "you have to be it." In other words you have to learn. He used to say, "My name is Kutrzeba , which means you have" — but no matter how good you knew it he would always say, "You learned it from a [sounds like: *bricht*.] What's a *bricht*? The shortening of the subject. Small.

JL: Abridged?

MR: Abridged? Yeah. There would call it *bricht*. But I flunked. I flunked like others. I wasn't prepared. But if I was prepared, I wouldn't. Nothing.

JL: You did this for one year?

MR: Yeah...It's a half a year. A half a year because you have to make it twice. So I went, after, they took me to the army.

JL: This was in, already, so the beginning of '32?

MR: Of '32. They took me to the army. I was six months in the Army because my father paid and he could show that he is sixty-five years old. This was the law in Poland that at sixty-five years, if your son maintained you, your son was exempted from the army. So I made six months and three weeks and after I was freed. So, what did I do? I made an application to go to Vienna. I had a brother-in-law, an ex-brother-in-law. I wrote a letter and he sent me from the university and the university said I have to have all good, all A's. If I have all A's they will accept me. I wanted to study medicine, so but I didn't tell have all A's, so I say to my brother-in-law, "Can you do it for me as you did?" "Oh, yes." And I gave him my diploma and he took that, put that thing. But the paper was in such a way that it was recognized that you did something. He wrote "bardzo dobrze, bardzo dobrze, bardzo dobrze," but it wasn't good.

JL: What is that? Very good?

MR: Yeah. He saw that something was done. So my father — my father was a very smart man — he said, "You don't put such a thing. You bring it here, they will arrest you for falsifying documents." So I said to my brother-in-law, "Well, write back what was written." So he again put it and put the good things but it still was — you couldn't prepare, you couldn't bring this. So what do I do? I go to Borszczow and I show. I say, "That's it. It happened. I was at the river assisting the workers and it began to rain." And my principal, it was already another principal. He calls the professor and says, "Give him another thing, give him another- because nothing, you can see that the grades are good. He did not falsify." And he says, "Well, but you can see that here a chemical was used." He refused himself. So the principal said, "Why don't you go to Professor — " I don't remember his name. He was a man from Borszczow. He was without a job, jobless. "Why don't you go for advice to him?" I went to him, very fine man, a Jewish boy, and he takes my thing, you know, and goes to the office and brings ink and pours all the ink on the

paper and he crumples it and says, "Well, this, that's it. Now, you go and you tell that your brother or your sister or your I-don't-know-who, took the, you left it on the table, and he took the ink and poured on it. Now they can't recognize anything." You know, that man, I don't remember-- Brach, his name was Brach. The principal, he knew that I falsified, that I did something, but he said, "Okay, now we will send it and you'll get another one." And this is the second one. You will see: "a duplicate." I want to show you what kind of a rascal I was. Not a rascal, a crook. In other words, you understand I could hide all these things but I want you to know me the way I am. My good things and my bad things. And I got my things. Okay. And I was called to the army.

JL: I'm afraid I'm going to have to stop here again.

MR: Okay.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 2

TAPE 4, SIDE 1

JL: You were beginning to tell me about your military services.

MR: As I said, in Poland was a law that the father was sixty-five years old, the boy, maintaining the father was exempted from the service. But it just happened they said, "If you were a student who recently graduated, how could you maintain your father?" So my father did not give up and he went from one office to the other and he paid, and because in our town and all in the area military service was considered a terrible thing. It was considered hardship and torture and everything. But when I came to the army I enjoyed myself. Certainly we had the hard time. It was so far from the home and exercises and marching and shooting and all these things and maneuvers. The Polish army was not a picnic nor was it a honeymoon. It was hard. But we used to make, for example, eighty miles a day walking and six months and three weeks — we traveled ostensibly to the front, to the battlefield in these, we called it lorries, which was like trucks. All the time running. It was hard but one thing I can say: no anti-Semitism there. There was one officer called me a "sacramental Jew." It was like a swearing, like an offence. It was doing exercises, I didn't do something well as he wanted me to and he was called several times in the offices and I was called as a witness. Of course I denied, I said "I didn't hear anything." I didn't want him to become more anti-Semite. I didn't want to inspire him with a sentiment of vengeance toward others Jewish people. And I didn't feel offended, it was something just like swearing, that's all. He didn't say something terrible. But my commander, the commander of my company, he called me several times. He want to get my confession. And after I was called by the major and after I was called by the commandant of the regiment and after they dropped it because I did not want to press charges. This is what I can say.

JL: How long were you in the army?

MR: I was six months and three weeks. Had I graduated from a governmental high school, they would have put me to the officer course, in other words, and I would have become — I had a chance to become a lieutenant, provided I did my job well. There was anti-Semitism in Poland, no doubt, but I did not see it. Soldiers, yes, they were anti-Semites but it was very prohibited to offend a Jew, to call him *Zyd*, Jew.

JL: So then after the What did you do after the military service?

MR: After the military service I got a job in a small town not far from our town. The town name was Krzywicz and I have a certificate. There it was a *Talmud Torah* It was a very poor town. The poverty— it's indescribable. Small town, no sidewalks. You didn't see a piece of plaster. And when there were a few drops of rain there was, we would swim in the mud. The people were so poor many of them lived just by going, by walking and asking for- begging in other towns. They would go on the fairs. But the town, the field around, the ground, belonged to a Jewish man, Meltzer he lived in Skalat, in our town. But his grandchild, he took care of everything. In those times, they did not have the plows as today. They would plow just with the metal things and horses. He was a very charitable man. He gave charity. But the *Talmud Torah* I was hired to teach there. It was a nice building and we had five teachers. The money would come from America. It was called Kaile Birnbaum Auxiliary. The name of the lady who left money in the bank and the interest was to maintain that *Talmud Torah*. Her name was Kaile Birnbaum. And I was teacher there. I was to teach Talmud, Bible, and prepare children to high school. But they didn't have a high school so in the morning while those children were in their public school I would teach, I would prepare four, five children, teach them so that they can take a test.

JL: Secular subjects?

MR: Secular subjects. In the afternoon at two o'clock, because their school was only until one o'clock, six times a week. At two o'clock I would start to teach *Talmud Torah* things, I mean Hebrew subjects. I had boys thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old. Boys and girls.

JL: Mixed?

MR: Yes, yes, yes. And the boys would learn Talmud and so my teaching was until seven o'clock from the morning from nine to twelve and in the afternoon from two to seven. We were, as I said, four or five teachers. We had another man, Dr. Rus, a man who after left for Israel. He used to teach the same subjects as I did. And after we had, no four teachers we had. We had a man who was seventy-five years old. He still was a teacher. He would sleep all the time. He was a *dardake melamed*, in other words he

would teach just the reading to small children. We had seventy children and at certain times they would get even milk and they would get a child didn't have shoes, he would get a pair of shoes, and so on and so on. And it was a wonderful school. And I had the very good wages, 125 zlotys. It was as much as any teacher in Poland would receive. I was a bachelor. My monthly expense was about twenty-five, thirty zlotys, and I lived very well. I had a room and food and everything. And besides this I was a religious teacher, teacher of religion in the public school, and I had another small very little, how would you say? Salary, thirty zlotys together.

JL: What years?

MR: This was year '32.

JL: So right after you graduated?

MR: Yes. It was '32, '33, something like that. Anyway, in '33 we, Dr. Rus that was [speaks in Yiddish], he began to tell me how he learned in Hildesheimer, in the rabbinical college in Germany, how everything was wonderful and how well they would eat. He would talk to me about the fish they would eat and about the *kugel* and about the steaks, the kosher steaks they would eat and so on and so on. But Hitler was already there. But he told me there is a rabbinical seminary in Florence and there if I could get in, it would be a wonderful things.

It was at that time — yes, it was in '33 already, of course — it was at that time when the Roosevelt devaluated the dollar, the New Deal and so on, and all of a sudden the hundred or 150 or two hundred dollars the *Talmud Torah* would get from America, instead of being nine hundred zlotys, it was only five hundred zlotys. With my sixth sense, I smelled that now it will be a reduction of salaries and a reduction of teachers. Well I confess I wasn't very concerned. I knew that in case of sending teachers away I would not be the first to be sent away. They would send away the man who was seventy-five years old. They would sent away the other teacher, his name was Herscher, instead of teaching the children he had a horse. He would be with his horse all day, it was his hobby. I was not threatened, but I felt that being a bachelor, I have my duty is to leave them here. Well, there was more than one reason I wanted to go

away. I didn't see any future there. So I started to get interested and I wrote to Florence. It's not so easy. I had to write a letter, send it to Lemberg to be translated. No one in Krzywicze knew Italian. He gave me the address of the rabbinical college and when I wrote there, I sent the letter away, I got an answer from Florence telling me the rabbinical college is transferred to Rome. He gave me the address, too. He answered me in Italian so I had to send again the letter and all this cost money. A great part of the money I made, I really had to spend until I arrived to Rome.

And getting a passport in Poland was very bad too. Why? You had to pay five hundred zlotys. It was a fortune. Why was it so? Poland was not happy to send the Jews away. While she-Poland was not happy with the Jews inside, they were afraid if I am getting a passport, I got out, I am poor, so I will only dishonor the name of Poland. So they limited it. They made it difficult. Finally, I got everything and on November 16, 1933, on a Friday morning, after traveling a week from Skalat, from my town, to Rome, I arrived in Rome. Why did it last a week? Because I stopped in Lemberg to see my friends and after I stopped in Vienna where I had two nieces from my sister who died and I arrived exhausted and very tired on a Friday morning at ten o'clock I had a few hundred zlotys — ten zlotys to a dollar at that time. I arrived there to Rome. I had the address of the rabbinical college. The office was Via Santa [Italian word] I arrived there, maybe I took a [Italian word], which is a horse and buggy and he brought me to [Italian Street]. He fooled me, too. It was the first time how I saw that the Italians are thieves and swindlers. But later of course I would learn better. And I arrived there, big building, everywhere on the streets I saw "*Duce, Duce, Duce*"⁶⁴ — Mussolini placards. I don't know, probably they had a election time. "*Si, si,*" which means "yes, yes" because when you went there to elections you could say "si" or "non." I don't know, but he was idolized, yes. They loved him very much. And everywhere papers and radio, was all the time they talked about "*Duce, Duce, Duce.*" After, of course, I learned that Rome was full of police in uniform who would go around to see that nothing happens to the Duce. But this is in parenthesis. I arrived there to the office—you want to interrupt me? Please interrupt me.

⁶⁴ A popular title for Mussolini.

JL: Well, I just, I was just noticing from the pre-interview, perhaps it was a misunderstanding, it said that you had a rabbinical diploma from Lemberg?

MR: I had, yes, but actually I was not interested in the rabbinical diploma. I was interested in, I want to study medicine and he said to me that Dr. Rus, my friend, that if I am a student of the rabbinical college, I get all the education as a rabbi and I get food and shelter and they take a university, too. In other words this was only a crutch. My going there to study rabbinical college was so that I could have the possibility to attend a university. Actually my going to Rome was because I wanted to study at university.

JL: So, we've skipped something here.

MR: No, if you want you can skip it.

JL: No, I don't want to.

MR: My going to Rome, I wanted to study at university. I did not have the possibility in Poland you could study only law and philosophy, that's all. All other faculties, all other departments, were closed for the Jews. Only it was a *numerus clausus*.⁶⁵ That means for ten Polish students, one Jewish student could study medicine. So my going out to Rome, to Italy, my leaving, was this. I had this in my mind: to study, pretending to study rabbinical college four hours a day, the rest of the time I would dedicate at the university, to study university, preferably medicine and my studies would be financed by the rabbinical college.

JL: Now were talking about Rome now.

MR: So I went to Rome.

JL: You said to me in the preliminary interview, that you went Yeshiva Machzike Hadas.

MR: Yes, I was, I just skipped it. I just forgot to tell you. You understand? Yes, I was in Machzike Hadas while I was studying at the high school in Lemberg. I used to go two, three hours to the Machzike Hadas and there I got my diploma.

JL: Rabbinical diploma?

⁶⁵ Limits placed on the number of Jews allowed in public office and in certain schools and professions.

MR: Rabbinical diploma. I still have it.

JL: You did that for one year?

MR: I would go and start. There Machzike Hadas, you were not obligated to be there. Whenever you had time you could go there and study with other students.

JL: I see.

MR: Yeah, it was a yeshiva, very old, old *modish yeshiva*.

JL: And you got a rabbinical ordination, a *semicha*?

MR: Well, I took a test and they gave me the...

JL: That was in 1932?

MR: This was in 1932, yes, yes. I left out many things. I left out that in 1931 I was in Israel six weeks.

JL: No, that's okay to leave out. Since you are a Rabbi, I just want to establish it.

MR: Yeah, yeah that's right. I left out many things. Anyway, I, was not interested in the rabbinate. I was not interested to become a rabbi. My going to Rome was because no other country wanted me. You could go to England, you could go to Czechoslovakia, you could go where else, I don't remember where you could go, but you needed money. You had to show that you have your own means to study. To Italy, yeah, you needed a visa. Italy said to you, Mussolini, "you want to come to study, you don't need the visa. You can come, you can come thirty percent reduction railroad." You know. And University you paid nothing and this was for everybody. Any student from abroad, any foreigner attended university for just credits. All the universities in Rome, there wasn't limitation. You could study in Rome, in Genoa, Pisa, Milan, Padua, Bologna, Ferrara — you had there hundreds of universities. Practically every town had, if nothing, a university. They don't know anything about college. College, *collegio* means the something else there. *collegio* means a school, any school, with a dormitory, this is *collegio*. For example, parents divorce so they sent their children to the college, to *collegio*.

JL: Okay, could you tell me a little bit about the rabbinical seminary in Rome?

MR: In Rome. Well, when I arrived there, finally I arrived there before ten o'clock, it was before nine o'clock. Finally a man came. There was a little boy, a boy maybe twelve, thirteen years old, he made me wait outside. Finally about nine o'clock a man came, I learned later it was Professor Dante Lattes, a great scholar, a philosopher, well known in Italy. I have his writings here. He was a teacher for the entire Italian nation. For the Italians, I mean. A Jewish philosopher. And he started talking to me German. My German was not good but I had to talk German. The he started, he switched to Hebrew. Hebrew, it was better. So first of all he said to the boy, "Take him to Pines, to Mr. Pines." What was Pines? Pines was a restaurant.

So I had to walk with my two valises. I can't describe the valises, but they were you know, old valises with rusty wire around. When you looked at the valises you knew all about me, about all my physical and moral state. Anyway we arrived to Pines. There it was a kosher restaurant. There was a man with a *yarmulke*, a skull cap, of course. A *litvisher*⁶⁶ Jew. He ran the restaurant mostly for foreigners because Italian Jews don't care too much about kosher, and foreigners, tourists used come to Rome from all parts of the world, especially from America and Germany. And they would go to him. It does not mean that every tourist came to Pines. Jews who were interested to know something about Jews, Jews who had a kosher sentiment, a sentiment of orthodoxy would come there. I came there and when he looked at the valise he knew already who I was. They gave me to eat, spaghetti with *pomodoro*, which is—

JL: Tomato sauce?

MR: Tomato sauce and I ate it. I was hungry but to me it was just like eating, I do not know, nails or snails. And he gave me that. But they gave me something. And after I said, "How much is it?" he said, "Do you have to pay? I thought you don't have to pay anything." Maybe the boy told him, maybe it was a pauper. I don't know. I felt so very upset about it. I said, "Of course I have to pay." "Well, if you have to pay, give me five liras." Five liras was a half a dollar. For five liras I could live five days there in my town. I almost fainted but I took the five liras out, a silver coin and gave it and his wife was a wonderful woman, he was a fine man, too. They said, me "Well, if you want to sleep" — because they knew already that I don't have

⁶⁶ Italian for Lithuanian.

great means — "here is a house for German people who can spend. In Via Pettinari. It is just for young boys, for, how do you all them? Pilgrims. they go there to sleep. Because if you go to sleep in a hotel it might cost you five liras a day, even ten liras, even twenty. I hard, I thought I shall die. So, I don't remember whether I left the valises or I went with the valises. I took a bus and of course I didn't know a word Italian but the people, the Italian people — and I saw the Fascists in the uniform — how they helped me, how they understood me. The saw, I probably had the valises. The valises said that I was a pauper. Although I was not. I was a pauper in money but I had, I still had my stamina. I knew that I should not begin with asking charity.

And finally I arrived there, Via Pettinari, I'm to count the numbers, and I had my address. When I arrived there, it was a Catholic institution and pilgrim boys would come there and they could sleep. Everybody. It was ostensibly for Germans, but everybody could sleep here. How much was it? It was a lira a night. Not only but there, I could have coffee, I could have food. Not all but things like a little salad, bread — of course, I wouldn't eat unkosher. And there I saw I would not say hundreds but dozens of young boys, only for boys, who had come there from Austria, from Germany. There were Nazis okay there but the institution was Catholic so no one — of course, everybody had a right. They did not distinguish. They asked me of religion and I told them I was Jewish; it was okay. And those Nazis were- they behaved very nicely. I did not hide my name. We talked politics. They were against the Jews, but of course no one talked about killing Jews. They pointed out, some of them that Jews want to take over the world, that they are aggressive, that they are arrogant, they are the richest people, they are most communist, and so I discussed with them in a friendly way and I saw they were not just animals in those times.

Saturday, I went again to the restaurant. I ate there and there I met two people, a certain Jacob Fine, from Poland and another man, Urbach. His name was Ephraim Elimelech Urbach. Today he is a professor at university in Jerusalem and he's a great personality. He's known in all Israel. In fact, he appears on the TV very often. He's an author of many books. He is a great scholar and at the time he was also a candidate for becoming president of Israel. There I met him, small, not too tall, and at that

time he was already, he left Germany. He was from Poland. He used to teach in Germany at a rabbinical college and he came to Rome looking for a job. The fact is that he was a student of philosophy in Rome. He would work in the Vatican. 'Cause he wrote a book about, I don't remember, Russia, I believe, and he would consult the manuscript in the Vatican, Jewish manuscript. He lived, which means he ate and slept, in that *Pensione Pines*. Of course, he kept me aloof, he kept aloof. He felt he knew who he was and he probably guessed who I was, that there was a great difference. He was-

JL: Excuse me, I'm going to have to stop it here.

END OF TAPE 4, SIDE 1

TAPE 4, SIDE 2

JL: I have some specific questions about the rabbinical school itself. First, if could you tell me something about the professors?

MR: We had there Professor Cassuto. He was exegetes, Umberto Cassuto, one of the greatest of this century. He was a very small man. Why should I say this? Doesn't mean, stature is not important. It is important because that man, while he was a great scholar he must have had a little inferiority complex so that he was never a big rabbi. He was a rabbi in Florence and after he was a rabbi and university teacher of Hebrew in Florence. But after, when he got the job as professor at the university in Rome, he left Florence and on that account the rabbinical college too was transferred from Florence to Rome. There was a Professor Freimann. He was professor in Germany, I believe in Hildesheimer. A great scholar. And he had to leave on account of Hitler. He was a very fine man. Professor Cassuto's brother-in-law, Artom, a great scholar. Professor Dante Lattes used to teach and a certain professor, Isadore Kahn, a rabbi from Hungary. And He came to Rome and he would be a teacher at the rabbinical college and also will do a little cantoring, a little in the synagogue, just to conglomerate his salary. We had very good professors. We had more professors than students. What does it mean? I heard later, and I saw later, the rabbinical college paid, with all for the students, food and lodging and everything, and after they make a *pensionato*, which means a dormitory, for Italian Jewish student, for students who were born in Italy. Not for those who came from abroad. Why? Because they knew that we came not to study at the rabbinical college but to get all the other privileges, to have the university paid, and to have paid the dormitory and everything. And besides, they said "Ff we give foreign students we have thousands and thousands of them. We could not afford it." So only the Italian students, and there was a certain [Italian name], a certain [Italian name], a certain I-don't-remember-his-name. There were three, four Italian students. There was a bunch of students like myself who came there who wanted to profit, to have profits, material profit there, just ostensibly there at that college, I mean that rabbinical college. That's all. So I was out. They didn't say it in a nice way. They treated it so cold, you know. They ignored us. We

were ignored. For example, in Poland the anti-Semites would talk about creating separate seats for the Jewish students at the university. They never came to do it but there we practically had separate seats because an Italian Jewish student would never sit close to me. He would sit aside. They would never talk to me. I was just like ostracized. In a certain way they were right because they knew that we students from abroad were dishonest. We just came to take advantage of them.

JL: How many students were there?

MR: Well there were, as far as I remember, one, two, three four, we were four from abroad, and my time—no, we were even six, yes, from abroad in my time. We have two Grosses; Hershkowitz, myself; there was a Lithuanian student, I don't remember his name; a certain Glatze, six, it's seven, eight students.

JL: And how many Italian students?

MR: Italians, well, I'm talking about the highest course because they have certain grades. There we had one, two, three, four.

JL: How many years were you there?

MR: Well, I did not attend all the time. Why? Because I had to make a living. How did I make a living? I met a man who lived in Venice, this man had a [Italian word], which means tableware, and he would go around. He would not sell it officially, he would pretend being a representative from Vienna. Actually, it was from Eran, which was Italy, the German part. He pretended being a representative having just samples and he just remained without money and he has to sell this [German word], which means *cauzione*.⁶⁷ He would sell it because he had to materialize, he had to get some money. So he would give you six pieces of knives, you know table knives and forks and spoons. The worth of a hundred liras he would give you for eighteen liras or for twenty liras.

JL: So you did this for him?

MR: He did it by himself. And he introduced me and other boy, Jacob Fine. You would go into a store, might have been a restaurant, it might have been a clothing store, a dry goods store, or a supermarket and you

⁶⁷ Italian for 'deposit' or 'down payment'.

would go to the first one there and would sell: "I have these. It is a [German word]. I'm without money." It presented itself very good it looked very good. It looked just like ivory, you know, the handles. Everything was so beautiful, packed well. But when you put it in water[laughs] once it was just to throw it away. It happened to me that I went to the same place, or to people who bought it already. They showed me: "Look what you are selling!"

JL: So how long did you do this?

MR: I did it for a month I don't remember I believe for a month or for two months. After, I said, "Why should I work for him?" because he wanted his percentage and we got the address, Fine and I and good friends. We got the address. Why shouldn't I go to Vienna? And I went to Vienna. I had there a cousin, you know, and I had my brother-in-law. My brother-in-law didn't want to see me. And the girls escaped when I came. But my cousin was very — he was a Communist, but this is not my business. He had a sister, also first cousins, she was *primarius*⁶⁸ in the great *Weiner Krankenhaus*,⁶⁹ so I had where to stay and I bought merchandise. Well, to make it short I tried to stay, to remain in Vienna at the university together with the *yeshiva*. It was nothing to do. So I went back to Rome. When I came back to Rome, while I was selling—and I did pretty well. I made enough to live, to pay my expenses. I went to live there in Pines' *pensionato*. I did not eat. I did not have over-

JL: So in this time how often did you manage to get back to the rabbinical school?

MR: To the rabbinical college I would go very seldom. They didn't need me. What did they need me?

JL: When did you finally finish there?

MR: I finished after the War. Meanwhile, I started to get private lessons there in Rome and when the war came, when Mussolini marched into Abyssinia, two teachers, two Hebrew teachers went there as chaplains. They needed a Hebrew teacher so I became a Hebrew teacher in the parochial school, Vittorio Polacco. To teach Hebrew there.

⁶⁸ Austrian German for 'chief physician' or 'head of a department'.

⁶⁹ German for 'the Vienna Hospital'.

JL: In Abyssinia?

MR: Not in Abyssinia, in Rome, in lieu of those two. In other words, I put my things away, you know, because I couldn't be both a agent of tableware, selling tableware and go to the rabbinical college and I wanted university, too. But university, I couldn't even go there then. So I began having private lessons. Private lessons from Jews who were from Poland, from Switzerland, and they lived there. Italians didn't need it. And both between the teaching there in 1935 I got that. In the morning I would teach in the school, Vittorio Polacco as a Hebrew teacher for the children, and in the afternoon I would have private lessons. I made very well. So I could even send money to my father. I could go to the college, not often. Of course they considered me a student so-so. In other words I could see, I could take tests, but I could not attend all their subjects. I attended Cassuto because I liked the way he used to teach.

JL: You attended him while you were teaching?

MR: Yes. And, well, I had at all times in Rome different times. During vacation I would be a guide. I learned things in the Roman Forum, in the Vatican, in Via Appia, and the Coliseum and all around other museums. And people who would come to Pines, to Mr. Pines. You would be surprised. This was in 1934, '35, '36. People, Jewish tourists would come from Germany, under Hitler they were oppressed, and they would come, stay in the first, in the best hotels but they still want to eat the kosher meal or they want to meet Jewish people. So, they would go to Pines and Pines would say, "You want to see Rome? Here is a boy." And he pointed at me and I would guide them, you know.

JL: Let me move back for a moment. You were in Rome then from '33 to '36?

MR: It's not '33. I came to Rome-

JL: September?

MR: September or November? I'm afraid it's November, I'm sorry. November 16, That's on a Friday morning.

JL: Until December '36?

MR: That's right.

JL: You were in Rome and for the most part teaching?

MR: Teaching, yes. Teaching and guiding and the first months I also was a seller of these things. Nobody disturbed me. Police, yeah, police would stop me every once in awhile because they were afraid I wanted to kill Mussolini. But when they saw what I had in my briefcase. They say that I always used to have my stuff and a little package of figs and peaches just to eat.

JL: Let me ask you know. You say you finished the rabbinical school after the war?

MR: That's right because I could not. I didn't have enough, you understand? I made an examen here, an examen there, but I could not finish that. Now, this I did not tell you: that in 1935 finally, money I had. I began to say, to study medicine. They said, "No, you cannot do it" — I talked there to the man of the faculty — "because you have to be at the university. You have to come. You have to attend, you have to see, you have to participate in the *laboratorium*."⁷⁰ So the secretary of the rabbinical college who was also at the university something, she said, "Why, Mayer, why Relles, do you want to study medicine? For you, study philosophy." The money I didn't have. Now. It was done. Yes, at that time I had to pay half already. Before it was *gratis*. So I went, I paid I left my documents there and that was in 1935. I never went to the university. I never participated, just I paid my dues and that was all, you understand? So I was a student at the university and at the rabbinical college without attending either one of them.

JL: Alright, let's forget the dates of when you attended right now. I would like to ask some general questions.

MR: Yeah.

JL: Would you tell me something about the political activities, if there were any, at the rabbinical college?

MR: At the rabbinical college there was no political activity.

JL: There wasn't.

MR: The boys were Fascists. No, I don't remember, no they weren't so much. No, nothing. They were Italians. Italian patriots. And I hurt very much of when they talked to us to say, "To me, an Italian Christian is closer than a Jewish man from abroad." They were Italians. I don't remember, because a fascist had to

⁷⁰ German for laboratory, here meaning a class somewhat like a discussion section at a United States university.

wear here on his lapel, you know the Fascist sign. It was like a—well, never mind, you know, from this time. You know, it was something on his lapel he had that he was a Fascist. They never wore it but they were Fascists and it was understandable because he could make people enthusiastic about it. I saw it.

JL: Were there any Zionistic activities at the rabbinical college?

MR: No. The answer is no! Not at all. And Cassuto, that great scholar, that great inexhaustible scholar, he was an Italian. He was a Fascist because on a Fascist holiday not only did he always have on his lapel that sign, the Fascist sign, he would dress like a Fascist in all the Fascist uniform. And since he was a little—very little, the students would say, "Who is that little Balilla?"⁷¹ Balilla was — Mussolini required that the small children from four years, they were Balillas in the organization. So, he looked like a little boy. [laughs] They were Fascists, yes. He taught, he actually taught — this I heard from other people too — he taught Bible as he would teach Lilius or Tacit or Virgil. He was a pathologist of the Bible.

JL: Well, you were beginning to—you seemed upset that there were no Zionistic activities, then you talked about Cassuto. Was there a relationship between Cassuto and this?

MR: Well, I mean a man like him, he felt nothing about Judaism, about Zionism. He was offered a job at the university in Jerusalem in '25, I don't know, and he said no. He declined.

JL: Were there any cultural activities at the rabbinical seminary?

MR: Yes, they had a Jewish *Convegno*, Convention. There they had, you know, a few people, they would go and talk. But it was all, yes! All, yes! There was — I forgot his name, such a very, very known name, Professor—I forgot. A Zionistic who would come from Florence, you know. There was *Avvocato*⁷² Viterbo, he was a Zionist. Dante Lattes was a Zionist. And there was a certain *Avvocato* Pacificia, a great man. He's still alive. He must be a hundred years old. At that time, I met him at the Pines. He was a great lawyer, known, and he gave up his office and he dedicated himself to Zionism. He predicted in 1934, he said, "You will see what you will get for your being Fascist." Because every Jew claimed that he was

⁷¹ A Fascist paramilitary youth organization. The term also refers to a member of the organization.

⁷² Italian for 'attorney'.

[Italian word] that he was [Italian word],⁷³ that he made the march on Rome and so on and so on.⁷⁴ And he said, "You will see for doing all these things for the, how do you call it? The Fascists, for being Fascists, what you will get." And he, too, was very active. In that Convention, there were Zionists, yes, yes, there were very staunch Zionists. Dr. Disegni, he was a great Zionist and he actually died fighting in Israel. But in the rabbinical college, nothing.

JL: Now this Convention took place at the rabbinical college?

MR: No, they would not! It had nothing to do with the rabbinical college. It was for adults who were not at the rabbinical college.

JL: I see. But I'm asking were there any cultural activities at the rabbinical college?

MR: No, no, no. There at the rabbinical college it was in the synagogue on the fourth floor, or fifth floor, I don't remember. They would come, there was a big room and the professor would come and teach Bible and after he would go another professor would come. And this would begin at three o'clock in the afternoon and would last until eight o'clock, nine o'clock in the evening.[inaudible, tape record stops; restarts] Plus the spice of one Jew toward the other Jew is something terrible there at rabbinical college. Today, after so many years, after more than fifty years, I'm asking myself, if you were in their place what would you have done? You had to face Jewish boys who come to take advantage of you, not to be rabbis, but to be at university, and perhaps to be rabbis, too, and to take your place away. How would you act? And of course, I, in my mind, I justify them. But at that time it was terrible because we felt the brunt of Hitler. All the Jews over the world, and I, in my situation, I felt that there should be a little solidarity. There was none. And unfortunately the Polish Jew in Italy had a very bad name. In fact, every non-Italian Jew was a Polish Jew to them and I always-not always-often, and often I heard that the Polish Jews are the trouble makers. They cause trouble and they are the prime cause of anti-Semitism. Is it true? Is it not true? Of

⁷³ A term for one who attended a formative Fascist rally in 1919, thus proving their early loyalty to Fascism and Mussolini.

⁷⁴ All of these were markers of early or strong loyalty to fascism and Mussolini.

course I imagine Jewish people in Italy, Polish Jews who more or less did unloyal business. For example, I saw Jews like myself selling those tableware, which was a great swindle. I saw people who would come and sell these electric bulbs. They would sell them in factories, in big houses, in very private places and these bulbs were good just for ten minutes to burn and after, when those Italians saw what those bulbs were and when they knew that the sellers were Jews, you can imagine what they thought. I also saw a Jew, a man who sold cameras, Zeiss and Ikon, he sold on payment and he sold it in a way that when giving the camera to the Italian the first payment he got already his money. And after he knew that the Italian would not pay, but a camera is not a pair of pants. If the Italian did not pay he would bring him to court, make him pay expenses and after get the camera back. It was a no kosher business. And I saw these things. But is this a reason to condemn all Polish Jews and to say that every Polish Jew is a rascal, that every Polish Jew is a thief? Well, that's it.

JL: Let me ask you now something? Where did you live in Rome-[overlaps with Relles] while you were teaching?

MR: In Rome I lived all the time in Pines, Via Campo Marzia 12.

JL: [overlaps with Relles answer] The whole time you were there?

MR: The whole time. I used to live there and I had a room and I used to eat there *Shabbes* on Friday night and during the week I would live on eggs and it's cheese they used to have, mascarpone, they call it. You go there to a milk place where they sell milk food. They call it *latteria*. There you can have eggs and butter and cheese, all kinds of cheeses and mascarpone and all kinds of things and I would go, this. There was a time when I used to eat in the school. They had for the children a lunch so I used to eat there too. I paid there very little at that school, Vittorio Polacco. In other words, it was no problem. In Italy really it's no problem. They had the most wonderful food in those times you would buy, for example, oranges, grapes, peaches. Big peaches, I never saw such peaches here. You would buy it for little or for nothing or for very little. In other words, I never spent, a small, not even half of my income was I needed. I was doing very well.

JL: Let me ask you know, did you have a chance to visit the Rome ghetto?

MR: I used to go to Rome in the ghetto everyday because I went to the rabbinical college-

JL: [overlaps with Relles answer]The college, it was in the ghetto?

MR: -besides the ghetto is in the heart of the city.

JL: Okay, so the college was in the ghetto?

MR: In the ghetto.

JL: And the teaching was also in the ghetto?

MR: The teaching was a little far from the ghetto to the rest on the left side of the Tiber. I forgot the name, it was about two blocks from the ghetto. Wait a minute—the college—no the college was in the synagogue, was in the ghetto. The office was two blocks away.

JL: In which synagogue?

MR: It was the Temple. They call it "Temple." The Temple there had rooms upstairs on fourth floor where the rabbinical college was, and where it's now.

JL: What was the exact name of the rabbinical college?

MR: Collegio Rabbinico Italiano, you want me to write it down?

JL: Oh no, it's okay.

MR: Collegio Rabbinico, one "L" and two "G" [Relles spelling was incorrect] Collegio Rabbinico Italiano When you came for example in the class, in the office, you saw a big picture of Mussolini, that was all.

JL: I'm going to have to turn the tape over.

MR: Okay.

END OF TAPE 4, SIDE 2

TAPE 5, SIDE 1

JL: I'd like to ask you now for some descriptions of the ghetto, impressions you had of the ghetto.

MR: Well, the ghetto, there are Jewish people who talked Italian with putting in Hebrew words — very degenerated. For example, a policeman is [words are in Judeo-Italian, sounds like: *yorbede*]. What is *yourbede*? Since when you play, how do you call it? With the numbers to make money, lottery, when you have a dream, twelve is a policeman, twelve is a policeman. So *yorbede*, but they don't know to say *yorbede*. *mishpat* is the, how will you say, the coat, *mishpat*, it's okay. But [sounds like: *macohm*] is a bathroom, *macohm*. *chazer* you know, *chazer* is pork, yeah. They had such names. They had a special dialect. They are very religious. What does it mean religious? They go to *shul* Friday night, they know, *chaser*, they know is *trayf*.⁷⁵ But other meat, of course meat and milk together, they don't know that meat and milk is something you can't even give to an animal. It degenerated. There was in the ghetto this Portico d'Ottavia, that Emperor Octavian had there a wall dedicated to him. It's close to the Tiber. There, Jews lived even before the destruction of the Temple and history tells us how well the emperors treated the Jews, Julius Caesar and Octavian and so on. You had the Jewish food, for example, *carciofi alla judia*,⁷⁶ you have a kosher restaurant, which is kosher by name. They sell there all kinds of jewelry, cheap jewelry, and there was always, I remember, always a big noise. Girls at sixteen, seventeen years are pregnant already and after they [the young people] marry among themselves. Nevertheless, of course, this is not something which depends on us, they are what they call the *Pantera Nera*, which means the black panther.⁷⁷ There was a Jewish girl, unfortunately under the Nazi practices, who would go with the Fascists or with the SS and point at the Jews. She came from the ghetto. After, she made herself a nun; she became a Christian and so on and so on. But in the ghetto, you have there are the Jews. What living do they make? They sell souvenirs everywhere. We made, say, ninety percent of the souvenir sellers are

⁷⁵ Yiddish for food that is not kosher.

⁷⁶ Italian for 'Jewish-style artichokes'.

⁷⁷ The name used by Italian university groups demanding educational reforms.

Jewish people, and they go around, and when he only hints that you are Jewish, he begins "*Shema Yisrael*"⁷⁸ to show you that he is Jewish. But the *goyim*, too, learn to say "*Shema Yisrael*."

JL: Could you describe how it looks physically?

MR: Physically, it's very crowded, it's looks up, up, up. Why? Because they could not expand, and its shabby outside, just like many — it looks like places like in Venice. Outside, I don't think here — but inside they have nice places. Not far away there is a church on which is written a sentence written, said by Isaiah [Speaks Hebrew⁷⁹] I don't remember it by heart. "I extended my hands all day on the people who always made me angry," [Romans 10:21, quoting Isaiah 65:2] and here you see Jesus in his full size and with that sentence.

JL: Overlooking the ghetto?

MR: Overlooking the ghetto. And there the Jews were obligated to go in the middle to go and hear the preachers, the Christian preachers during the Middle Ages.

JL: Would you describe the synagogue, the Temple?

MR: The synagogue, it was built, I believe, at the beginning of the twentieth century. They still have a picture showing the king, and I don't know, a few of the Jewish leaders passing there. It's a beautiful temple. It has a nice court, a nice yard. It's artistic, it's very good. I always heard the American Jews who would come there inside — I used to bring them when I was a guide — they would say that it's dirty, it's not well kept. I cannot give criticism, I don't know, but artistically it's very beautiful. It's one of the most beautiful temples.

JL: Okay, I would like to shift gears for a while and ask you, as you were growing up in Poland, through all of your travels, and then into Italy, were you ever a member of any political or cultural club?

MR: No. I used to be a great Zionist, until, well I'm still a Zionist but I was really, all my thoughts were of Zionism until eighteen years, twenty years, and after, I cooled off a little bit. I would, in my dream I would

⁷⁸ The opening words of one of the basic Jewish prayers, literally "Hear o Israel."

⁷⁹ Hebrew — tape 5, side 1, 4:40.

always dream about Israel. Yeah, when I was a boy I used to fight with non-Jewish boys, they would attack us, and I would like to have fights with them. Very often, I came home with a broken head. They would throw stones on me and after I would catch them and I was strong, too, and I used to beat them back.

JL: You mentioned to me earlier that there was certainly anti-Semitism growing in Poland. Before you left, what was the political and social atmosphere in Poland?

MR: Very bad. First of all, before I left the financial situation was very bad. Poland was an *agrar* land, which means-

JL: Agrarian.

MR: Agrarian, so they had all the privileges. There was no industry. Of course they needed an army and they needed lots of money. Poland was destroyed during World War I because all armies marched through it. They poured heavy taxes on the Jew. The Jew who had a little store he had to pay all the taxes. Poland had a terrible depression from 1924 and the Jew was hit more than anybody else. The Jews were conglomerated in the big cities, Lemberg, Krakow, Warsaw, Chenstekohov,⁸⁰ Lodz and, of course, their way of living was put, they influenced Poland. Poland was very much Judaized and the Poles said they didn't like it. When Poland came to life, when Poland, how would you say? No, how do you call this? To come back to life, how do you say it?

JL: Became revived?

MR: Yes, it came, yes it was in 1918. There was a civil war between the Poles in Ukrainia about Galicia. The Poles started with a pogrom in Lemberg, ostensibly because the Jews were on the side of the Ukrainians. It's hard to say yes or no, maybe yes and maybe no. Maybe the Jews were divided, some were for the Poles and some for the Ukrainians. After, in the twenties, when Poland established itself, she had eighteen million Poles, eight millions Ukrainians, and Tartars and Russian I don't know how many, and Jews about three million. They were very much interested to have the Jews on their side so that they

⁸⁰ Yiddish name for 'Czestochowa'.

could, of course, have more strength. The Jews from— remembering what happened in Lemberg and for maybe other reasons, old haters, the Jews from the very first moment said, "No, we are a minority. We want to remain Jews." The Pole says, "You can be Jewish in religion and Polish in nationality." No, the Jews would not accept it. For example, there was a parliament composed of 444 deputies, 444 elected by the people. The Jews elected their parliamentaries, Jews. They would never vote for Christians. There are many causes for anti-Semitism. Of course, both were responsible for it. I would say both have to be blamed: Poles and Jews. You probably heard, there was for example a Polish president went to Lemberg and the Ukrainian threw a bomb. It did not explode. A Jew was called, his name was Steiger,⁸¹ and he was kept, I don't remember how long, for a year, and there were all opposed that he did not do it. Even the man who threw the bomb, he came out and said, "I did it." He was in Germany, Olszanski, and the population was against that Steiger. But he was freed. In spite of the fact that he was innocent hundred percent, he was freed [speaks Polish], which means they didn't have proof. He was not freed as innocent and this was a, how would you say? A bad will. The Poles had bad will. But, on the other hand, we were ten percent of the population, but we were seventy, eighty percent, we had our Jewish doctors in the big cities. Doctors and lawyers and diplomats, too, because when the Polish government had to be represented abroad, whom did they have to send? They had to send Professor Reich, yes, Professor Reich a lawyer, or Sonnenschein. They had to send Jews. Whether it was to America or to England, and this, of course, caused anti-Semitism. And the Jewish students, of course, did better. They had to do better. So we cannot say what's first, the hen [the egg] or the chicken.

JL: Now let's go back to Italy again. You finished your duties in Rome then, in December 1936?

MR: In December 1936 I finished. What does it mean, I finished? I was defenestrated, thrown out. For the simple reason those two Hebrew teachers who were in Abyssinia, after the end of the war in Abyssinia, they came back and they wanted their job back. At that time I did not understand that they were entitled

⁸¹ Stanislaw Steiger, a Polish Jew tried and acquitted in 1924-25 for the attempted assassination of Polish president Stanislaw Wojciechowski. Ukrainian nationalist Teofil Olszanski, the assassin, escaped to Berlin.

to it and I was wrong as to stay by force. And of course I lost my job. My private lessons weren't so good either because the students which I taught, they grew up in the meanwhile. And at that time I was offered a job in Venice and accepted it — the *Comunità Israelita di Venezia*.⁸² I was recommended by Professor Dante Lattes, the man who saw me, he was the first to meet me. Yeah, he was a philosopher, he was a Zionist. He was in Israel during the war, came back, he died a few years ago. A very fine man, a great philosopher. And there I opened a new page. I met very contrariety from the ghetto in Venice. Why? Because there was Mr. Levi, who had, one who was a cousin, and one was a second cousin, and one was a third cousin. They were all for him and the congregation did not want him because he was arrested for something. He went free. The court freed him. It was not true that he committed what he was accused of, but yet the congregation did not consider him good for a cantor, a teacher, and besides, he did not have the qualifications.

JL: Shat what exactly your duties were? Canterring, teaching?

MR: My duties were cantoring, teaching, *shochet*,⁸³ and chaplaincy. There was another man from Florence, younger than I was, Aldo Oviato. He was there when I came. Before I came to substitute, another one, whose name was Pinto. They, usually the congregation had a rabbi and two people, they call him *capo culto*,⁸⁴ which means they had to — for the ritual. They were teachers in the school, they had school in the ghetto, a parochial school, Hebrew teachers. They were, both of them had to kill the chicken and — in other words, they were for the ritual slaughtering. And both of them were cantors and both of them were chaplains. We had one hospital, *Ospedali Riuniti*,⁸⁵ big hospital for I don't know how many, hundreds or thousands of beds, and at that time when I came they even had a room for Jewish sick people and a kosher kitchen there. After they closed the room but they still — a lady would bring kosher food from the Jewish restaurant for the Jewish people who wanted kosher. Anyways-

⁸² Italian name for the Jewish community of Venice as an entity.

⁸³ Yiddish for 'ritual slaughterer'.

⁸⁴ Ritual functionaries, literally Italian for 'head of the cult'.

⁸⁵ Italian for 'unified hospitals'.

JL: What did the chaplaincy consist of?

MR: It consisted of, when a person- I had to go three times a day to the hospital to visit. We always had eight, nine, ten Jewish people, sick people, to come to see what — to give them a blessing, to say a prayer with them and to see how they are and so and so on, this was. And God forbid, when the time came, they had to die, one of us had to stay all the time, not to leave until he died. Why? Justly, the Jewish congregation said, "We are Italians, we aren't Fascists, we are patriots, but when our men die, we want a Jew to be in his presence." It does not mean that I had to do all these things. It means that if I went to the slaughtering, the other one went to teach. If I went to the synagogue, the other one went to the slaughtering or to the hospital. In other words, there always had to be two people. One did one thing, the other one did another thing. When I came here, the rabbi [Adolfo Ottolenghi] assumed me as a teacher, cantor, slaughterer, chaplain, and all other things. But actually what I was only a teacher. I never *davened*, I never slaughtered, and I did never did the chaplaincy, but the rabbi said to me, "You will. Within time, you will learn."

JL: And you never did that [inaudible]?

MR: Wait. What happened, when I came there, that man, Oviato, who was from Tuscany, from Florence, he was not happy with my coming because he knew he could do everything and get a double salary. It was his duty to teach me all the rest of it and I found, first of all, there was he assistant secretary, he gave me such a bad reception. He was a Fascist, Signoretti. The father a *goy*, the mom, the mother Jewish. When I came, he gave me such a bad reception, but I had the rabbi on my side, but the rabbi said to me, "Now you have to go to the *grava*, to the president of the synagogue," Giacomo Levi — the man had such a beard, a man who was eighty or ninety years old, I don't know, when I came to him. And I said the way it was, that I was a teacher, he said, "It's too bad," he said, "because, well, we need a teacher but we need a slaughterer and a cantor and a thing " Why? Because they had it, at their congregation, that had it this way, they would not give you a global salary. They would give you, for cantoring they gave you a sum [sounds like: *tot*], for teaching they gave you a *tot*, for being the slaughterer they gave you a salary. Why?

You understand? Different salaries, and altogether formed six or seven hundred liras a month, plus a house, plus electricity, etcetera, etcetera. So they had for teaching, they had 120 liras a month, and he said, "Can you live with 120 liras a month?" And I said, "Well, I'm going to learn. I will learn." "But yes, but why should we pay you now when you are not able to — it will take six months. Nevertheless, we will arrange it this way." And they gave me the full salary. It was six hundred liras, it was a good salary in those times for one man. A family could live. This was a teacher's salary and they gave me also a habitation in the school, which was in the ghetto. And that man, this Oviato, did not teach me. Another man teach me — a young boy, a certain Angelo [sounds like: Aboara], who was a cantor, but they sent him away. Most of the cantors there, they had one sickness: playing cards, and you know four hundred years [ago] there was a rabbi — Leone Modena that man had thirty-two jobs in his life. He was a rabbi in Venice, and he wrote the book against playing cards, because already there four hundred years ago, they played cards. But he himself became a pauper because playing of cards. In Venice it was the same in the cafeteria, they would play. Anyway, that boy, taught me you know, he was one of, I don't know, a dozen children, he was jobless, I gave him, I paid him, I helped him, and he taught me to *daven* and I learned it in a very short time.

JL: The *davening* in the *Sephardi* style?

MR: *Sephardic*. And also, well to go to the hospital and to say, "How are you? God will help. You will see. I pray for you." This you learned very fast, right, and the slaughtering was a little harder. I never learned to be a good slaughterer because I never got used — I always had pain. But I did it and I had to do it. Remember we are in 1937. I came there January 1, 1937. In September, I brought my father from Poland. And He came and joined me and we had a very nice life.

JL: Now, what, the rabbi you spoke of, was the chief rabbi?

MR: He was the chief rabbi. He called himself *rabbino capo*.⁸⁶ In my time he was very much, his sight was very much affected. One eye was completely blind. Why? He lost it. Boys played ball, soccer, and it fell,

⁸⁶ Italian for 'head rabbi'.

the ball fell and a splinter of his glasses fell there. He was deaf, too. Later years, it was in 1938 if I'm not mistaken, he lost the sight of his second eye too. So that, a little bit--the retina fell off. In those times they could not operate. Just a little bit, he would distinguish between day and night in the summer,

JL: And this was Rabbi Ottolenghi?

MR: Otto—How do you know?

JL: I did a little research.

MR: *Rabbino* Ottolenghi, Adolfo Ottolenghi, a very good man. Wonderful, he had a golden heart. And In Hebrew he was not- I don't know how he was, sharp or not but he was in secular subject he was a wonderful scholar. His wife was a *goyette*, in other words from a non-Jewish family.

JL: Really?

MR: Yes. Actually she ran the show and she was the prime cause of his unhappiness. He was very unhappy.

JL: Had she converted?

MR: Oh, yes she converted, oh yes. She wanted to be a *rebbitzin*,⁸⁷ Our *rebbitzin*. She is still alive. I don't know, she must be more than a hundred years old. She never wants to die. Anyways, he was, I feel that man liked me so much I still feel guilty toward him. Why? Because this man who wanted to see me always high, high, high, and there were other people whom he did not like. But, in this name of justice, I protected them and after it turned out that they were digging a grave under me. There was a boy, Bruno Polacco — he died already, may God keep him in paradise — that boy was--his mother was non-Jewish or his father was non-Jewish, I don't remember. Anyways, he was a student at the rabbinical college. He graduated, he had the title *maskil*, because in Italy first you get, the first title is *maskil*. And after, you get the third title, *chaber*, and after, the [sounds like: *chakem ha shalem*], which means the rabbi.⁸⁸ He made the first rabbinical grade. He was authorized to be a cantor and a teacher. And when he came

⁸⁷ Yiddish for rabbi's wife.

⁸⁸ Rabbi Relles is referring to three titles used in Italy, ranging from that used for a young scholar to that used for a full rabbi.

back from rabbinical college he wanted to kick me out. How did he do? He did all kinds of things. He, too, had relatives, cousins and uncles and aunties and so on and so on and he tried to kick me out. The rabbi knew it and the rabbi said to me, "Relles be careful. You are walking on the edge of a soul. That boy is dangerous." And the rabbi kept him low. But, I, in the sense of justice, I would unite myself with the boy against the rabbi. I would protect the boy over this. Why was [this]? I had a sense of justice. I said, "Who am I to deprive him, to humiliate him? Okay, he doesn't want me. It's understandable, because he knows [sounds like: *mos tuavit amer*," which means, "my life means his death." If I were not there, In other words he was always a second fiddle because I was the first. I was older and I knew more and I had the rabbi's support. And in many other times I failed that man. I failed him and I still suffer. It's a matter of conscience. Is there something for conscience? I imagine there is. I imagine every person has a sense of conscience.

JL: I'm going to have to turn it over here again.

MR: What's the matter with recording...

END OF TAPE 5, SIDE 1

TAPE 5, SIDE 2

JL: Could you describe the Venice ghetto a bit? Is it much different? Much alike the Rome ghetto?

MR: Very much different. First of all, even in my times, most of the people were not Jewish people in the ghetto, because it was the first ghetto to be constructed, that's what they say, and one of the first Napoleon destroyed when he invaded Italy. Of course, during the Middle Ages it was surrounded by water and by a wall, and it was built high, it expanded in the height because they could not expand in space. What-there is a book about the ghetto in Rome, written by Roth, Cecil. Roth, so—but I'm telling you, just read it. It's much better described. In my times—

JL: This is now the Venice ghetto?

MR: Yeah, the Venice ghetto. They have, they had five synagogues: one synagogue in Spanish, one is the German, and one is Levantino, and I don't remember [the others]. I know that one synagogue has the walls covered with gold, you know, twenty-four karat gold. Now they have made a museum out of it. In those times, when they had five synagogues, they probably needed those five synagogues, in order that they had services, in all five synagogues. In my time, they had services — in the wintertime they would have it in the Levantino because it was smaller and it was less cold because they did not heat it. Summertime they would have the services in Spanish temple, and the German temple, *Tempio Tedesco*,⁸⁹ they had very few people, a family Fano, they maintained it, kept it. They would have services only on Saturday. We used to have *minyán*,⁹⁰ morning and evening. Why? Because we paid *minyán* men. We had six or seven *minyán* men paid to come to synagogue, morning and evening. Most of the time they were taken from the rest home, which was in the ghetto, too. And the rabbi and at least one cantor and two *shammes*⁹¹ and another one, we used to have *minyán*. Barely, *minyán*. Saturday, we had very

⁸⁹ Italian for 'German Temple'.

⁹⁰ Hebrew for the quorum of ten men necessary to perform a full service.

⁹¹ Yiddish/Hebrew for 'sexton'.

few people, maybe twenty, thirty people, maybe forty, maybe fifty, not more. But when I came they had 2,500 souls.

JL: Two hundred five hundred in that one synagogue or around?

MR: No, I mean, the entire congregation. There was only one congregation in the town. Even if you are a hundred thousand people, we can have more synagogues, but only one congregation.

JL: So the chief rabbi then, was the rabbi for all the congregations?

MR: That's right, that's right.

JL: And you also were hired by all the congregations?

MR: All the congregations, the *Comunità Israelita di Venezia*. We did not have a president of the congregation. There was a *commissario*,⁹² which means the government elected him, you know, the *prefetto*⁹³ of the governor elected him and he was responsible to the governor. Did they have at that time a *consiglio*?⁹⁴ I don't remember. But anyways, the ghetto out is there a square, they call it *Ghetto Nuovo*,⁹⁵ and there on one side you have the synagogues, on one side you have the rest home, on the right side you have, you cross a bridge, a very small bridge, you go and you have a school, this through the public school, three floors. I used to work on the third floor. It was made for a hundred pupils at least, but we didn't have that many. When I came, we had about thirty students, four or five classes. The people in the ghetto, as I say, are mostly, were mostly Christians, because the Jews, they expanded, they lived everywhere. What else can I tell you? Yes, when you come from the side, from the depot side, *Ponte delle Guglie*,⁹⁶ you enter a very small — how would you say? It looks like a hall and there is a tablet-no- made of marble, written in the eighteenth century that Christians are not allowed, Christians and proselytes are not allowed to come to the ghetto, and so on and so on. What else can I tell you?

⁹² Italian for 'commissar'.

⁹³ Italian for 'prefect'.

⁹⁴ Italian for 'council'.

⁹⁵ Italian for 'New Ghetto'.

⁹⁶ Italian for 'Bridge of Spires'.

JL: Well, perhaps you can describe the city of Venice a little bit.

MR: Well, what does it make you? Well, it is, of course, when you arrive from the station, there is, it looks like, you will say, you have the *Canale Grande*, the *canale*-how do you say?

JL: The canal.

MR: The canal. The canal and the city is built from both sides. You have, over the canal you have five or six bridges. On one side, from the right side you have lots of hotels. There is Hotel [Italian] this I saw recently. On the left side you have the depot and right away you have a church, an old church, I don't know how many hundred years, which is closed, but inside you have full of art. And after, you have from the right side that's all hotels and close to *Rialto* the houses are artistic, they are like palaces, it is gothic art. And on the left side you have just stores, souvenirs, and small hotels, very small hotels. And you arrive to *Ponte delle Guglie*. What does it mean, "*delle Guglie*?" It has like columns. On the left side you go to the *Fondamenta*, that is [what] they call it. And there it used to be the slaughterhouse, now it is not. On the right side I can't possibly tell you what we have, and when you cross the bridge, on the left side you have go, you have a foundation, just small and at a certain moment on the right side you go into the ghetto. Otherwise you go suddenly on Murano [one of the islands that make up Venice]. In other words, you go straight *San Leonardo* and you have stores on top, houses, apartments, on the other side, stores and apartment. The houses looked very shabby, very, how will you say? No care. You see all the walls they are black and yellow. For years and years they were not taken care of. But you see they are artistic, they present the art; in fact, every house is a national property. You cannot do anything outside without the permission of the office, of the municipality. You have to have a permission. Why? Because it belongs to the state. Inside they have beautiful houses. They are all old, these house, some of them are two hundred, three hundred. People say that there are houses which are eight, nine hundred years old and inside you come in, it's the same arrangement. A big room, tall, very tall — they do not worry about cold — and on the sides you have small rooms. This is Byzantine style. And you walked and after you come to

*Strada Nuova*⁹⁷ — or they used to call it *Vittorio Emanuele*, the street was named by the king. After you go farther and you see *Piazza San Bartolomeo*, and there you see Goldoni,⁹⁸ a big monument of Goldoni, how he stays with his stick. And after you go farther and you see *mercerie*.⁹⁹ And you go, you go, and you arrive to *Piazza San Marco*. You were there already? So you know. Venice is beautiful. To me it is dirty, very much dirty, the smell which comes from the canal is terrible. The people are, like most of them, very good, they are more calm than other people. In fact, when I arrived, a man — I slept in a very small hotel — he says, "We live calmly and we die calmly. We like it this way." Of course, you know, you don't have anything. You have only bridges and gondolas and [Italian word¹⁰⁰]. And they have the *vaporetto*, which of course that little boat which contains hundreds of people. You can cross the bridges. You can walk. If you have a bicycle, you can put it on your shoulder and carry it. You are not allowed to ride the bicycle on the — you can't even, because every few meters you have a bridge, so. Venice, the more you live there, the more you love it. And it's beautiful, especially in the wintertime, when you don't have all the tourists. It's beautiful and it's on these islands. You have Murano, Burano, Torcello, Lido, Alberoni, Chioggia, Malamocco. Those are beautiful islands. What else? I enjoyed myself, of course. I had, my office gave me lots, lots of trouble. Partly because I didn't know how to act. I did not have experience. I lacked good sense. Partially because people, by nature they live, they know if they don't hurt they can't survive if you don't kill. Actually, that's so. And I had good and bad [inaudible]there.

JL: What kinds of relationships did the Jewish community have with the non-Jewish community, especially since there was a lot?

MR: Well, when you imagine out of 300,000 people or 250,000 people, you have those Jews, and the Italian Jews, they had good sense. They lived and they knew that they had to adopt themselves-adapt, how you say? Adapt. Under Mussolini they were the best Fascists, the most faithful Fascist. Under the monarchy,

⁹⁷ Italian for 'New Street'.

⁹⁸ Carlo Goldoni, an eighteenth-century Italian playwright.

⁹⁹ Italian for 'notions' — he means stores selling notions.

¹⁰⁰ Tape 5, side 2, 10:15.

they were the best monarchists. The communists, communism came, there were Jewish Communists. Now I don't know what they are, they always knew to live with the people, which the Polish Jews unfortunately did not.

JL: Now the political orientation of the Jewish community was definitely Fascist?

MR: Very few anti-Fascists. Very few. I didn't know anyone. Of course, there sooner or later they ended in jail or on the island, deported. But those Jews who were Fascists they certainly knew how to make it known to you that they were Fascist. For example, the cantor, who was with me, Aldo Ovietti, he was younger than I was, he would boast that he made a March on Rome for Mussolini. But when I figured out the years I found out that in 1922 he was ten years old. How could he march on Rome when he was ten years old? And they would always boast of being Fascists from the very first moment and this is where could not forgive me that I was a foreigner, a *straniero*, a stranger.

JL: And this feeling continued throughout the Venice years, this feeling?

MR: Well, not all of it. All those who were in the ghetto and had any connection with my colleagues. It may be that I did better than they did, my colleagues. After all, they had no interest to excel, I had to. When I began to read the Torah, I had the people watching me. If I made a mistake, they would not correct me right away. They would let me go read the Torah and after they — "Your mistake here," so I had to start all over again. They were so happy to find mistakes. And of course this in a certain way helped me because I knew that either I do well, I do everything in a excellent way, or else.

JL: What was it that—I suspect I know the answer, but I want to hear it from you. What was in then that made you stay all those years in Italy rather than go back to Poland?

MR: Well, in 1938 when my father went back, I wanted to go home very badly. My passport was still good. Poland made in that time, made a law that a good passport or a bad passport, you wanted to go back, you needed a red—how do you call it? Stamp—not the stamp, no something, it's you needed the permission of the council. So I went to Trieste and there he told me that — yeah, rubber stamp, it was a rubber stamp — that man told me he had to sent the passport to Poland. There, they had to give me,

you know my district had to give me. And he said, and after I came back then he sent, and I came and he said, "We don't have any answer." It didn't ask, the—. So another employee got up, a younger man said, "Why do you lie to the gentleman? You know that you did never send your passport and your passport is here." So that man took out the passport. "Okay," he said, "so I did not send it. But you cannot go anyways—"

JL: - That's it.

MR: "-because you lost the citizenship. You were not five years in Poland." And after five years—this is Poland make like in America, after five years if one did not go back he lost his citizenship. So I couldn't go back to Poland. And in that time anti-Semitism — Mussolini declared the laws against the Jews and I had nowhere to go. This is why I stayed there. I took my father in 1937.

JL: Excuse me. [records stops, restarts] As we already discussed, Jews were coming in to flee Nazism and—

MR: To flee what?

JL: To flee the Nazis, were coming into Italy. Correct?

MR: Yeah, yeah, oh yes. Not only this, Mussolini said that the Jews will bring in prosperity to the country and they are free to come, and thousands of them came in 1933, they started to come from 1933, they started to come. Many of them came and stayed in Rome, most in Milan. I don't know about other cities, Torino, Genoa, I don't know. But I know in Venice not too many. And Mussolini was very much for the Jewish people, especially in 1933 and in 1934 after Dollfuss¹⁰¹ was murdered — in other words, when the friendship between him and Hitler cooled off, he was very, very amicable to the Jews. I don't remember, in 1933 or '34 there was a fair in Bari and Palestine had a pavilion and he went in there and he said "Where were the Germans when these people — the Jews who were in Palestine, they had already a country and a high civilization — they [the Germans] were still half-naked, roaming in the woods." This is, he wanted Hitler to know what he thought about him. And he was very much — he wanted, for example, a rabbi, an Italian rabbi, in Egypt, and he was very pleased that Rabbi Prato, David

¹⁰¹ Austrian chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss was assassinated by Nazis on July 25, 1934

Prato, who used to be a cantor and a teacher and a director — he was a very wonderful man. As a human being, he was one of the very few great Zionists. He [Mussolini] was very happy when he heard that Prato became rabbi in Alexandria. He, for example, wanted a rabbinical college in Rodos, which belonged to Italy. Well, As a matter of fact, he had a Jewish friend, Margherita Sarfatti,¹⁰² the first years she made him great. That's right, the Jewish built that. And we know that at the moment when the racial laws came, there were dozens of generals and colonels and 4 admirals. There was the highest general, Ascoli, he was Jewish. There were the Pugliese.¹⁰³ Pugliese was a great general. He was a kind like, here [sounds like *rico*], you know. During the War, I am jumping from one place to another. During the war when the Italian fleet was [cornered] good by the English at Taranto, he [Mussolini] wanted to get those boats out, so he called Pugliese, the Jew he put in the corner, he degenerated—not degenerated, he humiliated, and said, "I need your help." So Pugliese donned his uniform of admiral, you know, he went to Taranto, and in a very short time he organized, took out the boats — it was warships — and remodeled them and put them back at Mussolini's disposal. And after he took off his uniform and returned to his civil life. Anyway, there were many, many Jewish officers, high-ranking officers in the army under Mussolini. The minister of finances, Jung, was Jewish. And in Rome there were so many doctors and pharmacists and businessmen who came and established themselves so well. There was a man, Brenner, who came to Italy with a few — and I saw him with a few [inaudible] with a few, photograph cameras, and in three-four years, he was the biggest in Rome — you know, he had stores, you know, he was theaters, stores and stores I don't know how many, all over Italy.

JL: Where did he come from?

¹⁰² Margherita Grassini Sarfatti (1880-1961) was a Jewish woman who was Mussolini's mistress and an influential Fascist prior to 1936. She served as the editor of the art and literature page of Mussolini's Popolo d'Italia and as a co-editor of Gerarchia, the Fascist Party's ideological monthly.

¹⁰³ Emanuele Pugliese (1874-1967) was the most highly decorated general in the Italian army in World War II. Umberto Pugliese was inspector general of the Naval Engineer Corps.

MR: From Germany, from [inaudible.]Yeah, he was Brenner. you did not pass one street without seeing "Photo Brenner." He made it.

JL: Could you tell me some about the Delasem [Jewish social services agency] and how active were you in it?

MR: Delasem. This was in 1938. I was in Venice when Hitler occupied Austria. There, of course, Jews began to escape, and the same story. Wherever they wanted to go, they needed visas and they were not let in, but Italy was open. They didn't need a visa, and it was already after, even later when — this was in March, April, May, the first months of the year — but even later in '38 when Mussolini declared Italy a state with racial laws and so on, anti-Semitic laws, they were still coming in the hundreds. And lo and behold, the Delasem. How do you know, the Delasem?

JL: I read about it.

MR: Yeah, the Delasem. We had an office in Venice. The money would come from America and from France itself. It happened that my brother-in-law, whom I cordially hate, may God forgive me, her brother used to be the secretary, and I was the cantor, as you know, with all other things, and they would come — he did not understand one word of German. He knew a little French, that's all. So he would call me. The people, they would come, not too many to stay in Italy. Why? They didn't have the means. All they could take from Austria was just a pittance, a few marks, twenty marks or forty marks, I don't know. Enough to buy bread and a little food to eat. So, most of them would come to stay for a while and go away. Where? There was another place where people could go — Shanghai. And strange enough, it was already occupied by the Japanese, I believe — Manchukuo, Shanghai. And there, in Venice, the consulate would give visas to whoever came. Yes, but those people who wanted to go, they did not know the way, they did not know to speak, but they needed somebody, and this was my job. And I ruined my health there. Because why? Because I was after an operation, I had a hernia operation, both sides. And the food I ate wasn't so wholesome too. I would live on cookies and fruit and a little cottage cheese, which there they call it, I forgot how the you call it, and that's it. I wasn't nourished too well. And I would run with

them, run, run around. Well, anyways, I would interpret for them. I would see that they eat, and this was in the rest home. I would go around with them, and it just so happened I lived on the third floor and there I had a kitchen, a small room, and a bedroom. In the rest [home] they had a Jewish organization for the poor. They would come and play ping-pong and for elder people — all under fascism. But when the wars came, you know, that organization — it was called *Cuore Concordia*,¹⁰⁴ which means “heart in concord” now-

JL: Is the organization?

MR: Yeah. And the emblem was two hands embracing, and it was dissolved, so there was no organization so, you know,— practically, it was on the same floor, all the rooms belonged to me, and I would accept everybody who came who didn't have [a place] to sleep and couldn't go to a hotel. I gave them [a place to sleep], of course, somebody said, "Well, they could bring you lice, they could bring you bugs." It never happened; they were all very clean people.

JL: Okay. I'm going to have to turn it over again.

MR: Okay.

END OF TAPE 5, SIDE 2

¹⁰⁴ Italian for ‘hearts in agreement’

TAPE 6, SIDE 1

MR: It very often happened that people came and they had a little money and currency, which means dollars or English money. And they wanted to keep it for other things and they needed money to live and to buy tickets. They needed liras but they didn't want to exchange, or they wanted it better conditions. So, I would always give them in liras, they would give me as a pawn, their money and after, when they had the lira, they would give me back. And this was of great help to them. I never asked them any, of course I didn't do anything for gain and they appreciated very much. And I had once case, as I said, Hans Bauer, a man, he came with his wife. His wife was non-Jewish. This is how he could get the money. And he went to America. I lent him the liras and he gave me the money for the pawn, you know, so that I could be sure that my money could be secured. After, of course, we settled everything and he wrote me such wonderful letters. I didn't keep them. He even sent once money to my father because I could not send money to my father. When Mussolini entered the war in Abyssinia, 52 nations made sanctions against him. They did not want to do anything with Italy, to have no business with Italy. So Mussolini, as a reaction, he prohibited sending out money from Italy abroad. Poland was one of those who signed. So I couldn't send money to my father. So I had to find other ways to send money. This man, I told him my troubles, and I remember \$50.00 he sent my father. He was a tailor, a *shnayder*.

JL: How did your other activities, your religious activities...

MR: My religious activities...

JL: How were they affected by your work in Delasem¹⁰⁵? Did you continue them?

MR: Well, it was vacation time. You forget that in Italy you begin from June to October. They have three, four months vacation. But the Jews, on account of the holidays, we would start school after the holidays. So I had the June, July, August, September and sometimes October, five months, you know.

JL: Oh, so you did your Delasem activities in that vacation time?

¹⁰⁵ A Jewish social services agency.

MR: That's right. And besides in the afternoon, for example, I was free, I was always free. And sometime I had friction. For example, my colleague would say, "I don't want you to. Relles has no right to go there." I had friction, yes, sometimes I had friction. But I felt it like my duty.

JL: Now, what was known by the Jewish community in Italy? And How much was it effected by the knowledge of Nazi activities in concentration camp? How much did your community, and you as the official representatives of the community, know about what was happening outside of Italy, in terms of Nazis?

MR: Well, I tell you. The Italian Jews, from the very moment, they were very afflicted when Mussolini declared from now on the Jews will be second rate citizens. Why? It was spiritual. They felt humiliated. In other words, they were removed from government places: no Jewish teachers, no Jewish professors, no Jewish students in the Italian schools. But Mussolini paid for the Jewish schools who were filled with the Jewish teachers. Well, and it came out this way. Mussolini said, "Jews cannot own a governmental place. But in Abyssinia, in Africa, in the colonies, they could. Jews were freed from the army. No service in the army. Jews could not keep un-Jewish servants. But, if a lady was sick and she needed a nurse, it was allowed. The doctors, Jewish doctors, could not help the Christians and the Christian doctors could not help the Jews. But it was always looked through the fingers, like that, you know [inaudible], if you are a bias Jew. In other words, he closed one door to the Jews and opened another door, or other seven doors. For example, Jews who served their years and after they were sent away, they got their liquidation and they got their pension according to the years. This is not so big, big.

JL: But after the racial laws-

MR: Hitler did it, too. I will show it to you. For those Jews who distinguished themselves. I have it. The Jews were not hurt so badly. When war started, those Jews who had something on their conscience, for example the Jews who had voted against Fascism, he was put in a concentration camp. And I described the concentration camp, how they were.

JL: We'll get to that...

MR: They were human. And whatever happened outside, even the second time, even to the very end, the Jews would say, "Ah, it will never happen in Italy. Why, my grandfather was a colonel in the army. My father was a lieutenant. My, I don't know, son was a second lieutenant. We were, we are Italian patriots."

JL: So then, they did know something was going on?

MR: They did know that something was going on. They didn't know the persecution, yes. But, for example, after Mussolini came back from having been captured and so on, in 1943, at end of 1943, it was November 26, the radio announced that the Jews will be interned and their belonging will be taken away. And I remember I was going back and was on the street and I heard it on the radio through a window and I came to the restaurant. There I have my friends, Gentillis, who were like my parents. She says, "So what, we will play the *tombola* — *tombola* is bingo — we will play the *tombola* in the concentration camp. It won't happen, it won't be so bad."

JL: Well, did you have reports of the concentration camps?

MR: Yes. The reports were that it was very bad the Jews were persecuted. But the burning and gassing and all these things, no one had an idea. No one had the faintest idea. It was, yes, starvation, beating. Why? Because the people came already, the refugees came and they said how it was in Dachau and Buchenwald.

JL: That's what I mean, yeah.

MR: They knew that, for example, people had to stay and they counted the people, how you call it? The control? Not the control, when they wanted to know how many inmates they had — *appell*,¹⁰⁶*appell*.

JL: *Appell*, yeah.

MR: And that they had to stay long in the cold or in the heat and they wouldn't be given water, and they would be beaten and people died and all these things they knew.

JL: Now you said, that people said that they would play *tombola*, etcetera, so am I correct in assuming that they didn't feel there was a life-threatening situation?

¹⁰⁶ German for 'roll call'.

MR: Man, it used to be so. The *Carabinieri*, which means the police, in certain towns and cities they came to the Jews a few days before they arrested them and they said, "You know tomorrow we are coming to arrest you. See that you escape." And they did not move. I left.

JL: They didn't move?

MR: No. I left because I was forced. My friend said, "If you come with us — you are always lucky, you are always the lucky man. It will help us." Otherwise, I intended to stay. And the day I left, it was on a Thursday, I don't know, the first or second December, in the evening they came for me. This is what the man, the custodian, told me when I came back after the war, you understand. I did not intend. Why? Because I had my memory told me that in Campagna and Ferramonti I lived like a prince.

JL: Let me go back a moment and asks you this, you said your, yourself were not, wait a minute, you were concerned obviously if you left because your friend asked you to leave.

MR: Yes. No. We jumped too much. We went too far.

JL: Yeah, let me backup. This is now before 1940. Now, let me ask you a question.

MR: Yeah.

JL: Before Italy declared war on France and Great Britain, do you feel that you, as a Polish Jew who knew a lot of persecution, were more wary of the Germans than the general Italian population?

MR: Yeah, and I tell you why. Because Mussolini also declared that all those Jews who came after 1919, had to leave Italy within six months. If not they would be deported and get jail, and I don't know how much money they would have to pay. And I was under this jurisdiction, you understand. I had to leave Italy. This, you should give me, I believe I described it there. Of course I described it in my thing, in my manuscript. When this law came out, you remember I was registered at the university in Rome, philosophy, and I never went there, I all forgot about it. I paid the year '35 and that was that. So I wanted those documents back. Where will I go? There was no place to go. There was nowhere to go. But I wanted the documents with me. So I went to Rome and took them out. My birth certificate, but what was most important, my high school diploma. My high school diploma was all I had and I took it out, okay. A

week later the newspaper announced that all those Jews who were registered at the university could finish their studies if they, for example, if they were on their third year they could stay other two years. If they were on their fourth year they could stay one year, if they were on their first year they could stay three years and so on and so on, as long as they made their-but they had to take tests. Other students don't have to take tests, you are registered. In Italy there's a law, you are registered at university you must not take tests on first year, second year. You can take as many as you want. You can do all your tests in the last year, you understand. I had to take tests. So the rabbi told me, "What do you stay here? Why don't you run to home" — he knew the story — "and get registered!" So I went to Rome, I went to Rome with my documents and I came there to the place. And he said, "Well, we're in a very nice way. Yes, those who are registered can continue. But you are not registered anymore because you took your documents out and to be registered again we don't have registration for Jewish people." And there I was. You know, I left Venice at nine o'clock in the evening, or twelve o'clock, I don't remember, in the evening, I arrived in the morning at nine o'clock, tired and hungry and exhausted and went to the university and there were thousands of students there at that time, you know, October or November, and there was one employee and there were students in a line and, you know, Italians, too — shouting and singing and, oh! And I came there, I was tired and I said, "Listen boys, you have to let me go ahead. I am Jewish. Does it mean something to you?" "Oh, let him go." In five minutes I was there and I talked to him and he answered me in a nice way and I stayed there. And while I stayed there who comes there? Professor Umberto Cassuto, he was a professor at university. He wanted something there. Oh, this was, God forgive me, this was my greatest satisfaction. He was always Fascist. He ignored me and now he was in the same condition. I didn't even say good morning to him. I looked at him and he knew what I meant. It meant, now you are the same situation, now you are in the same position like I am, and it's good this way. Well, it's humanity, what can I say? And while I was going here and there a professor passed, Hamadazi, Professor Hamadazi, a young man. He used to be in the secretary. He registered me in 1935 and he was very good befriended with Miss Sestieri, the secretary of the rabbinical college. The girl who

after married, she went to America with her husband, a lawyer, and she was on vacation on that time, too. I met her later. Where I used to come to her parents. Well, anyways, I go to him and I said, "Professor Hamadazi, do you recognize me?" He said, "Yes, but at that time you didn't have a beard." He remembered me because she went with me to register. And I said, "Well, now I have a beard but I also have trouble. I have big load on my back. I am Jewish, you know." "Oh yes, I know. What can I do for you?" I told him the story. He said, "Well, I am not secretary anymore. I'm not at the office anymore. Today I teach Arabic and all languages and I can do nothing for you. But I will see. Give me the documents." And this was on a Friday morning.

JL: The date?

MR: I don't remember even the month.

JL: The year?

MR: Thirty-nine, thirty-eight, It was sometime in October, September/October. And well and I stayed at the Pines, where else? Pines at that time was in jail because his son-in-law that handled gold. You know, he was gold merchant. He was from Tripoli and they found it in his place. Well, anyways, I stayed there. His wife was still alive. Monday, I came again. I came to his office and he was there and he says, "Well, wait, wait a minute. Wait here." You know, big office he had. And he went again and he stayed there for about a half an hour, forty-five minutes. he came back, he says, "Well,[inaudible] like a thief I put the documents in their place and there where they belong. Now all you have to do is to go to the Santo Spirito Bank because now you have to pay..." half taxes, not taxes, how you call it, for the university?

JL: Tuition.

MR: "You have to pay Tuition, you have to pay, it's a new law. Till now it was gratis." He said, "I will take you." He took me in his *balilla*,¹⁰⁷ in his car. On the way he told me to leave Italy because bad times are for Jews. He was wonderful to me. And I paid the thing and I came back to Venice. Now that stupid, that

¹⁰⁷ Italian for a small, four-cylinder automobile.

cretin of my brother-in-law. He, without asking me, he asked the ministry, the police, to allow me to stay because they needed me, as a teacher and cantor and so on and so on.

JL: In Venice.

MR: In Venice. Because Mussolini said that the religion Jews, not only they may continue to observe, but they will be encouraged to observe. A few weeks later I'm called to the *questura*¹⁰⁸ and there was a man, Salerno, Dr. Salerno. He tells me, "Mr. Relles you are requested to leave Italy in eight days," or ten days, I don't remember. I say, "What?" "It just arrived from the ministry, seems that the application back, refused." In other words they did not accept the application for me to stay there, to stay in Italy. I say, "But I am at the university. I am registered at the university." He said, "Can you show it by a document?" I said, "I got the receipts." "Ah, the receipts," he says, "is no document. Everybody takes money. You will offer money, they take. Why shouldn't they? You need a booklet" or to, how do you say? A personal document that you are, because the university they would give you a little, your photo. How do you call it?

JL: An I.D.?

MR: "Identification card, or a certificate," he says, "or both." You have time, eight days," he says. "Well, we will write the date of tomorrow so you'll get another day."

Oy vey, what do I do? And I knew I couldn't make it once more go there. No, I couldn't because I had remembered what happened to the first time I went by. I had a friend there, Richard Marx. In fact, we were two, after I approached—he came to Pines because he was half Jewish. His father was Jewish and his mother was Catholic. He was Catholic. He had his brother, he went to Africa and he came to Italy to study medicine. Richard. A tall boy, you know. But a staunch Catholic, but he was a Jew, to Hitler he was a Jew. And he came to and I said, "Well, if you want to work I will help you work." And I took him, he became a guide. I made a guide of him. And oh, that boy would do anything for me, you know. I really was of help to him. Although, at the time I caused him much trouble but let's forget it. I caused him trouble. I acquainted him with another Jewish boy and that Jewish boy took money, all his money away,

¹⁰⁸ Italian for 'police headquarters'.

you know and escaped. He gave him checks. Well, it was my fault because I acquainted him with him. Of course, he did not ask me. Anyways, I wrote to Richard and I said, "Richard, I want you to go to the university, go to Professor Hamadazi. He started helping me. Please, and tell him I need these identification card and a certificate." You know, Sunday morning — I don't remember when it was or what day — on a Sunday morning it arrived express, special delivery. I opened and there was the certificate. I showed it to you, 45 This was the certificate that certified that I am regularly registered at university and my date, my boat. Yes, this I forgot, I had to pay also a fine, it was just peanuts, for those years I did not pay. I paid only for '35. So I had to pay '36, '37, '38. But peanuts. It was a fine, you understand? Okay, and I came to the *questura* and that Salerno who happened to have married a Jewish girl, a German girl. She came to the office to take a folio of the *soggiorno*¹⁰⁹ and he fell in love with her and they married, they had already a daughter. And he invited me later, would you believe it, to come to visit with him. He said, "Well, Mr. Relles," he says, "you made it, now I'm going to cross out what was written on the *soggiorno*," because in Italy they give you just a sheet where it's written that you can stay.

JL: Was it written there that you couldn't stay?

MR: No. He wrote it down. When he called me to tell me that the police in Rome refused the application, he wrote that I am challenged to leave Italy within eight days. I am not authorized to work. And I came and he says now I have to bring it back. He wrote, "Permitted to stay in Italy." On that, *soggiorno*, on that folio they write down everything. I have something; I will show you a second time, if I might. And he wrote, "Permitted to stay in Italy." He says, "Not authorized to work." He says, "Yes, he says, "but you understand, it's written here 'not authorized to work,' but do you really think we go to the ghetto to see whether you say prayers or not? You have to make a living." You understand? And that was that, and I could stay. But, you know, the appetite comes when you eat. I said, while I was registered in Rome at the university, to go to the university in Rome, I had to make my exams. I can't and besides you must not attend university. But you must have—they give you a booklet, they're call it "index." On this index the

¹⁰⁹ Italian for 'residence'. Here Rabbi Relles is referring to the residency permit for foreigners in Italy.

teacher, the professor writes, gives his signature that you attended university, that you attended his lesson every time. But what do the Jews do? He cannot write all of them. So they give it to the custodian, the *bidello*,¹¹⁰ the *bidello*, and he gives it to the teacher, you understand? And if those students did not attend, what do they do? They give them a little money to the *bidello*. But I still had to go. I had to be closer. So I made my application to go to Padua, and this you can do in Italy. You can make your documents travel from one place to another. So I made an application to Rome and since I am in Venice and I am there stationed and I live there I'll try to be registered in Padua. And this, they do it, you know, automatically. Now what happened? My document and I waited, I came to Padua a few months. They say in Padua, "We did not receive your documents." And I went a dozen times. "We did not receive your documents." I had a friend in Trieste, a lawyer, Bassi, I used to teach him Hebrew. Because, he planned to go to Israel. He died already. He had a brother-in-law or brother, I don't remember, in Rome. A big shot he used to be, so I asked him — I used to teach him *gratis* [inaudible] I asked him to go to Rome- not to go to Rome- to write to his brother or brother-in-law to see at university there what happened to my documents. And Rome said, "We sent the documents to Padua." They said, "Well, it's prejudicated. Something was done." They recognized there that something was done, it was not in the right place.

END OF TAPE 6, SIDE 1

¹¹⁰ Italian for 'janitor'.

TAPE 6, SIDE 2

MR: Well it came out that Rome said, "We sent," and Padua said, "Well, we did not receive." Now, according to the law there, whether you make exams or not, you pass from one year to another. In other words, after five years you can make all your exams, you understand? According to the law, I was on the fifth year or the fourth year, so I didn't have too much to stay. It was so I began '35, '36, '37, '38 and I had only one year and that year I had to make all my exams. Finally, a few days before the end of the year, it was a June, I came to Padua, or they called me, I don't remember. From Padua to Venice you go in half an hour in those times. And the man says to me — I forgot his name, Doctor. I don't remember — he says to me, "Well, the documents arrived but you have no exams so we had to put you on the first year." What was his name? Okay. So you can imagine! So I went back to Venice. I had in Venice the director. He called himself director, actually he was the custodian. I don't know. She was called directress, she was the cook, but they were like father and mother for me, older people. And I used to eat there. But to them I meant anything because they had no children — she had a niece, a daughter from her brother. Well, anyways we made a great holiday. Okay? And what happened next year, well what happened, I don't remember. Did I take exams or not that year I don't remember. Of course this was in '39, no I did not — I did them in '38. Thirty-nine, not in June, but in October I presented my exams. It was Roman history with a Professor Ferrabino,¹¹¹ a great scholar, and I don't remember what else. I made German, I believe, and something else. I had to take twenty tests plus a Latin translation. Twenty tests. Among those twenty tests, not more than four subjects to make a [sounds like: *beyano*], which means to repeat it twice. For example, medieval history I made twice, you understand? German I made it twice and I don't remember what else. You have it here, I have my grades. And I come there with my booklet, you know. The teacher's signatures were there because I paid the custodian and I paid him very well, you know. They would give him a few pennies, I gave him liras, and I presented myself and that professor, oh, he was terrible. What does mean terrible? What does it mean? He would give you a question, if you did not

¹¹¹ Aldo Ferrabino, an Italian historian.

answer, he would let you talk, if you did not answer he gave you another question more or less like this, and three questions. And after he would send you out, you came in and you found already on that booklet your grade. Eighteen over thirty is a minimum. Thirty over thirty is a maximum. Thirty *cum laude* is the best. I came there and he says, "Oh, you have such dirty book, such in disorder." I said, "I have reasons." He says, "Yes, we know that." And he gave me the test. He gave me very easy questions. What did he asked me? "What is Ra?" It was Egyptian history, antique history. Ra means bad, but Ra was an Egyptian god. "What is Ra?" I said, "Ra is an Egyptian god and the name passed and you remember the pharaoh says, [Hebrew, from Exodus 10:10]' — 'Look, Ra is against you.' It was a god. Ra is against you." And I said, "It was an Egyptian god." "And what does it mean in Hebrew?" "Bad." This I know. It was [sounds like: Iskah]. It was an Egyptian god, too. He gave me such questions. I come out and I thought that he fired me, that he flunked me I come home, I was to- I don't know, I was [finished?]. I come home and they open, my friends the Gentilli said twenty-seven over thirty. In other words I had nine votes more than I needed, you understand. And yes, I remember on another occasion — I don't remember when it was — I had a funeral at the day the day I had exams. We were left at the end. Jews had to be at the end. In other words, every student made his exams alphabetically: your name began with A, you were one of the first. But if you were the Z, it was at the end. And you know, many boys, Christians or girls, Christians for that matter, because they had a parent, a Jew, they were considered Jews and they had to wait till the end. My exam, it was on the wall, it was on a Wednesday, and I had a funeral. And it was a Mrs. Fano. She wanted me to perform the funeral not anybody else. So the rabbi says, Rabbi gave me, he says "You have to go to do something that that they let you go another day." So I came to that Professor Ferrabino, he was a Fascist, he wrote a book just on Mussolini. But at me he would not make this. He would take his hat off, you know, his hat. I came to him and I said, "Professor Ferrabino, I have this problem. I am a chaplain." So he says, "So what? You ask somebody else. You will have thousand boys and girls who will want to change with you to be at the end so that they can learn a little bit. You can make be one of them. You can make it today." I say, "But I am Jewish." He says, "That's what you

say, you are Jewish. I don't believe you. You want to have privileges such" — he made it in a joke. It was a joke, but every joke has a bit of truth. When you said you were a Jew in Italy, the situation ended. They would do everything for you. You have to use psychology. They always hated the Germans, and hating the Germans, they liked the Jews, you know. The enemy of your enemy is your friend, right? This is just to show you the niceties they used, the kindness. I wrote it there and I don't believe I have to repeat it. Do you want me to repeat it?

JL: Well this is a different document, so yes.

MR: Well, what else I can tell you hundred stories, which I described there. For example, while I was in the so-called intern camp in Campagna—

JL: Lets, before we move on to that, I have a couple other questions. First, I'd like to ask what do you remember about, specifically that June 10, 1940.

MR: About June 10, 1940, that Italy entered war, and that day I was called to the *questura*, that day or the day before, a few days later, I was called to the *questura* and the political office, the man of the political office, Dr. Cristallo, says "You are challenged. You are requested to leave the Italian kingdom." I say, "And if I don't?" "You will be interned." I said, "It's okay. So intern me, here I am, I'm not afraid," I said. He said, "Well, let's talk business." He says, "Where do you want to go? Where could you go, somewhere else?" I said, "I don't know where else." But I guess, not far from Udine, Mereto, they had properties there, my friends Gentillis, and we talked about it. I could go there, it's a small village. He says, "You can go wherever you want except in those places where there is a flee place, how do you call it, for airplanes?"

JL: Airport?

MR: Airport and where there are military installations. There you cannot go. And where there is ocean or sea, you can't go. Otherwise you can go anywhere." I said, "I am going to Mereto." "When?" I said, "Give me forty-eight hours time." "Okay," he said, "you have forty-eight hours time." And I left. Next day, I came, I don't know where I was, and I came for lunch to the restaurant and there were two policemen in civilian clothes, waiting for me — "We are sorry, you have to come with us." Remember, I had to go, I came just,

I had brought things, toothpaste and soap, whatever they still had for sale, "you have to come with me." And Mrs. Gentilli says, "Why I give him something to eat." "Oh, you don't have to — where we take, in jail, they give him to eat, where we take him an-" I thought they would take me to the *questura*, to the police, you understand. And at the police, I used to come, I was in my home. [laughs] All the policemen there they would smile and me and jokes. The Italian policemen is not like here, policeman. And slowly but surely my brother-in-law came too and they accompanied me to jail. In jail they took all the fingerprints and they looked at me and took all the things away from me — my belt and my shoestrings — and they put me in a cell. But I want to eat. "Tomorrow." They would always answer you "tomorrow, *domain, domani, domani.*" Yes, they came. Well, you want me to describe the jail? It's there all described, why should I have to repeat it?

JL: Well, this is a different document.

MR: Well, the jail was something I can never forget. It was the worst thing. It was a place you never get used to it, and this is what other jail I was in, especially they kept me isolated, no beating. The food I could have, they gave you, for lunch at noon, they gave you a good soup and a pound of bread. I never had, there in civil life, I never had such good bread. But who could eat? Who could eat? I smoked. I smoked, six, seven, eight packages a day, sixty, eighty cigarettes a day. And sleeping, I couldn't, because there were so many bugs, bedbugs. They attacked me day and night. They were not afraid. They were in the thousands. All they give you there is a place to do your physiological needs. There was a place, like in the wall like a chair to sit down and there was here like a table and dirty as dirty can be. Lack of air and hot. When I heard they bombed — the French came to bomb Venice — and when I heard it, "Oh, I said, "my goodness, it was the most beautiful thing I give them," — a bomb hits this place, and I really wanted to die. I was there from 17 June to July 3, and I do not believe I slept two hours. Food — yeah, what happened? When I talked there to the man, he said, "Well, you ask to pay, they give you better conditions upstairs — cleaner and you can go out more." They would let you out in theory, an hour to go somewhere, anyplace, and everything, you can have everything. Okay, so I make application. I wanted to

pay for my food. Okay. Next day, the first thing they took the food, they would give me, you know, they took away. I could order everything I wanted. Steaks and soup and chicken and wine. Anything in the world — chocolate — anything which outside they did not have, I could order it. But that I was there in the same place. They gave me a mattress, you know, — instead of sleeping on a straw mattress, they gave me a good mattress. So instead of having bugs, bedbugs, you know, I had lice, too. You know, because the bedbugs, that mattress had — it was the most terrible thing, you know, the most terrible thing. But with me was a man, in other room, but we used to meet while walking, Mr. Paitel, who was the Poland Jews, whose son was killed, I don't remember, yeah, his son was killed a year ago in Germany, before they brought him back. They said if he wanted the ashes he had to pay, I don't know how much. The Germans, yeah. His son was a boy who helped the immigration tourists. Well, he used to laugh at me. He used to say, "Here is a paradise." He was in Dachau. "You should have seen in Dachau how conditions were. No, they did not have those bedbugs, no they did not have the dirt, but the beatings they used to give us. . ." I couldn't understand it. And July 3, a day before, at about seven o'clock in the evening, a man came, policeman, opened that thing and said, "*Domani, lei va a casa,*" which means "Tomorrow, you go home." And when I heard this I just fainted, you know. Down I felt, I was fainting. And after I came to myself, I said, "No, it's not true." They are very happy to give you these news because they knew that when you go out and you give 'em something, you leave them something. Of course I had nothing with me, everything was in the office. But I had a pair of socks, I gave him, you know. Well, anyways, I said, "It's not true." He said, "Yes, it's true. It's written here." Because, in other words, he did not have me on the list of those people who have to be taken care, and the fact that the next day, policeman, I was called to the office, they gave me everything back what they took away from me, money and my watch and this and that, and there was a policeman waiting for me. He did not say a word to me, they put me in a-I never saw that policemen, he was very taciturn, and they took me in a boat, you know. It was a motorboat, and there was another man. The other man was, you know, he had, how do you call it, shackles?

JL: Manacles.

MR: Manacles, and we were brought there to the *questura*, and I was brought in and they said, "You wait." They had me outside. I could have escaped, I could have — no, no one cared about me. And all there see around policemen. Policemen, they ask you a cigarette, they give you a cigarette, and they are offices, as I said, the houses are, there is a big hall and on the sides you have small, small rooms. In those rooms you had the offices. There was political offices, there was foreign offices, there was this office. They had twelve offices, I don't know how many, and in the middle you had all the police, you know. They were not outside, they were there. And soon they brought other people in from jails and they kept Jewish people. Well, finally, two policemen came to me, young boys, fine boys, "Where do you want to go now before we take you away?" "I want to go to the restaurant, to Jewish restaurant." So we went to the restaurant, we had a nice lunch — the policemen, too. They told her where they are going to take me, they did not tell me, but they told the Gentillis where they are going to take me. At two o'clock we left in a train, the fastest train, because there are different trains, you know — *direttissimo*.¹¹² And we traveled from two o'clock in the afternoon until three o'clock [in the morning]. We arrived to a place in South Italy, Battipaglia, from Battipaglia, we went, I don't remember where, on a small train [to] Eboli, and from Eboli to Campagna we had to walk. They took a taxi. I never saw such thing. We were two people — a Hungarian was with me. And on the way we had such a wonderful trip with those two. They would tell us stories, you know, they were [speaking Italian], they would tell us stories and we were like friends. And when we arrived there they brought us to the police and there we were registered, and they said, "You are free." And we came out we were in Campagna. Campagna, a small town in the province of Campagna. I'm telling you, never did I see such beautiful town, a town with beautiful parks, monuments. It's surrounded by mountains — this is why they selected this place. Outside were boys, all boys, not women. Boys and boys and boys—young boys, Polish, German, a very few Italian, Jewish boys, very few Polish boys not Jewish. And I had to go to the Concetto. There were two barracks on the hills and from

¹¹² Italian name for a very fast train.

there you saw a *vista*, I am telling you, a sunset that you can never — it means really happiness. And there was one military barrack and one *carabinieri* barrack, was Concetto and San Bartolomeo. I was to go to the Concetto and those boys brought me up. I came there and there was a young boy and he began, he brought me a bed, he brought me pillows and sheets and blankets, all. I thought he was a policeman. He was a policeman! He brought me, organized me, offered me cigarette. So I invited him for a coffee. "No, thank you, we cannot accept, we are not allowed." You understand. And there I passed from July 3 or July 4 to August 18. It was the most beautiful time I had in my life. Why? Because the government passed me six and a half liras a day. To eat food I could eat like this for that money? Can you imagine? You know that [for] a liter of oil, I paid a lira? A good lunch cost me three and a half liras. For they gave you an appetizer, vegetables, spaghetti, meat, I'm not for meat so I'd have eggs, *dolce*,¹¹³ and wine. Mail — free. You could write a thousand letters and a million cards. I could go, yes. I did not like to sleep there upstairs, so I took wanted to have a private room. So I took a private room. The head of the camp, the *commisar*, I don't know, he was such a wonderful man, you know, really like a father to us. And he had lots of patience with us, too. You can imagine people, male, all male without a woman. Yeah, they had women in town, but I don't believe, I don't know — anyways we were very nervous. We used to fight — not fight, but quarrel — and arguments, and complaints and neglects and go over the law, you know, for example, the certain hour we should have stayed in our homes and they would walk around. And of course — but they did not arrest us, but he would complain. He would say, "You have to know there are certain laws which I have to observe," and so on. The police was wonderful. We had *carabinieri*, policemen, and that's all. And they were just to help us, to help everybody.

JL: Did you feel you were treated differently from others, perhaps better because you were a rabbi?

MR: I wasn't a rabbi.

JL: Well, not rabbi, but you were a religious function-

¹¹³ Italian for 'sweets' or 'dessert'.

MR: No, no. I was just like any other man. I had the possibility, and so were many others, to live private. So when I came in the barracks, there were lots of people. I had to live with eighteen people in one room. But it was clean — no lice, no bedbugs. We had fleas, did you ever see fleas in your life?

JL: No.

MR: Those who jump, they jump. They are very small. They jump. Of course, they suck your blood. You can live with them, you know. They are nice creatures, jolly, but bedbugs and the lice — it develops very bad and this we had in private. When I came to live in my room, that night it was [a] terrible thing. I had a battlefield. They attacked me and I killed them. I don't know, scores of them. But next day, I learned something. I learned it from my father. He used to do it when they had a wedding and we had ants. And we made cake, you know and the ants would attack the cake. He would put the cake on a big table and put the feet of the table in water, you know, in a glass of water and so they could not come up. In other words, I isolated my bed. But first, I burned it. I burned the, how do you call it? Not the mattress, the— how do you call it?

JL: You mean the frame of the bed?

MR: The frame, all you know. Because those bedbugs and the lice are in the frame. They are not in the mattress. So, I went, we had a pharmacy you know. Everybody gave money for that pharmacy. But we were not sick. All we had was cotton, and I took a piece of cotton, I bought alcohol and a piece of wire. I put the cotton on the wire, wrapped around, and I put it in the alcohol and I burned that frame, you know, all around, all you know, it was those iron springs, and I'm telling you yes, every once in a while a bedbug would come from up, you know, I caught. I lived there like a prince, you know. Why? Because the food, we had the best, and of course from the restaurant she would send me all kinds, the best of things. Even chicken fat she sent me. And I had a wonderful time there. And I prepared my exams, too.

JL: I think there's just a little bit left here, I'll stop here.

END OF TAPE 6, SIDE 2

TAPE 7, SIDE 1

JL: You wanted me to remind you to tell me about the poverty and dirt at Campagna.

MR: Yes, well, are you ready?

JL: Yeah.

MR: There's not much I can say, there was a great poverty and still whenever I think about Campagna, I cannot capacitate myself, I cannot guess what they're living for, because there they have no industry, they have no commerce. I saw there, for example, farmers picking up the potatoes, the potatoes were as big as walnuts, and the soil was all pebbles, very bad soil, and I used to see there my landlady, on a Sunday morning, before going to church, she would give to the children a piece of bread and a few drops of oil. The oil there is so cheap, but all week she couldn't do it. All week she would put tomatoes, tomato sauce, on that bread — very poor people. And I saw there ladies, thirty, thirty-five years old, they looked like if they had been seventy years old. I also detected that some people would marry at twelve, thirteen years, some girls and boys. Twelve, thirteen years, I saw a boy, twelve years, he already had a ring and he was married, what else? Very, very, very poor people. And, on the doors you can see mothers and daughters sitting and delousing themselves. With a comb, she would comb her hair and she would kill the lice. Very dirty. The only way they could clean the city, they would leave. They had a dam, the water — a dam. They would open the dam and the water would come and clean the entire — the roads. But they were lively, the people there — of course, we didn't see too many men, because they were all in the war, the young people. And they were very friendly, all of them. The mayor would come and be so friendly to us, and I remember when we left that this was, if I'm not mistaken, on an August 18, on a Saturday night. The buses came to take us to Ferramonti, this was already in Calabria. Not all the people, only from the *concessione* where I belonged. About, I don't know, about two hundred or three hundred people. Those people but from [sounds like: *mere*] were still left there. The buses came about seven, eight o'clock Saturday, but we left at one o'clock. We have to say the Italians are good, but when it comes

to, how would you say? To exactness, they are very much failing. Their bureaucracy — this wasn't in order or that wasn't in order.

JL: Before we go on to Ferramonti, let me ask you a little more about Campagna.

MR: Yeah, I'm talking about Campagna.

JL: But you said you were going on to Ferramonti ?

MR: Yes, I want to say that when we were there waiting to leave town, every once in a while a lady would come or an old man would come, a jar of strawberry jam or raspberry jam or apples or food. Everyone brought something to us, with blessing, this is what I wanted to say.

JL: I want to ask you a little bit more about the barracks, if you could describe, you said there were eight people.

MR: Well, eighteen—

JL: Eighteen.

MR: Well, the barracks, it was — I never knew whether it was a barracks or it was a school for the *carabinieri*, like teaching them to be *carabinieri*. This is, I remember that it was on a hill, and it had a big yard around. It was more a castle than a house and from there you saw all around yourself was a beautiful panorama. And the houses, how from afar they looked so beautifully, of course, grass and trees. The rooms were very, very huge rooms, I would say halls, I would call them, and they had to wash, they had something like a pipe, and the pipe had holes, and from there it was a kind of a shower, we would take. Inside, the halls were nice and clean, but the most beautiful thing was the panorama, the landscape from there all around where you looked.

JL: While you were there, what did you think would happen to you after? Did you think about it?

MR: I was not thinking at all because I lived in my room, I didn't live there for a long time. I left and I went to town and I — of course, which meant I had to pay for my room. But I was sleeping in my room, I could study in my room. This is the only benefit I had, because both people who lived in private rooms or

people who lived in the *concessione* all day they could go around in town all day and no one would say a word.

JL: So there was no work that you did?

MR: No, we had no work. We were treated just like a soldier, without duties of a soldier. And I had, when I left the *caserma*, when I left the barracks, I had to go three times a day to the police. It was the second house or the third house, to put my signature, except Saturday. I told them I don't write on Saturday, so they accepted it. So I just had to appear and that was all. We could buy everything; we could go to the library. There was not one place closed to us. And most of the people would go around the police there, police station. And they had beautiful parks and benches. In fact, in those parks, some were made of marble, and life was really beautiful. At nine o'clock we had to stay in our homes and barracks. But very few people observed this, even after twelve o'clock you would hear all the times — it was like a beehive in town.

JL: Okay, so you were there until August 18?

MR: August 18. Before August 18, it was announced that there was a list who had to leave and it was said that in Ferramonti there is malaria and, the how we say, the director of, I don't know, the police, I don't know, the head of the police, that man he was so wonderful to us. He gathered us, he wanted to speak to us, and he said, "Well, you are going there. There you will have a camp, a real concentration camp, but not something like in Germany. The only thing is that you will live in barracks instead of living in houses."

JL: Oh, wait a minute. Ah, I see. You were not in— the police were in the barracks at Campagna and you were in a private room, is that right?

MR: No. These barracks, at that time, where we lived in that *concessione*, it was not barracks anymore, there was no police anymore.

JL: I understand that.

MR: Before, years ago it used to be a place for the *carabinieri*, not police.

JL: Yeah, I understand, but was it a barracks then in Campagna or private room?

MR: A barracks, but — it used to be barracks but when we were put there — probably before — they closed that place.

JL: Did you live with other people in one room? That's what I mean by barracks.

MR: Barracks meant that in one hall, in one room, we lived eighteen people.

JL: Yeah, okay.

MR: It depended on the size of the hall. But it was enough room that one bed was far from the other bed. We were not squeezed in there. And the most important thing, it was very clean. We had only those fleas, as I said, which are not so bad as the other things.

JL: So let's go back to Ferramonti.

MR: Ferramonti, we left on a Saturday, one o'clock, I believe. All day it was terribly hot and when we came into the trains it was terribly cold. All night— the director of the police, the head of police, he came, he said, "Gentlemen, I want you to know that according to the law you should be manacled. But I guaranteed for you." This is what the *carabinieri* do, this is for everybody. Police does not do it, and the *carabinieri*, they have it in their law and their procedure. "I guaranteed for you and I am responsible that you will behave yourself. You won't escape, and you won't do mischief, and you are traveling like tourists." And this is what we did. I don't know how many. Half of them were *carabinieri*, I don't know how many, a dozen or two dozen, I can't remember. This is, I remember that they were most wonderful to us. They shared their chocolate portions with us, because they used to get chocolate portions. They shared their cigarettes with us and they were, these *carabinieri* were most wonderful. This I can remember. And we went, we left at two o'clock and we arrived not to Ferramonti but a station before, Mongrassano Scalo. We arrived about, I should say, about five o'clock in the afternoon and the day there was like in a desert. The night cold, and the day very hot. And we zigzagged with the train. Why? They wanted to avoid bombing. At that time the English, they would bomb Italy, so they had to avoid it. And we arrived at five o'clock to Mongrassano Scalo. From Mongrassano Scalo to Ferramonti we had to walk

about seven, eight kilometers, which means about, I would say, about five miles, no four miles. I don't know, I don't remember. Anyways, there, when we arrived to Mongrassano Scalo, we saw not *carabinieri* but police. Police and there was a man on a motorbike, motorcycle. Instead of a collar, he had something made out of paper. Later we knew that he was the director of the camp, he used to be a captain of the police in Minneapolis, and now he was to be our boss. He was a man in his forties, might say or his fifties...

JL: He came from Minneapolis?

MR: Not Minneapolis, Naples.

JL: Naples!

MR: Naples, I'm sorry. And this man he was middle height, very slim, a very slim face, dark complexion, and he looked so grim, he looked kind of sour, and he began to tell us, first thing he said, "Only those who are very tired and only the old people will ride in wagons." Wagons means big— two wheels, made of two wheels, with one mule, a mule, and it could contain five, six people, maybe ten, and they were very few. The young people had to walk. Second, he told us already that this is a concentration camp. This is not just a place, a resort place, as the other places we were, as we had in Campagna. This is a concentration camp and we will have discipline, we will be subject to law enforcement, fascist, and police, no *carabinieri*. "Otherwise," he said, "we don't have..." how do you call it? The wires? Around-

JL: Barbed wire?

MR: "...barbed wire, fences," he said, "There is nothing of this. But where do you want to escape? We are in a desert; you have no place to escape. And if you will observe the laws, you will be happy and we will be happy." And we began to walk and when arrived there I had a terrible headache and people were already in the camps. That camp in Ferramonti, there we lived in barracks. Every two barracks had a court — between two barrack there was an empty space. In every barrack there lived thirty-five people, so two barracks had seventy people. On one side there was a kitchen. Close to the kitchen was the bathroom with showers. The water was yellow and full of minerals, and it smelled like spoiled eggs. On the other

side there was in the barrack a big dining room. Nobody ate in the dining room, but there it was. It was a dining room and also a library and state would be there, like a living room — it was everything. And in the middle there was a court. It was very hot there, deserted. We saw there patches of burned grass, that's all, and trees without leaves and for months and months there was not a drop of rain. Outside it was terribly hot. Inside [it] was very comfortable. Between one bed and another there was a certain space. The beds had mattresses and sheets and blankets and pillows and everything. Now, the kitchen, there were people who worked in the kitchen and they were paid by the government. The *piantone*, which means the man who made order in the outside around and in the living room — he would clean the living room — he was paid by the government.

JL: Were these not prisoners, then?

MR: No, no, no, a prisoner who was paid by the government? He was paid by the government besides what he received. And in every room there was a *piantone* — this I don't remember who paid him, but I do know that those seventy people, each seventy people, they had their own kitchen. They would have a man who would go to Tarsia, accompanied by a policeman, to buy all this stuff. Everything was rationed. But practically — the poverty of the population in that place in Calabria was so great that even what was allotted to them for the rationing, they could not buy. So practically we could have everything we wanted, without rationing. This is what the man used to tell us. And yeah, water, drinking water, they used to bring with the mule and barrels from Tarsia, and after when I saw, years later when I came to the States, and I saw how people in Chicago Heights would drink that stinky water and they made no tragedy of it, bad water. But in Italy they understood that prisoners have to have clean water and that stinky water we used only for washing ourself, to have a shower, to rinse things, but to cook and to drink, the drinking water, we used to get the water after they made pipes. They prolonged the pipes, they built pipes underground so that we had the water from Tarsia, clean water. Now, when I came there, there were about, I don't know, ten like of these barracks, maybe I couldn't say — between ten and twenty — but there the builders would build and build and continue building and I was wondering how fast they made

it. They brought barracks in like nothing they built the kitchen. The kitchen was not the barrack, the kitchen had to be with bricks, and how fast those people, those masons, built — it took them in one day they built them.

JL: Could you tell how you were treated, after all this? Physically? No abuse?

MR: Physically, really we had a real vacation, because food, we had more than we wanted. We could eat turkey as much as we wanted. I was in the kosher barrack, so we would eat turkey — we had a *shochet* — turkey, chicken, eggs. The Fascists themselves, they would bring us, at least you could buy. People from the village around, they would bring things. They were not allowed to come into the barracks. This is why — we were isolated. And we were not allowed to go outside. But they would come and stand at the entrance, and we would wait for them, too, and the sentry — there was always a sentry — he would say nothing. And there was an officer, a lieutenant of the Fascist police, when he saw the arrangement from one side the peasants or the farmers, with their produce, vegetable and eggs and fish and food, and when he saw the refugees from the other side, he would go away so that as to say, "I don't see anything what you are doing." And we would go out or they would come in and we would get the produce and they would get the money, and that was that. We had only one who was bad, a Fascist, the doctor. We had a doctor who took care of us. Every other day they had to give us shots and he had a needle — we used to call him the smith, in Polish it's called *kowal* — this man, and he used to shout, and he was always sour. He would not beat anybody, God forbid, but we used tricks on him, terrible tricks. For example, he had two Jewish helpers, doctors. Before getting the shot one of them had to put a little iodine, so he would put the iodine like he already made the shot, and that's it. He would pretend — this is the way we used to fool him. The Fascists, well I remember a sergeant, he would come and cry for us because three times a day he had to make an *appello*, and according to the law everybody had to stay at nine o'clock in the morning, at noon, before eating, and in the evening, stay close to the bed at attention and so that they could see whether everybody is there. But when he came no one was in the barrack. So he went around, "Please, gentlemen, what are you doing to me? I need you, you understand, you cannot treat me this

way." And he would always talk and we would laugh and that was that. One day he talked his soul out, and he says, "You see behind here, behind these hills or mountains, we are getting such a beating. The English, they beat us as much as they want. They beat the soul out of us and we deserve it because we should never have become friends with the Germans. They are our secular enemies." This was the, the policemen, the police, they were always in — not the uniform — civil clothes. The camp director he would pick up — later on, later on, we had people, I don't remember, they were called Bengasini, from Benghazi. Why were they called Bengasini? These were Jews from Galicia, from Romania, Polish Jews. They were going to Israel on a boat and the Italians captured them. So, but they were afraid, the Italians were afraid that some other — Poles, maybe English or German — might shoot at them and destroy them. So, the Italians brought them to Tripoli, from Tripoli to Benghazi. They were entire families. I don't remember how many families, husbands, wives, children. I don't remember how many families, maybe a hundred, maybe more. And from there, from Tripoli, they brought them to Benghazi, which is in Africa, too, from Benghazi to Naples. In Naples they put them in jail, and from Naples they brought them to Ferramonti. Those people were assigned apartments, which means a family had a bedroom and a living room and two-three families, one kitchen and one bathroom, a toilet, call it. These were arrangements, and we called them Bengasini. Of course, these Bengasini, the children, needed instruction and right away the Jewish people made a school, and I was one of the teachers. What?

JL: Oh, I just in anticipation of what you were going to say.

MR: Yes, and right away, we don't know, by some miracles, we had things to give them a *merenda*, which means a little something — food, special food — which meant marmalade, jam and egg — children needed it — milk, special for the children. The director of the camp graciously cooperated. He would take a load of children in the truck and take them to Tarsia just to make them see Italy. To make them enjoy a trip. What else?

JL: Just what was the other populations of the camp besides you? Jews?

MR: Jews and Yugoslavs, Yugoslavish Jews. We had very few Polish people, I don't remember how many non-Jews. From Germany, German Jews, lots of German Jews.

JL: Very few non-Jews you said.

MR: Very few non-Jews. When I came, after, we had three synagogues, not one, and one church.

JL: In Ferramonti ? In the camp?

MR: In the camp, yes. I showed you a one there. Well it was made — just a barrack with benches and they put an ark, you know, with a curtain, a *Sefer Torah* we got, I don't remember from where, we had two Orthodox synagogues and one Reform, and we had preachers and we had teachers and we had everything.

JL: Who came in or from among the population?

MR: From among the population.

JL: I'll have to stop here.

END OF TAPE 7, SIDE 1

TAPE 7, SIDE 2

JL: So, besides teaching to the Bengasini children, what other type of work for the Italians in the camp at Ferramonti? Did you do any work that was required as a so-called prisoner?

MR: No, no, no. We had a Bible class, we had a Talmud class and we had language classes. And we had, for example, as I say, bands, music, we had sport, which is the thing, how do they call it? Football, they call it there, here, how do they call it?

JL: Soccer?

MR: Soccer. And we had all kinds, libraries. Not big books, but we had it. And everybody had something to sell something. We had, for example, fried things like these, all kinds you know and food for sale and barbers. And of course, there were as usually, women would sell their love. Married women, husbands who would pretend not seeing. This would scandalized the police very much because there, they are really very, how would you say? No, people, not honest...how would you call it?

JL: Moral?

MR: Morally they are high. They don't know all these things and they did not like it. Maybe they were a little jealous—we don't know, but when the Bengasini came, the woman came.

JL: So before that there were no women?

MR: There were no women. What else is there to say?

JL: Let me ask you about, at that time did you think ahead? What kinds of thoughts did you have about why you were imprisoned in this camp?

MR: Well, we used to see a train two, three wagons you know — an electric one or it was on petroleum, I don't remember. And lately, the train did not go so regularly. So we would say, "You see, he's in trouble, Mussolini. You see, he doesn't have oil for that train. The war is going to end very soon." We wanted the war to, in other words, we were very great optimists but people did not care. People had no time to care, to think what will happen or what will not happen. We were aware of everything because we had all the news and we also had the radios. No one ever prohibited us to have a radio. While in Italy the Jews had

to deliver their radios, they could have no radios, we could have that. We were not disturbed. And what else could I say? Food, we had much too much. We lacked nothing. Entertainment, we had. Yes, we used to have fights, even with sticks, but these were non-Jews. I never saw Jews fighting with sticks. Quarrels and arguments, as many as you want. Orthodox with the Reform — there was an Orthodox man, Mr. Ashkenazi, he wanted to impose fasting on us and we said, "No, we are not going to fast. You want to fast, you can." There was a small faction. Some people were on this side. This gave us, of course, material to quarrel and to keep busy. All the time we would elect *kapos*, elders, leaders. The next time we would demount them. We were not so happy. We would always discuss we wanted better food and maybe it had to be cheaper. But, the fact is that the government would give us six and a half liras a day, as much as they spent for a soldier. We spent three and a half liras and we had all the food and the rest we put away. There were Jews who said, "What did I do when I was free? I was a nobody. Here I am somebody. I'm making money." My thing, my conditions were quite different because I used to get, from my friends in Venice, coffee to have my espresso. I used to get sugar, chicken fat, chocolate. I would get packages. And the congregation continued to give me half of my salary. Which means they, my friend would get the salary and would put it away for me. I knew that I could have everything I wanted in the world. But practically I was in the school for a short time. Why? Because the Talmudic teacher — I don't know what happened to him — he left and they needed a man to teach Talmud. The head of our barrack, Mr. Ashkenazi, was very religious man and we did not agree very well. And he wanted to make a fool of me. He said, "Would you be able to teach Talmud?" He didn't have a very high opinion about me because I was a cantor, an Italian cantor. What can an Italian cantor know? He thought of me as being a [sounds like: *robbyoung*]. But I said, "Yes, I would like to teach Talmud," and I began to teach Talmud. All the people, even non-Jews, which means converted Jews, would come to me to listen, to attend my class.

JL: By converted into or out of?

MR: Beg your pardon?

JL: By converted, do you mean people who had become Jews or who become Christians?

MR: No, people who had become Christians. But, of course, to all they were still considered Jews and they were interested in Talmud. They were German Jews, most of them. I used to teach in German and they liked it very much.

JL: So these were adult groups?

MR: Adult groups. People from twenty to seventy. And this was one of my greatest satisfaction because they said they never had such a good teacher. Of course, I taught for a time, but, after, I — yeah, this I forgot to tell you. While we were in Campagna, one day, it came out the head of our camp, the director he said, "All those who studied at universities, who are registered at universities, if they want to take exams, they should make an application to the police in Rome. The address so-and-so, and there's a possibility that they will allow to go each to his respective university."

JL: This statement was made while you were still in Campagna?

MR: In Campagna. Official. So, I was one of them and all the people they became *basinos*, students. They were students mostly of medicine because this is in Poland a Jew could not do it. It was *numerus clausus*. And I said, "I want to do, too." I was not capable enough to make the application by myself. There was a lawyer, a certain Kostoris who later in years, later he became my parishioner, Kostoris, and I said to him, "*Avvocato*, please could you make an application for me?" And he said, "Oh, please leave me alone. What do you think? Mussolini has nothing else to do, to make you go with all the trouble he has, to make you go to your university?" I said, "Well, everybody does it." So he helped me a little bit. I made the application and meanwhile we all forgot about it. Nobody talked about it and we went to Ferramonti. I had a hunch; I had like a sixth sense, that for me to study is good. And the brother of that lady who was the cook there, he lived in Padua,—.

JL: The cook, where? From where?

MR: He was from Padua. Where I was at the University.

JL: And which cook are you referring?

MR: There, in the Jewish restaurant in Venice. Her brother, I wrote to him and he went to the university and he took all the books for me and sent them. Not only books, but in Italy when a teacher teaches a lecture, there is somebody who writes, you know, what he writes and after, he prints it and after, he sells it. He sent me all the scripts. The so-called scripts. I wanted to learn. That was the truth. I wanted to learn. If I'm called to take exams I knew that I had to learn. So after a couple months I said, "Listen, gentlemen, I have to give up my Talmud class." It was only an hour but it was more than an hour because I had to prepare myself and you know, you begin it lasts longer, a discussion. I gave up my Talmud class. And again, I have to say — maybe I'm showing off — that when I gave up my Talmud class it lasted a few more days and after it fell apart because the other one who knew more Talmud than I but he couldn't give it out so much. His name was Reb Izolski a very religious boy whom later I met in Rome. He became a freethinker. But I will talk about him later. That Reb Izolski destroyed my Talmud class which I built up and had developed so well.

So I started to study. How did I study? I would go around the barrack, but it was too hot to read. It was too hot so I went inside and this is the way I learned. And, well, other people, too, students — some of them learned, some of them taught, some of them went around fooling around. But I believed that this was a good time. Not so good as in Campagna, but good enough. As a matter of fact, one man escaped from the camp. He escaped. Why did he escape? I don't know. A few days he was out, after he was caught and you know what they did with him? They sent him to a *meshugana*, how do you call it?

JL: Insane asylum?

MR: Asylum, yeah.

JL: Mental Institution.

MR: Because to escape from there one had to be crazy. Of course, we thought that when he would be caught the police would kill him, they would beat him. No, all they did, they put him in bed. And for two, three days he was in bed, it was a punishment. A soldier was there, policeman was all the time close to him and after he was sent to the lunatic asylum. Why, if a man escaped from Campagna, must have been a

meshugena, that's it. Soon, of course, we had all the time we were very busy. Prepare the services for the High Holidays, see that the *shul* has everything. Of course everybody thought capable of being a *chazzan*, came to a rabbi. And we were all the time busy. All of a sudden it came out that those men who were married, Mussaloni did not intern their wives unless they wanted to join their husbands. So if one had a wife, for example, in Genoa, one had a wife here, one had a wife there — if those men were weak, if they needed attention, if they needed their wife's help, they would be able to join their wives to become free. So the doctor would give an examen to everybody. Well, the common sickness of a Jew is heart trouble. So every married Jew began to complain of heart trouble. And it came out that drinking coffee and running around the barracks would make your heart palpitate. So people began, coffee, we didn't have coffee, but right away a committee was created and who had a little coffee had to give it there. We had I don't know how many kilos of coffee. I gave all my coffee away. I had a little jar, maybe a jar, maybe I don't know, 200 gram or 100 gram. I gave it there. And people began to run obstacles, jump. Everywhere there you saw people jumping. It gave us fun and to do. And after, nothing came out of it. After, they said, well we had to prepare for the winter. They wanted double windows. It was leaking, the roof was leaking. So they went to the director and the director kicked them out and shouted. But next day, he provided workers to come and to fix what we wanted. Well, in October, the first days of October, the first boy who studied in Bologna, a certain Loebman, he was called to the police. The police said you have a permission to go to Bologna to take your exams." Bologna or Ferrara, I don't remember. "You go by yourself, no police. When you come there, you have to announce yourself at the police that you are there. And take the exams. You have eight days for the exams and after you have to come back here."

JL: This was October of what year?

MR: Forty. And every day it was the same thing, the same thing.

JL: A different person every day?

MR: And for me nothing. For me nothing. So I wrote that man, to that Gentilli; to the director; or as I used to call him, the cook, the janitor of the Jewish restaurant. He was a soldier during World War I. He knew a

few German words. He was a great patriot. In fact in his testament, he left, he wanted to be buried in a Fascist uniform and with an Italian flag and so on and so on. And he knew to talk to authority, that's what he said. So I asked him to go to Rome and to see what he can do for me. So he went to Rome. There the chief of police, his name was Sinesi, and he had an appointment with him, he had a, how would you say? Interview with him. And Sinesi said no, we cannot do it. He said no. So he said, that Gentilli sent me a card, an express card especially to tell me, "I went to Rome and I tried and I failed and you have to give up your dream to come to Padua."

Actually, I was not prepared and I did not care about the exams. I wanted to go out because although we had it good it was still prison. We still were just like roosters, like cocks, without anything a person needs in freedom. So I wanted to go out a little bit. I wanted also the ambition to say, "All the students go. Why can't I go?" And I had a terrible time, a terrible few days. Of course, I described the fault to him. I said, "He didn't know how to talk. Otherwise, why should I be worse than any other? They all go. Why can't I go?" Well, to make a long story short — or vice versa, a short story long — the 30th of October I was called to the office. Or somebody came to tell me, "You have eight days. You are going to Padua to take your exams." You can imagine my joy. Of course I had to go to Mongrassano Scalo, walk. And yes, I went with another student but accompanied by two policeman. This is what they would do, the police.

Somebody, just by case, just by chance. One, some of the students were going into Rome without police and some had not only one police but two policemen. We were not scared. Of course, if I would have a choice, I'd go by myself. The fact is we went, I don't remember where the other boy stopped. He did not go to Padua. My policeman brought me to Padua and brought me to the police and the police asked me, "Do you want to take a room by yourself? Or you want us? If we give you a room it will be a very shabby room. Or if you wanted to take a hotel room." I said I want hotel room. I took hotel room in fact And they said, "Well, the policeman, you don't worry. The policeman will stay in the hall and watch you, all night." I said, "No, I want the policeman to sleep just in the same room with me and I will pay for it." And this is what I did. There in Padua I had friends. The father and the step-mother of that lady who was cook in

the Jewish restaurant in Venice. So I used to stay there. I did not sleep there; but I stayed in the hotel. And that policeman, they gave me a policeman who was at my disposal, twenty-four hours a day. So, next day I came, I said, "I'm not interested in exams. Why should I make exams? I'm not even prepared. But I will stay the eight days and after, I will go back." And my friends, from Padua and from Venice, they came to Padua, like it is a try. Yes, but in October 30th the exams were finished. There were not exams anymore at the university. They say, "Go to try," because the exams, at the vacation they make — September, October. The session was over. So I said, "Okay, I will go." And the policeman too said — the policeman they would change and once in awhile I got a very fine policeman — and he said, "Why don't you try? Try, it doesn't cost you anything to go." Next day he brought me to the Niviano, there to the university and I talked to the secretary of the faculty and her name was Zancan, I forgot her name... Paola Zancan. She was the secretary and also the girlfriend of Professor Ferrabino, the man who gave me the exam. She was young, very beautiful woman. And I came to her and she says, "Well, the exams are over. But since it's *false maggiore*, which means it's not your fault, you tell what kinds of exams would you like to have." So I said, "I want to make Roman history; *antichità* Roman, Greek antiques, — this is what she taught — *Risorgimento*."

JL: You mean, antiquity?

MR: Yeah, I had nine subjects to make, nine! Why? Because, you understand, while other people, Italians, they don't worry, they can study twenty years or five years. But I have to make exams, you understand. I was behind, I had to make nine exams to be true. It was the last year, something like that. No, it was not the last year but I still wanted to make it. So I said I had nine exams. So she says, "Well, I don't know about the exams. You can make an exam with me, *antichità Greco-Romana*. And I'd be happy to give you. When do you want?" I say, "Even now." I knew that subject, you know. Actually, it's history. Then she had said, "No, I have to ask first the president," which means the principal of the faculty — it was Ferrabino — "and come next day." I came next day and she says, "Everything is okay. You will have the possibility to make all the exams." There they don't give you a written exam; they gave you a oral exam

and there are always three professors: the professor who taught you, and another two professors. Okay, and she began to ask me. And she gave me, I don't remember, I think I had twenty-nine over thirty. Beautiful. So, next day I came to her, always accompanied by that policeman and he was jubilant when I made a good exam. It was his merit. And I said to her, "Mrs. Zancan, do you know we used to say that the appetite comes eating. Now that I made a subject so well, could I make another exam, another few exams?" She said, "Okay, tell me when and how." Okay, so I make a long — yeah, but my time ran up. I had eight days. So I went to the *questura* and I wanted to talk to the *questore*. "No," I said to the men, they had an office for foreigners and there was a representative who handled my case, a very nice man, and I said, "Would you like to make an application to the police in Rome that I could stay? I have, you see, I am making exams but it's after, I was given the freedom after the session was over." He says, "No, we cannot do it. You can do it by yourself to make an application." And I know if I make application it won't be good. I said, "How about giving me a possibility to talk to the *questore*," which means the head of the police. He says, "Yes, you can have it." And he made an appointment on Saturday night to talk to the *questor* about seven o'clock in the evening. There I met students, you know, Jewish students. They came to the police just to warm up and to spend their time! They would even live there, you know, in the hall. Well, the *questor* received me. He was a man maybe in his sixties, sixty-five. He was recalled — you understand it, he was impatient but they need his help, so they called him. And he gave me a chair, he shook hands with me. I said, "Mr. *Questore*," I don't remember how I said it, "my situation is that I have to go back and I still have exams to make, you can see." I showed him everything. I showed him the session was over and before I came. "And Could you please? And I was told to make the application by myself. Don't you think it's like the guest making dinner without the host?" And he says, "Of course, we are going to make application. And I have some use for you," he says. "We make the application. The police does not answer right away, but until the police answers, you stay here. Police may answer in six months, in one month, in a year — you stay here." And after, he began to ask me about my parents and what I want to do and where I come from. He kept me more than an hour, talking, just talking. And I

went out. This was on a Saturday. Sunday I came back to Paola Zancan, and I showed her when I wanted to make the examens. I left spaces between one examen and the other so that I can brush up and I can rest and I began to take those exams. I made an exam, *Risorgimento*. What does it mean? *Risorgimento*, I don't know, I can't translate it...

JL: Renaissance?

MR: Renaissance? No, it's not renaissance; it's not English, *Risorgimento*, *Risorgimento* is reanimating, the dead turning to life, what do you call it — resurrection, something like that. But it is national, *riso*. *Sorgere* means to have the dawn, to shine, to turn. Well, anyway, *Risorgimento* this was in the nineteenth century when the Italian people, when Italy was reunited. And this man — I don't remember what his name was but you don't care — while he was examining me there was a alarm.

JL: A what?

MR: Alarm! And alarm! We had to run to the shelter.

JL: I'm going to have to stop you here and keep the suspense.

MR: Okay darling.

END OF TAPE 7, SIDE 2

TAPE 8, SIDE 1

JL: Okay, the last time we were talking, you were telling me about your release from Feramanti to Padua for exams. Could you tell me more about the exams?

MR: Well, the examen, as I said, at that time, the secretary of the faculty, it was Miss Paola Zancan, when I came there she said that the exams are over, it's too late, but due to the *false maggiore*, which means it's not my fault. After all, I was interned so she would see what she could do. And the next day, she said, "Well meanwhile you can take the exam with me." It was *antichità Greco Romano*, which means Greek-Roman antiquities. And she gave me a very good grade, which is twenty-eight over thirty-one or over thirty, I don't remember, it was almost maximum. Eighteen over thirty is the minimum. The maximum is thirty over thirty. And after, the policeman from the *questura di Padua*¹¹⁴ who would follow me everywhere. He even slept in the same room with me. I paid, otherwise he would have to stay in the hall. He was very well-disposed. He encouraged me and said, "Well, try, it doesn't cost you anything." So I came to her and I said, "Miss Zancan, you know, we say that the appetite comes with eating. Could you please arrange for me other exams?" She says, "How many exams?" I says, "I would like to make seven." Of course, in Italy, you can make in five years you have to graduate. Whether you make four a year, there are twenty exams plus a Latin assignment. I was behind with my exams. No, I wanted to make nine. One I made already. And, she says, "All you have to do is to tell me when you want to make it." Meanwhile my time was running up. I had only eight days. So I went there to the *questura*, there was a department, I don't know what you call it, yeah a department, of foreigner, foreign people, and there was a man, a secretary, a very nice man, very simple and frank. And I talked to him. I told him the story. He says, "What can we do for you?" I said, "All you can do is to prolong my stay here. I need at least a month because due to the war the professors are not available here" I said, lied. He said, "Well, this does not depend on us. This depends on Rome. The police in Rome, the headquarters have to prolong your thing." I said, "Well, will you please take an application for me?" He says, "No, you have to make the

¹¹⁴ Padua police headquarters.

application. We don't have anything to do with it." So I said, "Well, could you arrange an appointment with the head of the police in Padua?" We call it *questore*. He says, "Yes, it can be done." And he arranged such an appointment on a Saturday about six o'clock. We were in December, which means six o'clock was late already, no it was in November, it was late already. Well, as a matter of fact at six o'clock I was whisked in there to the director, I don't know, the head of the *questura*, a man in his sixty-five or seventy. He was already called back, because during the war they called people who were already pensioned. He gave me a chair and shook hands with me and gave me a big smile and began to ask me about my parents and about what I want to do after I graduate and about this and about that, personal things. And after he says, "What can I do for you?" And I told him the story. I said, "I still, I made one exam," and I showed him. "And I still could make eight. I would like to make, but the time runs out. I have to be already back." And here, the secretary tells me to wait. I said "Don't you think that if I make the application it's like the guest would make the meal without the host?" He says, "Certainly," he says. "We'll make the application and I have some news. The police in Rome has many other things to do than to answer your application. Which means they may answer application six months from now. Until they answer you stay here. You are out of the camp." I said, "Thank you very much," and I left. I couldn't believe it. That man just [background noise, inaudible] And okay, and I began to make the exams. For example in *il Risorgimento*, I don't remember his name, I believe his name was Facciotto but I'm not sure. There was a alarm and we ran to the shelters and there in a moment he says, "Listen how are you managing to go ahead? I could give you a loan if you need." This was the way they gave. I came, for example to philosophy. His name was Toila, Professor Toila, I remember his name. And he tells me — I had a beard—he tells me, "Oh, your beard is really clean now, something like that. And the fact is I didn't know a thing in philosophy. Not a thing because I lacked the foundation and I didn't know, and he started- there were two other professors because this is the way they do in Italy. They ask, the professor asked the questions for the two. He started, "Dear colleagues, here is a man who came from the concentration camp. He is an internee. And we know what is in his heart. We know all his problems and

we wish him serenity, as we wish ourselves and our children." And This is the way he started, and he did not let me answer one question. He asked and answered. He gave me a good grade, he gave me a "B", it twenty-four over. And this is the way I made. It was medieval history, it was Roman history and I don't remember- German and all kinds of. And the last was Latin. Marchesi used to be a Communist. Marchesi spent years and years deported, in deportation. At that time he was free and when I came to him he asked me things I didn't know even the author. He, for example, lectured about Sallustius; I didn't know that it was Sallustius. I was very badly prepared. I was not prepared. And I said, "Professor, how about withdrawing?" He said, "No, you cannot withdraw. You have to make it." He gave me a *diciotto* [minimum passing grade], which means eighteen over thirty. This is the only *diciotto* I had. It's the only C I had, otherwise I had all B and A's. And when I finished I said, "Alright, now I'm not going to wait." I could have stayed in Padua. "No, I'm going back to the camp." But before I had an appointment with that woman, with Paola Zancan. I said, "Now, next year I have to graduate. I have to write a thesis. How am I going to consult the books and sources?" She says, "I'm asking the same question. How?" I said to her, So, she says "We have to make an a—" No, I said to her, "I have to be free." She says "Yes." Whatever I said, she repeated. So I said, "Well, I will make an application to the police to send me here, but I need a very good recommendation from you. She said, "Absolutely. We will do that today." And, you know, she right away called up the secretary in the office, Professor Marchi. She called him up, she says, "Listen here is a man, so-and-so. He is interned and it has to be done very well." And he said, "Why, you bring it. Let him make the application and bring it. I will do everything and I will give the best opinion about it, okay, alright." Yeah, the rector of the university — his name was Ante. He was know as an anti-Semite. But when I came he says, "Well, I have now to call up rector Ante to wait a minute, he's going away — he's going to Rome — so that he can sign this. We can get his signature." And he right away called the *bidello* to run to Ante, to the rector, so that — otherwise it would be such a tragedy. This is the way they treated with me. And, when I came, okay, well I had dozens of such cases, you know, to show how humane they were. But suffice it to say I went to the *questura* and I said, "I graduated. I finished my

things." I still had, I don't remember, four or five subjects, and they assigned me a man, a policeman who was to carry me back to Calabria. As you know Italy's like a boot. Padua is on one end and Calabria is at the other end. And it was a matter, I had to travel, oh I don't know, two or three days. And that man, that policeman, he was in his sixties too. The fact is that he was a wonderful man. The trip was terrible because people were like herrings inside. Troops were inside. And on the way, well, of course I saw German troops going to Tripoli on their cars there with all their hardware, with their weapons. And I asked myself, "Who will ever be able to defeat such a strength?" They were sitting in their places with their shoes and everything was so symmetric, so precise. Well, The trip was a terrible trip. Two days — I don't remember — without sleep. We were like herring. The people were wonderful. When I said I was a refugee, they did everything for me. They carried my valises. The beautiful thing is when we arrived to camp- in Padua we had not snow, but it was very damp and very cold. And there we had ninety degrees. People washed their things in the camp and they put their beds out. It was hot.

JL: What time of the year was that?

MR: It was in November, at the end of November, I don't know, whether it was the 25th...

JL: And the year?

MR: The year was 1940. And there I was. When I arrived with that policeman — this is the most beautiful thing — there was another man who did not know me. He thought that the policeman was the interned and I was his policeman. And again we began in the camp. I did not describe the camp to you as I would and I don't believe it will be, I will be able to do it but you have it in my—

JL: Well, you described the camp in Ferramonti

MR: Yeah, but at that time, when I came, things were different. The season, the rainy season began there — no snow — and we had leakages through the roofs. And we had lots of mud there because it was not plastered. Food, we had enough. The light was very dim. Why? Because you were not allowed to attract airplanes, enemy airplanes. And it began to be gloomy. It was, practically, it was a town. It was not a camp anymore. And I started — I went around... With all the things, it was no picnic. As long as we had

summer, it was much better. It was a bad period. Then, all of a sudden on December 20, three weeks after or so a man comes, a boy comes and says to me, "I was just now in the office," because people would go to the officer as they would go to their father-in-law, mother-in-law. It was their home, they were bosses there. And he says, "Just now, the secretary told me that you are going home. You are free." I believe I fainted. I don't remember, but it was something I couldn't believe. So I ran to the officer and the man says, "Yes sir, you are going. But I can't understand why they sent you to Venice. Why didn't they send you to Padua? But this is something you will make out. It may be a mistake. I have to send you to Venice." I said, "Well, am I going with a policeman?" "No, this time you are going free, alone." And so next day I went. It was next, yes? Next day, oh no, it was the same day, the same. He says, "Well, at eleven o'clock you have a train going to Mongrassano Scalo and from Mongrassano Scalo you go to Cosenza and from Cosenza you have the train to Rome and from Rome you have direct to Padua." He made it out for me. He made the ticket for me, he saw that I got my food. No, they gave me the food. And I left. I left and I arrived in Mongrassano Scalo, and when I arrived in Mongrassano Scalo there was a small, very small, station, very small — one man. Small room and there was a little oven, you know, made, he burned it food, very fine man. He said, "The train to Cosenza left just this very moment and you will have to wait until tomorrow morning." *Oy vey!* So he said, "Well, after all, you are not in a desert. Sit down and you will be here with me. I am sitting. You will sit here with me." A few minutes later a Fascist militia came and he had to go to the front and he came, all he had with himself was a bread and a can, I say a can of oil, olive oil This was his food, he took with himself. Well, he heard that we have to wait. "Don't worry. Everything will be okay." And he took out his bread and he put the oil on the bread, you know, and put it in the oven there and, you know, fried it, and all night he gave me that bread with oil, with olive oil. And in the morning I took the train. I don't remember exactly. I know that when I arrived to Rome I was dead. But before going to the hotel, even if nobody told me anything, I wanted to go to the *questura*, to the central *questura*, and I said, "Look, I am coming from the camp. Here are my documents. I'm going now to the hotel." I don't remember, there was hotel. I was in Rome, so I knew all the hotels, the cheap

hotel where the clergy would go to sleep, and I went to sleep, and I said, "I won't come to Padua in time. I have to sleep." I don't know. "Go to sleep, don't worry." I slept there and when I arrived to Venice, I went to the *questura* and there was a man, another man, Andriulli, I didn't know him, a doctor. And Dr. Andriulli said, "Yes, we are waiting for you. We had already, they signaled that you have to arrive. Now, it was understood that you can stay either in Venice or in Padua" — this because I asked him, "What do I have to do with Venice now? I am a student in Padua." I did not worry what will be in Padua, how will I live, because, as I told you, I had half a pension and I had friends and I had a little money, too — I was not a pauper. He says, "You can stay here and you can stay in Padua. But here you have to be very careful because don't have to do with people. You know how people are — mean — stay away. Don't go too late at night, don't go to the cafe." So he told me all things how I have to be. And there I stayed. Of course, I went to Padua and I made out. Of course, it's very easy to talk, but it's hard to explain how things go in Italy. In Italy if you study medicine, you absolutely must be there. I don't know about the other faculties. But if you studied philosophy and literature as I did, you don't have to go to the professor. Why? Because there are about four hundred students in a class room, I mean registered, I don't know. I was at that time the last year, and how many students go there? Maybe forty. So what happened? Sometimes he makes an *appell*. The professor calls people: "Relles, Feuerstein," I don't know "Schneider," and so on and so on. So I asked a friend of mine, Colombo, if he asks "Relles?" to say, "Present." That's all. He wouldn't ask where, when. Now, you also needed his signature. Every once in a while he would give you the signature that you attended. This was in a book. They called it index. In that index all your history was written: what you paid and your examens and your attendance and everything. You had to keep it in great order. So a man, a student, you know, who later was killed, poor boy, Hirsch, he made out, went with me to the *bidello*, because the people would give the *bidello* the booklets, and he would give the professor and the professor would sign. Of course I gave him a good tip, you know, and he always took care of that. When it came, my booklet was always in order. I began to talk about my thesis. My best examen was literature, Slavic literature. So I said, "Why can't I make Slavic literature?"

And I talked with that Conia. He gave me *cum laude*. And I said I would make something out of a Polish epic, Pan Tadeusz. "Okay, very good," and so on and so on and so on. But when I came to make an exam in German there was a Professor Tagliavini. A man who, seems, he talked thirty-four languages. He had a very high job with Mussolini. He was in the anti-espionage and that man was one of the professors who attended my examen, my German exam. He right away saw that my German was a little Yiddish. So he said to me, "Listen," he says, "do you know Yiddish?" I said, "Yes." "Do you know Hebrew?" "Yes." "I have a work for you." "What's the matter?" "Well," he says, "There is a tractate, *Mo'ed Katan*, or *Yom Tov* in the Talmud,[laughs] he knew this, not that and we have a commentary Shlomo ha Yatom , which means 'Solomon the offering.' We don't know about him too much, whether he was in [sounds like: Cicero,] in Calabria, but we do know that he lived in the twelfth century before the great Trecentisti¹¹⁵ lived" — which is Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarca.¹¹⁶ The Italian language begins with them. We have in this commentary of Shlomo ha Yatom, we have about forty, I don't remember, Italian words of great importance. They reappear later in the dictionary *Accademia della Crusca*¹¹⁷ in Florence, Tuscany. And it's so of great importance to the Italian literature to have a Jew use Italian before the Italian name, before they would use the oil and the ox, such different dialects. Can you make something out of it?" I said, "Yes, but I already have selected my thesis with Professor Conia." "Uh," he says, "that means nothing. I will settle it. I'm very much interested. Could you please come tomorrow, to the—he knew I was from Venice, you know. I'm going Venice, could you attend me there at the depot? And, no--he invited me to come tomorrow to Padua. I came to Padua and I came there to the Libiano and there Paola Zaca] stops me, says, "Relles, I heard you are changing your thesis." I said, "Well, I don't do it. It's not me. I was asked to do it, Professor Conia asked me." She says, "You'll be very sorry." I said, "Why?" "Because that Conia helps a lot." And while we are talking Tagliavini comes past us. Tagliavini says, "Well, what's here

¹¹⁵ Italian writers of the fourteenth century.

¹¹⁶ Italian for 'Petraarch'.

¹¹⁷ A vocabulary of Tuscan published by the Accademia in 1612, which became an arbiter of Tuscan Italian usage and a landmark in the development of the Italian language.

going on?" And she says, "Relles cannot graduate with you. He cannot, you understand. He cannot." And he says, "Why not?" And she says, "Because Relles is the modern direction and Hebrew is classic." Because they have modern and Hebrew-- classic, the antique. They're all kinds of things which you are not interested that I tell you all these things. And he says, "I'm sorry, ma'am. Hebrew is not a classic language. There are thousands of people who live in Palestine and talk Hebrew and all over the world, there are Jewish people who talk Hebrew and Hebrew always, it continued and there is a modern Hebrew, a very modern Hebrew literature. So she, "Okay." So he takes me to his office to give me that book- to telephone call. I did not hear who was on the other side but they talked about a half an hour. And I hear — you know, they say that the head of the faculty is president, like here, how would you say? The principal. And, Ferrabino, this was his name, I don't remember his name... *Oy yoy, yoy.*

JL: It doesn't matter.

MR: Aldo Ferrabino, wonderful man. The examens, he was terrible. The students were so afraid of him. He would not talk with you. And I heard he talked all the time. "Yes, president. No, president. Don't worry." I understood that that Tagliavini, he used to make such jokes, to take a student and work with him and discuss the thesis with him and after he would fire him. He would discard the thesis. He says, "I won't do it because the man here involved is an expert in these languages, in Hebrew," and so on and so on. Afterwards, she says, "Ferrabino is very much worried about you, that you wouldn't make it, and you have to make it." And so on and so on. Well, to make a long story short, I went with this book — you do not want me to explain what was all about.

JL: I think we'd better not go into that.

MR: No.

JL: The tape is ending, I'm going to turn it over here.

END OF TAPE 8, SIDE 1

TAPE 8, SIDE 2

JL: So then I understand that between December '40 and December '43 you were living in Venice?

MR: In Venice.

JL: Working in Venice...

MR: Does it work already? Working in Venice. My job was chaplaincy, to go to the hospital. There was only one hospital and there I have to go three times a day. It meant walking; in Venice you don't go by train, you don't have any — you had the *vaporetto*, but you didn't pay. And I would teach in the morning. It was a school for the Jewish children. Now it became practically a parochial school. And what else? I was cantor at the synagogue. I was also to watch the *kashrut*¹¹⁸ in the restaurant. But all this was in the ghetto, the school and the synagogue and the ghetto were in one place.

JL: And you lived in the ghetto?

MR: I lived in the ghetto. I used to eat in the restaurant. Because this was the only place to eat kosher. I stayed away from cinemas, from walking here and there. My only walk was when I went from the ghetto to the hospital. I lived in the ghetto, too. I had my rooms in the school, on the third floor. A very quiet life.

JL: Did you continued the work you were doing earlier?

MR: That's right, the same thing. And of course I had a helper boy, from Venice, a certain Bruno Polaco — he died a few years ago, very young, in Livorno, as the chief rabbi in Livorno. And life was here at the synagogue twice a day. The rabbi, blind and deaf, always I would accompany him home. He lived two blocks from the synagogue.

JL: Who was he?

MR: Adolfo Ottolenghi. We used to see people from the *questura*, not in the uniform, but they were always in civil clothes go pass in the ghetto, here and there. But there was nothing they could say. There was a cafeteria in the ghetto, but as you know in Italy every second store is a cafeteria. In fact, they had two cafeterias and the people would go there and drink coffee and play cards there, and sometimes they

¹¹⁸ Hebrew/Yiddish for 'dietary laws'.

would play billiards, maybe they talked a little politics, but nobody saw it. I never participated. I never went to the cafeteria and I never approached people. I did my job, and just that was that. I had one thing. One day I had, how would I say, sad things. Namely, Jewish people from a camp, not a camp, town or village, Lonigo I don't even know where Lonigo is. It must not have been far from Venice. They came to Venice to collect money, obviously, and they came to the rabbi and the rabbi called me up. I was in the restaurant. Practically I was all day in the restaurant. Only to sleep I would go home and he called me up and said, "You know, people came, so-and-so but I don't know, four or five people, men, and see what you can do for them." I said, "Okay, send them," because he did not understand them. They came to the restaurant and they said, "Well, we thought we can get a little money," because they told me how they escaped from Serbia to Croatia. In Croatia they were captured a week or two weeks in jail and, after, the Italians — of course in Serbia the Germans would kill all of them. And the Ustasha¹¹⁹ and Croatia would kill Jews, too. But the Italians, they would catch those Jews, put 'em in jail and bring them to Italy. In Italy, they would intern them in the village and give them to live. Allegedly, they would get the wages a soldier, Italian soldier got. And the population helped them, too, and of course it was no picnic, it was no honeymoon. They were not allowed to leave that village, but life was living. They would get here a little *polenta* and here a little beans and here a little this and that. People helped them in the government and nobody bothered them. All they asked me was to give them water, and I gave them water in glasses and that was all. They took out their bread and their cheese and all that they had, eggs, and even crumbs of meat, and they ate and we had there a small little *tempietto*, a little synagogue that was there. I put a plate and they left and that's that. A few minutes later, just a few minutes later, a marshal comes in, you know what — *maresciallo* — comes in, you know. It's something like a non-commissioned officer of the *questura* comes in, a tall man, and says, "Are you Relles?" "Yes," I say. "Well, where are those people who came to you?" And they began to ask, I say, "They just left." "What did they

¹¹⁹ A Croatian nationalist movement that modeled itself on the Italian Fascists, the Ustasha ruled Croatia during World War II with the support of its ally, Nazi Germany.

want?" And I told him. "Oh, you did a very bad thing," he says. "You know these can be spies. These can be *saboteurs*. The minimum thing you should have done was to give us a ring to the *questura* and tell us about those people." They listened to the telephone was tapped, you know. The Jewish telephones, especially the Rabbi. He says, "You come tomorrow to the *questura* and I came, the next day I came to his office. He says, "Oh, it's a very bad thing. I don't know what will happen but I already denounced you. I made my report to Dr. Cristallo. Dr. Cristallo was the political department, a wonderful man. I wish I could- I was two years ago in Venice and I tried to catch him, to find him, but probably is not alive anymore. At that time he was in his fifties, I don't know. Wonderful man. He had that strong accent of being a Southerner. A wonderful man. And I came to him and he didn't even let me finish. I said, "I gave them just water." He said, "You did a wonderful, humane job. You couldn't have done better, but I have news for you. They are not Jewish even. They are not from Lonigo." I say, "How do you know?" "Because we signaled there and nobody is missing." Which means right away they went back. It must be Lonigo. I never heard of that place. It must be very close to Venice. To give you one example, he lauded me for having helped them.

Other things, this I can say, in there everything was rationed. I used, Some time, I used to go out to buy fish and people would be there because not having meat and not having bread and not having everything, everybody began to eat fish. And that woman would wink to me, say, "You go home. I will leave the fish for you." And I came there and I remember I had to go to Treviso. Somebody died and I had to take food. I remember I had to stay there until after the funeral, and she gave me two kilo fish. More than I needed.

For example, cigarettes. People would stay in line, and so help me God, there was a woman — I didn't know-- how did she know me? I don't know. People would stay in line and her husband sold the cigarettes and she came, called me away, says, "You go on. You come later. I know you can use those cigarettes." This is the way. All of a sudden, what happened, the government said, "The Jewish people will have to work. To work, is the least they can do." When I heard this, I was the first to go there and say,

"Here I am, you want me to work? I do any work you want me to do." And here they discovered that I was Jewish, in Venice. Why I had to go to announce my being a Jew and I didn't — to the municipal —

JL: Even though you worked in the Jewish community?

MR: They didn't know. Every Jew had to go and I did not go. And the man calls me and says, "You know what this means? We don't have you here," he says. "You know what this means? It means six months jail and I don't know how much money for not having..." I said, "Yes, but I have other proofs that I always announced my being Jewish. For example, I studied at the university, I have all my — did you see, "of Jewish race." And in the *questura* they know me. That I did not do it here is not bad intentioned." He says, "Don't worry. With all the rationing of sugar, to every practice, we put sugar." You understand? Not anything happened. Another time, it was a few days before Mussolini fell, there came the secretary of the party, Scorza,¹²⁰ and he made a long speech in Piazza San Marco. It was, I don't remember, a Jewish holiday and I went out with the director of the rest home and his wife, who went out, and there it just happened. Those few Fascists came back from the *adunata*, from the meeting, you know they had it there on the piazza, and one of them, his name was Ciaoli?, he was a worker at the railroad. He would put coal into the furnace at the railroad. He threw himself on me and he pretended beating me because he did not touch me. Bap, bap, bap, bap. And somebody else said, "You throw him in the canal, that Jew." He was an invalid, you know. They were Fascists, all right, but he did not touch me. Yes, and he said also, "*porco giudeo*," which means a Jewish pig. And, well all of a sudden I became a hero, a martyr. The people in the street, *oy*, how sorry those who were, one told another, one told another. A week later or two weeks later a man comes to me. I was, he says, "Excuse me, I am the Captain So-and-so, of [sounds like: *Cona leggo*] of the *questura*." You know, because in the *questura* they have many offices. They had the central *questura* and Venice is a big city, a city of 300,000 people. "And I saw how that man treated you." I said, "Which man?" "You know about— ." "No, don't know anything." I didn't want to help. He says, "that Ciaoli" and so on. And the same day or the next day I was called again, that

¹²⁰ Carlo Scorza was the last secretary of the Partito Nazionale Fascista.

Dr. Cristallo. "We heard what happened," so and so, "and we want to make a report and we want to put that man in jail." I said, "I don't know anything," I said. "That man did not touch me. He did not do me anything and I'm not going to testify against him. Besides," I say, "he was drunk." And he was. Well, I can tell you, that was that. And after that, Ciaoli, he — *ausgerechnet*¹²¹ — lived not far from the ghetto. I used to see him, I used to. Even after Mussolini fell, he thought. There was another man, a Jewish man, Brandes, he made a report because he was hit or he was hurt, and after, the Fascists, they made pulp of him, you know. I was very, very smart, not looking for vengeance and these were my adventures I had. Otherwise no one, you know, because I had too much time for myself. The last month I became a representative of — there was an encyclopedia, *Labor*, Labor and I would go and sell this encyclopedia. They did not bother me no one asked me anything. I was free as free can be. This was my story.

JL: Just tell me, before we go on, when did you finally receive your degree from Padua?

MR: This I received in '51 and I did not tell you the story, in '51. I have to go back. Now my thesis, which usually lasts — you know what writing a thesis means. Sometimes it lasts months, sometimes it lasts a half a year. I made it in three days. Why?

JL: Forty-one, In '41, before you said '51.

MR: Forty-one, It took me three days. After, of course, I had to make it and I had to type it, a girl typed it for me and corrected and my professor added things. You can see it I gave it to you. You have it. But the work by itself lasted three days. And when I came to make — you know the thesis is discussed, you know. Of course, I wasn't the only one who had to become doctorate, you know. In Italy when you are declared that you are a Ph.D., you come out, one of your friends puts a crown of laurels, you know. Do they do it here too? Well, the fact is that I went there and there was in Venice there was a Professor Luzzatto. He was director of the Jewish Academy, a Jewish man, not a Jewish academy. By academy, I meant like a college, it's less than a university. And under Mussolini, he was discarded and he was always an anti-Fascist. His sister, an old lady, she went to assist my, you know, my becoming doctor and

¹²¹ German for "of all people."

I had a friend, [sounds like: Emil Pugo] who is now in Israel, he came, too. He became doctor a few days before me, and a few friends. And you know how it is, those students who have to discuss their thesis, alphabetically they are called in. I was at the end because I was Jewish. And there, in the room, a big hall, you have like a half moon, you know, a half a circle. All the professors are there. I don't know, twenty or thirty or fifty, with Director Ante, and my professor who discusses the thesis with me and asks me things and I answered him. I had to tell him what's all about. And when I came in, so, the teachers, the professors were like, you see, like there. There was a chair for me but far away. There was the chair. Every student who had to discuss it, you understand, was discussing it, but enough far, you understand, not to be too close to the professors and not too far so that they can hear him. They didn't have all these things, these gadgets. And when I came in, Professor Ferrabino, who was the man of the faculty, he was the head of the faculty, you know, and later became the husband of Paola Zancan — he's dead already — he said, "*Venga più vicino. Vogliamo vederla*," which means, "Come close. We want to see you." So I came and he says, "No, take your chair with you." And he wanted me to sit close to them. And there was, well, that was the story. It lasted ten, fifteen minutes, or maybe a half an hour. I explained to them my work. I explained with words I elaborated in Italian, the Hebrew words where they are to be found. For example, there was a story about on *Yom Tov*, you cannot bring water from one place to another. There is *arugah*, which means, how do you say flower together? A bed, you know. A bed of, I don't know what, anything which is growing, you cannot. *Arugah* means a bed of flowers, of vegetable. But *arugah* also means something like the lungs, you know, all the veins are called *arugah*. In the book of *Shir Hashirim*,¹²² there is *arugat habosem*, a bed of perfume, which means flowers. And my job was to show where you find the word *arugah* in the Talmud and in the Bible. For me, I took a dictionary, [laughs] a Hebrew dictionary, and I found every place.

JL: So, when you say three days you mean you actually, for the writing of the thesis it took three days?

¹²² Song of Songs.

MR: Yes. Why? Because I had to elaborate words which I knew so well, you understand. This was my only job. And after, the professor filled out where it is in the Italian literature, you understand. And he said, for example, in Italian it's called *porca*, a bed of flowers. But *porca* also means a female swine, you understand. This is all in my book. I didn't say it lasted three days. I said "practically." The big job, you understand, was three days. After I had, of course, to do other things. But, you understand, to make the skeleton, I did in three days. It was just nothing. Of course, at this moment, I couldn't tell you — there are so many, many, how would you say, stories, based on the facts how wonderful they were. Of course at the end, in '42, '43, '44 and '45, we can say "Well this is because they thought they lost the war." Some people wanted a—" how you call? No, how do you call when a person has to say where was he at time? Alibi! "Some of them wanted an alibi. They were, with fascism smirched, you know they were Fascists" they said, "Well, maybe you treat the Jews better maybe we will be able to — ." But I am talking about the years '39, '40, '41 and '38 when they were well, victorious. Even Mussolini, with the laws in 1938, he said, "All Jews who came after 1919, they have to leave Italy within six months. If not they will be deported," and so on and so on and so on. At the same time hundreds of Jews would come from Austria and a few from Germany would come in and get a sojourn permit and they were allowed to live in Italy. And what happened? There was a Jewish organization, a Jewish charity organization, [sounds like: IZIM], legally recognized by Italy, I don't know. This was financed by French and American Jews. Every man or every women, every refugee who came, he would get money either within in Italy or else he wanted to go to Shanghai — they didn't have too much choice. But the fact is that the *questura*, the police, and the authority, the Italian authority, they were just wonderful. Very much humane, I can testify it, in everything. And when war broke out they were taken. All the people they were put in castles and villas they put them, like Salsomaggiore, like Campagna. Campagna, in peacetime it was a resort place and later they made camps, concentration camps.

JL: Let me ask you something now about the German occupation September, 10 1943. What do you remember specifically of that day?

MR: Well, I remember that. I don't know whether it was September 9 or September 10 or September 11. I do remember that on the radio Badoglio¹²³ says, "We just concluded the peace with the Allies and now the Germans, we do not want to hurt them, they have all the freedom to withdraw and to leave our country." At that time I worked for the shelters, you know. I wanted to work, I wanted to do something. They paid me and you will have there a certificate, you know, there, because they put me on pension so that they would draw money from me. And during the night I was a watchman. I had to watch all the stuff they had — the wood and the cement and the sand — that people don't steal it. And I was sitting in the shelter, in a bomb shelter already, and I heard speeches from the English radio and from other radios telling them, "You Italians, you have to take the arms away from the Germans" and so on and so on. This was on a Thursday. On a Friday morning we heard — namely my boss, the man who was over me in the shelters — he told me, he said, "It's very bad, because the Germans are disarming the Italians." And we saw how they took, for example, sailors and they treated them like prisoners in the *vaporettos* there. I believe, I don't remember, they also mined and destroyed a great Italian boat, and at about twelve o'clock I cross the street where the Fascist headquarters were, and there already — in the last weeks there were no Fascists — already two Fascists were standing there. And after the Germans came they did not hurt Jews in Venice or somewhere else except in Rome. In Rome they started, I believe, the 14, 15, 16 October they deported Jewish people and of course they were seen in Padua, closed wagons, you know, closed there and the Jews in Venice and other cities said, "Well, we must not lose our heads. After all, the Jews, they were too much triumphant when Mussolini fell. They were too much in rejoicing and this must be a punishment. Now, nothing will happen to us." The Jews were always optimists, especially the Italian Jews. They said, "Oh, here it won't happen like in Poland. After all we are in Italy. After all, my father was a lieutenant and my grandfather was a captain, and we have gold medals and this and that and this and that." You understand? And I tried to hide somewhere?. Where did I go to hide? The Ferro-

¹²³ Marshal Pietro Badoglio was an Italian leader who succeeded Mussolini after he was deposed on July 25, 1943, and who surrendered to the Allies.

Betone, that company for which I worked when building the shelters, they put me on a island, where they had — of course, on that island they had a big, big shack and there they had their material — machinery, you know, to lift things and to make cement mixtures and all kinds of things and they put me there. "No one will hurt you here." And I was the man who would take material in and give it out, you understand, and worked

JL: Let continue with that on the next tape.

END OF TAPE 8, SIDE 2

TAPE 9, SIDE 1

MR: Yes, now the rest home, they would bring me in the evening to eat for all day. 'Cause later I learned, you know, rowing, you know a burge, you know.

JL: What was that? I didn't understand.

MR: Eh?

JL: What was that, that you did? I didn't understand that.

MR: It's like, not a gondola.

JL: Rowing. I see.

MR: Yes. They would come, you know, there was a place where the land, the mainland ended, and I would take the food, whatever they had, beans and spaghetti, not great things, but there I slept, and there I lived and I wasn't the only one. Other people came too. I mean, there were other workers, too, but they would go home to sleep.

JL: When was this? When did you come there?

MR: This was in December—no, October, this was October and November, the first days of November. One day, an engineer, a Swiss engineer — I forgot his name — came in, he saw me having a beard, you know. Or, no-- I did not have the beard, I don't know. He asked, "Who is this man?" And they, the head told him that I am Jewish. "Get him out, we do not want trouble." And I was fired. So I went to the *questura* and the man said, "Well, listen, I tell you what you do. You maybe grow a beard so that people won't recognize you and if something happens, we will tell you before." Meanwhile the man, the head of that place on the island, I forget, his name was Joe, I don't remember his second name, he says, "Listen, in Mestre there is a Professor Bergamo. He has a clinic. He said to send you to him. He wants to talk to you." So I went to Mestre. I came to Mestre. That man he was so busy, you know, with all the sick people and so on. He found the time. He says, "Listen, I understand you are in trouble. I can help you. Here as a sick man, if you are sick, you are sick, so, no one's coming to look for the sick to — or you can be a gardener here or you can be a nurse. Whenever you want, but meanwhile, you need a document, so I'm

going to send you to Treviso." Treviso, I don't remember how far it is from Venice but you have to travel about an hour and a half, two hours, I don't know. There and he gave me the name of a smith. "This man will give you a document." Because, if they catch you here or there, that you have to show something. So I went to there. I went there. Treviso was full of Germans. Not only German male but female, too. They had there a—how do you call it for the planes?

JL: Airfield.

MR: Airfield. And I was walking there and I saw, so help me, there was — the *carabinieri*, they look at me. I was so stupid, you know. I had shoes, mountain shoes, at that time. The partisans — when you look at mountain shoes, it comes into your mind that you are a partisan. But no one touched me, no one told me anything. And I went to that man, and the man said, "Well, I tell you, I cannot do it because I'm afraid if they catch you they hit you and they punish you, torture you, you will say who made it for you. I had such a case already and I do not want to get another." So I go. This is a very important thing, and I walk out and about five minutes later I see I am surrounded by a cordon of I don't know how many, five hundred or hundred, I don't know, Fascists, with these machine guns, hand machine guns. Not only I, this is what they would do: they would surround the place and all the people taken and bring them to the *questura*. So I am with other people, I don't know, about two hundred people at least. All kinds — women, children — they arrived there, and after there they began "the children go home, women go home, go home, go home." We remained about fifty people. They did not beat us, nothing, they were Fascists. Young boys, fourteen, fifteen, years old, boys, with machine guns. After they brought me to the Germans, I come to the Germans, I had no documents, you understand, I had no documents, and finally I come into a place, a home like this, there was a man sitting there. I don't know what he was, a colonel or captain, I don't know what, and he says to me, "Well, what's the matter with you?" I talked to him in German, and I said, "I have no documents, this is why I am here." He says, "Why don't you have documents?" I said, "Because I'm Jewish." So, he got up from his chair and came and put his thing [hand], you know, on my back and says, "*Sohn, es gibt Dinge, die anderen Leuten man nicht sagen kann*" "There are things you

don't have to tell other people, something like that." He gave me a cigarette and he gave me the entire package. [inaudible] "Take this man—where do you live in Venice?—take him to his apartment. This I had, this is the case I had to. 'Course later I was aware he must have been a Viennese, an Austrian. This was boloney, because the Austrians — Eichmann was an Austrian and there were so many Austrians. There were so many Austrians.

JL: When was this now?

MR: This was in November, November 26. I was going home, it was about six o'clock, and I heard through a window, there the radios were on, and I heard through a window saying, "The Jews are recognized as the enemies of the nation. Their belongings will be—" I don't remember, how you say it, "pawned, confiscated and they will be put in concentration camps." This I heard. I was not scared. I did not think anything. It was a half a block from the restaurant. I came to the restaurant and I told the people — Jews were not allowed to have radios — and I told them, and they said, "So what, what, what?." It meant nothing. The Jewish people said, "So we will have a good time there." Why? Because of what I told you, the story. Things come through, in other words, it was not-Italian concentration camps were not German concentration [camps], it was, you understand. The next day and it was in the paper again. They will be kept in Italy in concentration camps. This was Friday; Friday, yeah. Now, you forget I had a place with Dr. Bergamo there. But the Gentilli, both of them, say, "Listen, you are so lucky. You know the language. Are you going to leave us? We don't have [a place] to stay. We don't know where to save our lives here. Come with us. You will save us." How could I say no? And the rabbi, and the rabbi's wife — the rabbi was, as I said, a very good man, a very good heart, but she was a *galekh*, a *goye*, who became Jewish, and she practically carried the pants, you know she was — and so seven people— Gentilli, his wife, her niece, the niece's boyfriend, is four, the rabbi, his wife, and I — seven people, we decided we are going. This was not Friday, it was Thursday afternoon, I'm sorry. On a Thursday afternoon we left for Milan.

JL: The date, what was the date?

MR: I can tell you, it was 3, September 3—not September, December 3. Why? Because the Sunday was 5, I know I go two days back. So Friday was 3, Saturday was four and Sunday was 5. As a matter of fact, we left for Milan after a bombardment but after an alarm, and we yes, with an address of a man in, I forgot the name but it was in Como, on the mountain, I forgot— Brunate. A place, it's a village. In peacetime it was a place for skiing, a place for resort, you know. It was, I don't know, maybe a thousand meters from the town, Como. So we left about two o'clock in the afternoon, this was on a Thursday, on a Thursday, yes, and we traveled until four o'clock in the morning there — twelve hours from Venice to Milan. Usually you travel in those times, five, six hours — twelve hours. We arrived in Milan at four o'clock and people were in the shelters. I saw other Jewish people, children, you know in passages, you know.

JL: Tunnels.

MR: Tunnels, yes. They were on heaps of garbage, you know, children you know, and old people, all kinds of people. And we were going around until eight o'clock. Well, it's a long story, you know, the *rebbitsin*, she wanted to avoid us because she was afraid that we will be arrested, you understand and she and our [inaudible]. We had to look for her. And finally Friday, in the afternoon, about six o'clock, who cared about *Shabbes*? It was *Shabbes* already. We took, you know, I don't know how you call it, to go up, you know. A little bar...

JL: Cable car.

MR: A cable car, and we arrived in Como, to Brunate and we were all full of water. There, the man's name was Primo, Primo, the first name. We slept there, who on the floor, and Saturday morning the people came, these smugglers began to come to offer their service to us. And all Saturday we were there and we saw other people, even from Venice we saw there people, and we all were there and we, well, we ate. We paid for everything and those people, those smugglers, they did not give us security. They wanted too much. Every once in a while they put the price up for each person, finally we got one and we agreed with them and we began to—we went on the train, again with the — on the way, he said, "No, the money you are giving me is not enough. You have to give me more." And so on, and after a few miles again it went

up — what could we have done? These were very bad people. And we arrive about, I would say, about three hundred meter from the Swiss border. There we entered a, how you call it? A cafeteria. There wasn't coffee but we had [inaudible]. And we had of course valises and all kinds of stuff, and there the woman comes to me and says, "Are you looking for a smuggler?" I said "Yes." You know what happened? This man disappeared, disappeared! We didn't know why, because he saw somebody from the *finanza*, those who are, it's the police at the borders, you know. They are against smuggling and so on. And she says, "I take you," and she took me on her — she had buggy, a horse and buggy. She took me there to a man — I don't know who the man was — and the man says, "Well, I cannot do it today. I could do it after tomorrow." He was actually by trade he was a carpenter, and that was that. So she takes me back and when we were close to the thing, to the cafeteria, she stopped and said, "Escape, escape, escape, because Fascists are there!" And I came there, I came into the cafeteria, the Fascists surrounded me, [inaudible] and they brought me there to their headquarters. I don't remember how many Fascists but on the way they say, "You have nothing to fear. Mussolini is very good. Nothing will happen to you. You will have good life. You will be interned." And so on.

JL: So these were Italians?

MR: They were Italians and they were Fascists. When we came to the man there, yeah, there was the man from the *finanza* and a discussion ensued between them [about] to whom we belonged. The Fascists wanted us and they wanted, of course, rewards for heroism and he wanted us. But they were more and he had to leave. Or he did not leave, I don't know. When we came to the headquarters, the man at the headquarters says, "I am so glad that we have the man from the *finanzas* here. I do not want to deal with us." In other words, he was very nice to us. In other words, he said, "I'm so sorry. Why," he said, "why didn't you go before? The week before, you could pass the border, so free. And nothing, no one will have said a word." This is the argument he gave us. And when this man came to say that we belong to him, that man was big from the *finanzas*. He said, "Oh, take them. I am very happy. Why should I be the tyrant?" And we were taken to that man by the *finanzas* and there we came, and of course there were

many soldiers from the *finanzas*, policemen, and there was the marshal, very fine man. They gave us to sleep, they gave us to eat. We had our food and they were most wonderful. And Saturday morning, this was Monday morning, Monday morning they took us to Como, back to Como. We came to Como, and they gave us to the *questura*, they brought us to the *questura*. The *questura*, they gave us a room and we stayed. There were many more people arrested already, Jewish people. There was a doctor from Turin, you know with his wife. He saved his life after — he came back, but she did not. Pretty woman and a fine man, wonderful people. And I tell you the *questura* themselves, every once in a while a man would come in and look at us with, you know, weeping. They were very good, and we were there from twelve about until about six o'clock in the afternoon. At six o'clock in the afternoon a man came in, a captain from the *questura*, and began to shout at us. I don't know what he wanted, shout, here and there, and they brought us to the jail. We came to the jail and the jailer said, "I have no place for these people. We have here two hundred beds and we have already seven hundred people. How can I — I have no place for them. Do whatever you want. It's not my business." So they brought us back to the *questura* and about — I don't know, tell me. [Tape is turned off here; resumes in mid-sentence] The place, you know they call it *guardina*,¹²⁴ they catch a man drunk, they put him there before putting him into jail. In the *questura*, they have. You have there, you have a straw mattress for six people. We were there about forty. You ask me how? Literally one on the other, and people standing, too. We have there a pail to do our physiological needs. Food? No food — we had no food. The only thing they used to bring in to give us to through the hole because — there would be a piece of chocolate like a big finger for each one and they said to us, "We are giving you our portions, because nothing is prepared for you, nothing is destined for you." And this is we lived. Water? Yes. How? They would give us through the door had a hole with a screen. They would open the screen and give us a bottle of water and this is the way we drank the water. Once they allowed me, I said, "I need a wash." They allowed me to go to wash myself and I saw, you know, there was a yard, a big yard, full along, all around, with these, for the dogs. How do you call it?

¹²⁴ Italian for 'guardroom'.

JL: Kennels.

MR: Kennels, German dogs, you know, those big German dogs. I also saw a German. Then I saw Germans coming and going. I saw everything was German. I was not afraid because I say to them, "We are here."

JL: So you were very optimistic?

MR: Very optimistic. And of course, well we said, "It's a matter of days that the Germans will be defeated." Well one said it could even last three, four weeks — this was in 1943 — we said, "How, it can't be?" You know, even if I did not tell you, that they took all our belongings, the money and gold we had. If we had a watch, a ring, all this they took away. I had five thousand liras. In that time, five thousand liras, it was not much, but for fifty liras there you still could eat a lunch without coupons, a good lunch. Today such a lunch will cost you fifteen thousand liras! Can you imagine how, in that time! Well, a man came, I don't remember if he called us or-- and he said, "Well, if you want we can arrange a supper for you on your expenses. We'll take from your money. You order whatever you want." What did we care? We ordered and they gave us inside and we ate and it was different. A man came while we were talking a man was brought in, a certain Colombo, a non-Jew. He had a garage and he used the car which the Germans sequestered, put under sequester, you know, so they arrested him, and he was fiddling with his pants because they took things away, you know his belt away. They did not take the belt away from us. They knew we were not dangerous. I gave him my belt, I didn't need it, and he gave me a big sandwich, I remember, a big sandwich with bologna. Now they call it *mortadella*, bread, a big one. So help me God I did not eat it. *Trayf* meat, I did not eat it. I gave it to another one. That other one escaped and never came back. He's in America.

Well, anyways, we had old people. Oh it was a terrible thing. We had a man from Yugoslavia, a man in his seventies. He says, "I know." He was very pessimistic. And it was cold and damp and you can imagine. And we were there until, on a Friday, Friday night, they say, "Now come."

JL: What date was this?

MR: Well, if you say Sunday was December 5, what was Friday? Monday 6, Tuesday 7, Wednesday 8... the 10th. And we were brought to the *tributario*. What is the *tributario*? Where those *finanzas* are, another place, *tributario*. They brought us there in a big, big room. We were about, as I said, men and women, about forty people, I don't know thirty-six. I can't remember. And there were already straw, you know, in boxes, pressed straw. You know' it's that big, but when you take it out you can sleep even on the floor, you know. And while we were so putting our straw to sleep. Two men came in, one a lieutenant and one in civil clothes, you know. Came in. The civil clothes was, we imagined that he was higher in rank because the lieutenant went behind him. And he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know that you are not our arrested people. We are giving you— you are our guests. We are your hosts. I'm sorry we couldn't do it the way we would like to do it, but we will give you a few crusts of bread and potatoes. And we will also give you—" and this he lowered his voice, "blankets and cushions, these pillows. But in the morning at five o'clock you have to turn them back, and don't tell anybody that we helped." This was when our morale fell. Because now we saw that the intentions are not good. They were afraid. And they brought in, I'm telling you, spaghetti and cheese and all kinds of things, even wine. And we had a wonderful, wonderful thing you know, a wonderful supper and we slept. Saturday morning, even you eat, people were hungry again. There was a man, I forgot his name, a Jewish boy from Milan. People would bring him packages from Milan, it's not so far, *oy yoy, yoy*. And he gave me just a small piece of *mortadella*, you know, that bologna, which I refused a few days ago, and I ate it and I opened my eyes. [laughs] It was so good. You understand, the first days I still was the religious Jew, but after I ate everything and it was pork and no pork, anything. And we were there all day, no nothing. Nothing to eat. So we say, "Listen." We said, yeah, there was a policeman who would stay at the door, watch us. Not the *tributario*.

END OF TAPE 9, SIDE 1

TAPE 9, SIDE 2

MR: Well that man from the *questura*, a young man, he was very nice to us but he had nothing with him, nothing cover. The door was locked and he was behind and he didn't even know what after. We talked to him and we said, "Listen, after all we should be in jail. We are not in jail because there is no place, but we don't have a right to the food in jail?" He said, "Well, why, I didn't even think of it! I didn't even think of it!" That's what he said. And he right whether he called them. "Tomorrow we are going to jail to have the food." And on Sunday about eleven o'clock, they came with a kettle — no, we came- I don't know, I remember that we walked or we traveled — and they gave us a kettle of food and bread. We went four people, I was one of them. I was one of the youngest. I'm telling you that was a soup, thick. Spaghetti and potatoes and I don't know how many — a dozen of other ingredients, and fat and pasty. And there were *gribenes*,¹²⁵ pork *gribenes*, I imagine. Yeah, and what they gave us a pound of bread. You just imagine, you know, in the free, when you were in the free, you got three ounces of bread, a hundred grams. A pound of bread, delicious bread! My goodness. And that soup you could have had as much as they gave us for a hundred people. And it was something wonderful. I said, we were so happy because with a full stomach, this was Monday morning and after I ate I said there to the *piantone*, "Listen, I see you could use a little washing here, washing the floor, a bit of sweeping. I'm a good man for this." "Oh," he says, "Well!" He just gave me a pail and water and rags and brooms and I began from the top. There on the top they had a colonel who was arrested, too. I don't know for what, and they were very sorry about it, but they had to keep him. He was in jail in the back

JL: He was no Jewish?

MR: No. I started to keep busy, to wash. I started from top to wash and clean and brush and this and that and one soldier gave me a piece of bread and one soldier gave me a cigarette and one soldier gave me — I didn't need it because the jail began to give everyday. And we had, the soup was wonderful and I had, you know, picked up under my pillow, I'm telling you, pounds of crusts of bread just in case. And I

¹²⁵ Yiddish for 'rendered fat'.

ate and it was so good. A few days later they come — "Two minutes, out of here." I had to leave everything. I didn't have the time. Why? Because he says, "We gave you another." And they brought us to a place, [sounds like: Camerlata]. I don't know how many miles in a German van to Camerlata. A big, big hall. There I believe thousands of people could have gone inside. Everything cement, columns and the floor cement. And well, I'm telling you it's so big and there a man comes in and says, "I'm from the *questura*. I want to tell you, don't dare to escape from here because this place is surrounded by militia and by *questurin*¹²⁶ and they will shoot at you." He left, okay, yeah with a grin, you know, with a grin, smiling. There were two or three, I don't remember. And after they began to bring in people. They brought hundreds of people and it was like nothing. After two people, I believe it was from the town, they came in with brooms and they began to sweep and they made a big, big heap of dust, of garbage. It was very good because this was insulation. We had children, young children. The youngest were ten years, fourteen, fifteen, even from Venice. There was a man, Maggiore Basane, major, a Jewish major. He was a professional, and before the laws came, the racial laws, he was nominated colonel. He and his wife and a boy and a girl were taken. One boy left. He is now a very big shot in Trieste, baptized. I prepared the boy and the girl for Bar Mitzvah, you know. It was, I can't tell you, that heap of dust was something. It was invaluable because people have to sit there. There was nothing — there was not a chair, there was not a table, nothing. And after a Fascist came in, a soldier, with a pail and brought wood and coal, not coal, it looks like, it's not coal but it burns, *letame*¹²⁷ it's called in Italian, I don't know how you call it in English. It is coal and the baking and he began to heat this to warm us, but all we had was the smoke. Well, it helped.

JL: Was it charcoal?

MR: No, no, no. I never saw it here, I never saw it here. Well, anyways, it was good because some of the people had those, to make soup, you know those, not in powder—

¹²⁶ Colloquial Italian for policemen or cops.

¹²⁷ Italian for 'manure'.

JL: Bouillon.

MR: Yeah, so we could drink a little soup. No food at all. No food at all. This was at twelve o'clock we were brought there. And we were all day and all night going around, "What will be? What will we do? What will be? What will we do?"

JL: Were you still so optimistic?

MR: Well, no, no. It was terrible, terrible. All night, not even to have a place to sit down. I was younger.

JL: What were people thinking would happen?

MR: What people were there, everybody, yeah. We said, "The war will end very soon." We always felt that we were under the Italians and the Italians will always try to help us because Italy is not Germany and meanwhile the war will end. No one would have said, would have believed, that the war will last other eighteen months, you understand. Why? Because we heard they landed in Calabria, they landed in Anzia, they took Naples. And in Russia, oh!, they were getting the Russians, they took Kiev and I know where Kiev was. And so on and so on. Well, as a matter of fact, what happened, in the evening they brought Italians in, no it was not in the evening, it was the next day. Next day before lunch we got again from the jail. They brought that big kettle of soup. It was soup thick you had to take it with a spoon, you know. And bread, a pound of bread, and that soup you could have as much as you wanted. Now, this was at the Swiss border. There were three store. The first floor there were the *carabinieri*. This time we were under *carabinieri*. On the first floor were the *carabinieri* having there the same thing — a pail with that coal and all kinds of wood and warming themselves. It was cold.

JL: So what kind of building was it?

MR: This used to be, first it was a military barracks. How did we know? Because we saw those pipes with the holes, to wash, this a kind of showers. After they closed the military there and they would magazine, they would put there the tobacco. The peasants would bring for sale to the government before it was processed. In fact, in the adjacent place there still was there a place where they still would bring in the tobacco and we saw the peasants coming in with their horses and wagons and discharged the tobacco.

JL: Did you try to make contact with those peasants?

MR: No. Why, What kind. We didn't have to. Why, why should we try? We were not, you understand, we were not mistreated. We were not mistreated. Nobody mistreated us. And on the first floor there were the *carabinieri*. The second floor, the men, the third floor the women...no, the second floor, yeah—I don't remember how it was. The second floor were the women and the third floor the men. Okay, and we had food, they brought us food. They gave us, of course, plates and wooden spoons and I used to eat that soup in the morning and the evening and it was just, "I can't stop eating." You know. I became fat, I couldn't [inaudible]. And In the evening they brought in about a hundred people, Italians, from around. Smuggling and robbing and stealing and those who did not, boys who did not want to become soldiers, you know, did not go to the draft, they brought them. Those people had cigarettes. It meant a lot — we didn't have cigarettes. And they had food and their relatives brought mattresses in. You understand? I had a coat made of English fabric. In that coat I lived all day and I slept all day. But I had one thing, I took good care of my cleanliness, you know. Up on the third floor — we were on the third floor, the men yeah— on the third floor the water did not arrive. So I would go to the women, to the second floor. I would go in and would wash, you know, on payment, you know, partially. First, one day I would do this, another — so that I could keep myself clean. This is the most important thing. Washing, I would wash my shirt. Unfortunately, I had two shirts, or three — I don't remember how many I took. Dry, they didn't dry. I had to go down to the *carabinieri* and put it there, you know, where they had that pail in order to make it dry.

JL: Were other people doing the same kind of things?

MR: Yeah. The fact is, that we had people from Tripoli, all kinds of things. I saw there that people fought for a spoon, you know. They would steal everything, even spoons. Everybody wanted to be the first to get from the top because the top was fat and they would fight. I'm telling you it was a terrible thing. I saw so much. I saw people act just like animals. People are like animals, you know. You take that thin veneer of civilization away and they act like brutes. For example, there would come a girl from the Red Cross. Her

name was Lisa Colombo, a very beautiful girl. She was 18 years old, and she would take orders. But what could you buy? Soap. That soap there was all made of sand. Paper to write. Such small things. There was nothing you could buy. Why did they allow it? Because every jail has a cantina, and we did not have a cantina. Whoever had a little money could order these things. And you should see — one ordered and the other one took it away. She came, "Who ordered the paper?" "I ordered the paper," he says. I ordered paper. You had to make — which happens later — an application. And a Jewish man took it away. A Jewish man who later became free because he was Spanish and the Spanish people, the Spanish Jews, were freed. Hitler respected. In other words, Franco, he wanted his Jewish people protected. Well, anyways, this was the story.

And so, yeah, so among those people, who was there? Mr. Colombo, the man whom I gave my belt. And Mr. Colombo calls me, so help me God on my shoulder, and says, "Mr. Relles, now you are going to eat with me supper." You know, Rice. A supper, I'm telling you, a princely supper. And cigarettes. He said, "Don't eat that *khazeray*."¹²⁸ And they brought it from home and I had to eat close to him. I don't remember when it was, but I do know that on December 25, even before — 24, 23, they left the Italians home for Christmas. Well, after all what did they do? Most of them you understand, the prefect or the police they did not look to keep people in jail because keeping people in jail you have to feed them and it costs money. You make their relatives rebel. So they were freed. That man comes — believe me — I'm not telling you and comes and says, "Well, listen, this mattress you keep for you. No more on the straw sleeping. And you have here sheets. I don't remember sheets, but blankets and pillows. "This you keep for you." And remember, he gave me a spoon and a knife and a fork. "You will need this," he says. And everyday for lunch men of his, I don't know, men of his, workers, would bring me food, the best food. Not bologna. It was ham and it was the best food which could exist.

JL: How long did this go on?

¹²⁸ Yiddish for 'filth'.

MR: Oh, it went on everyday, everyday. He would later come for the, you know dishes, for all the stuff, you know. Everyday, so help me God, and cigarettes. I stop, yes, and from outside they sent in money and Maggiore Basane he was our head, he said, "Relles needs more." Yes, because you know what happened? This is the most important thing to tell you. That a few days later a man came, a *commissar*, came from the *questura* and they said, "Now I take. Here is a list of the people who will go to Fossoli di Carpi, close to Modena. It is a place you will be interned. It is a village. You will live in houses. You will have families. Every family will have their quarters. The only thing you will have common will be the toilets and kitchens, stoves. You will have there all the protection. No one will do you harm." And he began to read the people. About ten people had to remain. Who? *Mishlings*,¹²⁹ people who were, women who were married to Christians; there was a Jewish woman whose boy died in the Army, he was not Jewish and he died in the Army; there was the Rabbi who was blind and deaf and his wife who was an *Arier*,¹³⁰ she was a *goyette*; and I, too. And I said, "Why I am not?" He says, "You are not under our," how do you say it?

JL: Jurisdiction

RM: "-jurisdiction."

In other words he gave me to understand that I am at the disposal of the Germans. This was for the Polish people. Hungarians, Hungarian Jews weren't there. I was the Polish Jew. He says, "When we, should we..." I said, "Can't you send me with the people here?" He said, "When we get answer that you belong to us, then we send you." He was a very fine man, but he gave me to understand that I would be for the deportation. And in those times something sneaks through that the Germans would not deport people to Poland there because they have no transportation. So whenever they caught the Jews in the run; they just would kill them and throw them in the water. This is what they did in Lake Como. They had no transportation. They had no choice. They would just kill 'em. I was afraid they'd kill me. And, you

¹²⁹ Yiddish for 'half-breeds'.

¹³⁰ German or Yiddish for 'Aryans'.

know, days passed, the trucks had to come to pick those people up. They were all ready to go, and no trucks. For me I was very happy to have the people as longer. And finally, they arrived, the trucks arrived. It was on a Sunday, and they took a portion of people, took them away, after, they came back. There was a bathroom there on the first floor with those, you know, how do you call it? Iron bars, but I planned and planned and I saw that if I can go out through these bars, I'm saved. I had to squeeze myself. In other words, it was not a jail, you understand. It was not a jail. It was barracks. They did it against thieves. So there were such spaces. So I picked up whatever I had. I had very few things, the most important thing, I picked up my shaving stuff. I have to be shaved always. And I took my jacket, my coat, and threw it out. It was far away from the people, you understand.

JL: So no one saw you?

MR: No one saw. Of course not. And I said, "When it becomes quiet I will go out slowly, slowly, take the train." I had money. I had three hundred liras that Maggiore Basane gave me. Otherwise other people got one hundred liras. Because everybody knew I would be for deportation. He said, "We have to give Relles more." And there I was waiting that the people were taken away and everything is quiet. The *carabinieri* go inside and I will go out. In fact, there was a man, a *carabiniere*, a young boy, he was perhaps twenty years old. His name was Giacinto. His first name I remember. And he said, "Why don't you try to go away? We don't have here the possibility of keeping you, of watching over you. In other words, we *carabinieri*, if somebody escapes, we are not responsible and we told them." And he says, "Once you are out, everybody will help you." And I remembered it. And a few people escaped. Oh! They used to come to make an *appell*, the police, when they heard somebody escaped. He would make to the other one such as to say — very smart, you know. So I was there, waiting and waiting and waiting, you know. It's already six o'clock, seven o'clock, eight o'clock, nine o'clock, and they're still "Blah, blah, blah, blah." I don't know where, you understand.

JL: This is evening?

MR: In the evening. They had a curfew. At nine o'clock or eight o'clock, I don't remember, no one had... and I said to myself, "Have they all left?" Oh, I cannot tell you, me heart, and my friend, and I did not say good-bye to them either. They treated me like a child and I treated them as parents. It was a terrible thing. And I say, "No, you are not going out now. You are not escaping to be caught on the way and to be arrested. You don't know where the train is, you don't know anything. Uh-uh, you have to go back." But how to go back? It's easy to go out but it's not easy to come in. You understand? And well, very bad. Absolutely I couldn't go in. I had to jump down, it was a little high. I cannot tell you. There, it's the mountains. On one side it's one floor, on the other side it's another floor, you understand. Well, I put my coat on and I entered the door, the central door. And those *carabinieri* say, "Why? Why didn't you go with the other people? Why did you stay here?" I said, "Because I just accompanied them."

JL: What do you mean? I don't understand. Why didn't you go with which other people?

MR: With other people took to Modena. They didn't know that I was to remain. I didn't tell them that I tried to escape and I came back. In other words they saw that I'm a gentlemen. I could escape and I did not escape. They were wonderful people those *carabinieri*. When I explained to them, they said, "Don't worry, you will see." They would split their cigarettes with us. They were just — you don't have any idea. So I stay there. There were a few Italians, about thirty Italians who were on the third floor in a segregated room. There was warm. I don't know how. Well, they were very close. They would play cards, you know, play cards, discussions, fight, you know. I would go in. I knew the language, I told you, and I would stay there and hear this and this and this. And as I say I would go to wash on the second floor to the women. One day I went, I washed, I came out and there I saw a lady, a tall lady in her sixties, grey hair, tall, slim, very elegant, among them, among the women. These are the women, the rabbi's wife, and that mother of the boy who died, and there was another girl who would always have her bag, you know, on her shoulder — about twelve people-women. And she says, "What does this young man do here?" So they told her. I said, "I went here to wash." Told her the story about me, that I'm destined to deportation. She says, "Would you like I give you a thousand liras?" I say, "What do I do?, Thank you, what should I do?" She

says, "Well, for a thousand liras you can buy a bicycle, you can bribe somebody who catches you." I say, "No thank you, I don't need anything. I am just waiting. It's my fate." I forgot to tell you that in the last days I adopted the same policy there at the *tributario*. I would ask him a broom and say, "Now I am going to clean for you outside." You know, Outside there was always straw rubbed across because the *goyim* would bring their tobacco and it was garbage and I would put it all the garbage. They had a can, and they liked it very much because otherwise they had to. You understand, they appreciated, and I appreciated it too because I saw around. If I escaped again — because I did not give up my plan to escape, you understand — I didn't want to escape in the night but during the day, why of course. And I was sweeping there, you know and I see the lady, that lady you know, comes in and she brought me *grissini*, you know. It's bread, not bread, it's like long, it looks like wires, you know.

JL: Breadsticks?

RM: Breadsticks. She brought me. In those times, I don't know where she got it. And she brought me even pastry and cigarettes. I couldn't smoke. They were good cigarettes, but too weak for me.

JL: I have to stop the tape.

END OF TAPE 9, SIDE 2

TAPE 10, SIDE 1

MR: She kept, on her arm, she kept a brand new coat. [Italian] You know what [sounds like: *utarkeek*] means? Meant a *khazeray*. Mine was a very good English coat. "This coat," she says, "is not good. It's [Italian word]." [Italian word] means it's full of dirt and twice dirt, you know, stains and stained and archly stained. "Put this on" and she says, "I am going to see that you get out of here." I don't know remember if she gave me some money or not. I don't remember. And she went there to the women and she gave them money, too. This I cannot forget, when that lady, the *rebbitsin*, the rabbi's wife — God forgive her, she's still alive — when she heard that she wants to give me money she says, "Oh, what do you give him for? Why would you give him money? I give him if he needs." She never gave me anything. It's human, you know. In fact by refusing the money, that woman got me, you understand, she got interested in me. A few minutes later Lisa Colombo comes on the third floor, she had always free access to — that lady, that girl who would go to buy things for the people, Lisa Colombo, comes and says, "Are you Mr. Relles?" "Yes." "I have to take pictures of you." Pictures, why? "I have to take pictures. It will be for a document." I forgot to tell you that after the third floor there was a terrace, you know, the roof was made like a terrace, and you had to go — it was built, you know, all around like a veranda and you had — with the windows and we were authorized to be there an hour because in jail — every man in jail is authorized to walk an hour of fresh air. We could stay there all day, the *carabinieri*, they did not care. Anyway, what did I do? I took her there because you need light when you have — in those times the cameras weren't as they are here, it's thirty-five years ago. And she made pictures, yes. The next day, she brought them. I remember even the man who made them to develop, Mr. Bernasconi. You see, I don't know what I ate a few hours ago, but Bernasconi. And she says, "I came from Bernasconi, right. Here are the pictures." *Oy veh*. I saw these pictures. She made about, I don't know, about a dozen. Not one was good. I said, "Darling, how can you put a picture on a document? When they see me like this, they will — I look like a murderer!" She understood. So, nothing. And she, that girl, came in contact, another day she came, she says, "Mr. Relles, I want to tell you we have here, if you can escape. Here is a place where we would keep you. A

woman, Angela Gotti" — she didn't say, but I still remember — "a woman who lives here close, she will give you the first hospitality after you escape, and we have everything planned."

JL: Now this was Lisa or the other woman?

MR: Lisa Colombo, a seventeen-, eighteen-year-old — maybe she was twenty-two, I didn't see her birthday certificate, but she was very young. Now it was so. Here was the, how do you call it? The task, right. There, you see, here was the place, the house, and the roof was this way, you see and here they would still bring the tobacco. There still was a place where they would bring the tobacco. After this, you see here, was another house attached, with a roof, how do you call it a [sounds like: *ganick*] a terra-pat...no, how do you call it? I don't know. Balcony, a balcony, you understand. In other words, was made, the roof was made of this shingles, you know what I mean. Shingles...terra-cotta. [inaudible other speaker] Clay! Clay shingles. So I had to go all that row and there from this roof I had to make myself to pull down, you understand to that little balcony, small balcony they have in Italy. And she said, "The lady will put a ladder there" you understand, "so that you can go." Okay, it was on a Tuesday, when she didn't say, on a Tuesday was about six o'clock in the evening. It was before curfew. I was sitting with the *carabinieri* and telling them stories and listening to stories and my shirt, you know, my shirt had to be — it was humid. I washed it, and I wanted to dry it there in the fire, because that was the only way it would dry. And she comes in and says, "I brought for you the paper, but I have it in the back. Come upstairs and I will give it to you." And when we were up she says, "Now is the time. In five minutes you have to be there because the ladder ready there." And this, what did I do? I had my shoes, I told you, my mountain shoes. I had after the War for a long time. I took the mountain shoes out, I mean off, I tied the strings together, and I put them here, you know. And I began to creep, creep, creep on that roof, you understand, until I came to the end, and after I came down and it was dark. The town was dark. There was no light. The only thing you see the streetcars when they came to a crossroad. They would discharge these sparks, you know on top, and that was all. You didn't see anybody. And I would slowly, slowly I put myself and I kept here, you know, my hands. And yeah, you remember I gave my belt to the man, to Colombo, but I had a

rope. The rope was attached to those shingles, you know, at the shingles, the shingles on the top, they are so, you understand, conquered and I could not get out. And of course it came to my mind that the place was surrounded with *carabinieri*, ready to shoot. Stupid, because I knew it was just as they said. At that moment, and I begin to, you know, to move. I don't know how you could last, but I at that moment I had all my life before me. You know, I just can't say, and I was also afraid that those shingles will fall and I — you know it was from the third floor. Well as a matter of fact, finally I could disentangle myself, and I looked for the ladder, you know — I didn't look, I tried to — and that moment the woman came. Somebody came out and put my foot on the — I came down, she says, "For the woman of service [maid] — I sent her out." She says. "When she comes, you are my cousin." And I was there and she gave me tea, she gave me, I don't know, one or two cans of sardines, those small cans, and I don't know what else. And then Lisa Colombo came in and says, "Now, you come with me." And she took me and we went about, oh, I would say, about maybe a kilometer or a mile and there, an old lady, old, she wasn't so old — grey hair — was waiting for me with two young daughters. And they brought me in the house, beautiful house. You didn't see the War there but she told me right away, "My son is a prisoner in Poland. I hope they do with my child what I have been doing for you." And they gave me to eat, you know, wonderful soup and meat and cigarettes and a beautiful room to sleep. Of course I did not go into the bed to sleep, it was a sofa. I slept on the floor. I was not clean, I was not clean enough. Of course, I kept myself clean, but my things were dirty. She disappeared. Now, in the morning, they woke me up. They gave me hundred liras, so I had almost four hundred liras, and again they gave me the best things to eat. And I forgot to tell you, when I came to Brunate, the first time with those people to go to Switzerland, Primo, the host, took my bread coupons away and said, "What do you need them? You are going to Switzerland, right?" So, I was without coupons. But it just happened, I later, that man, the Fascists caught him. They in other words, they sent the man, they uncovered that he was doing all the smuggling. They beat him so they made a pulp of him, of Primo. And they brought him to the place where I was arrested. Of course, I was sorry and so on. So I said "Dear friend, now you see in what

conditions I am. My bread coupons could help me very much." And he says, "Well, when my wife comes to visit, I will tell her." And so I got coupons, you understand, I got all my coupons back, I don't know for how many pounds of bread, which meant a lot because with a coupon I bought for ten cents I had a portion of bread. Otherwise I had to pay ten liras for God knows how much. I was a rich man. And she came, Lisa came, Lisa Columbo came. "Now I'm going to take you to Milan," she says, and she gave me an address where I have to stop. And I said to her, "Now you are going ahead, far ahead." We had to go to the station. " And you will stay away from me so if I am caught, that you are not caught with me." And this is what she did. I took a piece of newspaper and I walked and read the paper because, you understand, because those people those spies, those policemen who were in the towers around, in civil clothes, they look at your eyes, they see something. I do not know. I walked, I learned this to read while walking in Venice. And I walked and we arrived there to the train. And we arrived to a train, I'm telling you and the train was full with commuters, workers who go to Milan, they live in the suburb and go to Milan. Yeah, her husband, of that lady who gave me hospitality, he was an engineer. He worked in Milan, too, I don't remember where exactly. Well, so what happened? In the train with thousands of people, I had no documents. I had only a passport of the fiancé of that girl, of Columbo because he was going — I said, "What are you giving it me? It's good. If somebody asks me for a passport, for a document, I give it."

JL: But had the picture? Did she put your picture in it?

MR: The picture? No, the picture was his picture with glasses. But it's better, anything is better than nothing, to have something. This is I had. The only thing I had. And again, the train is surrounded and they come in and they ask, ask, ask, ask, ask. They did not ask me. They couldn't ask everybody. We arrived there and she was on the other side. We arrived to the station, I didn't even say good-bye to her. I never saw that girl. After, I learned she survived and she had a boyfriend, a priest. It's her business She was a wonderful girl, I cannot forget her. And when I arrived to the north station. Before yesterday I told you the story, we talked about other things. you know, my wife is my girl friend, so we talk about things which happened. I came to the north station, they had a central station and a north station in Milan. The north

station there weren't two bricks together. Everything debris. Bombs. I say, "Here, they are full of spies and somebody will catch me. And if I'm caught I am lost." I had my address, Via Moretto, 16. There are two girls who are waiting for me and what shall I do? So I wait up right away. The first German, there was a German man, you know an old man, regulating the you know, traffic, and I went there and in pure Venetian — you know, I knew a little Venice — I say, "Where do I go Via Moretto?" And he doesn't even know to answer. He shows me. There was a policeman there and he regulates traffic and if somebody does not obey the policeman arrests him. This is what they have. I go to that policeman and I say, "Can you tell me how to go to Via Moretto?" Why did I do it? Because when I am with a policeman no one is coming to bother me. And you remember, I had cigarettes, too, the finest cigarettes. I asked him a match and give him a cigarette and we become friends and he says, "Well, if you can wait ten minutes, I dismount in ten more minutes" — it was almost twelve o'clock, almost twelve o'clock — "I live in Piazza Susa." It's Suza, but they say Susa. "And we go together." Okay, I waited there, with him there. I became a policeman, too! And after we walked. It was forty-five minutes. He brought me there to the Via Moretto Sedici¹³¹, but they had the siesta, the Italians, which means at twelve o'clock they go up. I see the thing is down, it's locked, nobody there. The first thing I go to a cafeteria. Go to a cafeteria and take *ersatz* [substitute] coffee and after I take a card of Milan, you know a postal card of Milan to write to my friends. They will see, when they get my card from Milan, they know that I escaped, and for me, my escaping means to be able to help them, too. And after, I had my shaving stuff but I just didn't want to go around. I came there and, of course, as you know, there are all the world the same thing. He had somebody there to shave him and they talk politics. I took the magazine or paper, I don't remember, reading, you can imagine what was in my mind. And after the man went away and he shaved me and I came back there. This time went and she says, "Oh, we were so worried about you, because they lady called up, Mrs. Monti called up. That lady who took interest in me, her name was Leone but she changed her name in Monti. She worked for a committee, you know, to save — it was not only I. She saved other people,

¹³¹ Italian for 'sixteen', the address number.

and she ended in the concentration camp. I don't remember now the name, the name of the concentration camp, but she survived.

JL: Was she Jewish?

MR: No. Well if you gave me time, maybe not, I will tell you how she went to the concentration camps.

JL: Lets continue with your story.

MR: Well, so these two girls — there was only one girl — they had, they fixed socks. In those times they didn't have nylon. When socks were torn they would go to their place. They also had a washing place. They would polish, you know gloves, hats, all kinds of things. And she taught me even the signal. The lady called up whether the gloves are ready, which means whether I arrived. And she didn't see me. Okay, so I was there, and behind the store they always had a place, a little room, they keep their old stuff, I don't know, when they want to rest. I don't remember how they used to call it. You know, this is here a boy — eighteen, twenty years old — was hidden [because] he didn't want to go to the army. And she said, "Well, I have nothing to offer you. All I have to offer you is a little soup, but actually it's not soup; it's water." I forgot to tell you that before I went there I took my coupons out, I bought a kilo bread, which means two pounds and four ounces, and believe me from the bakery to that place I ate the entire kilo bread, good bread. I didn't think you chew. I forgot chewing; I just swallowed. And I said to her, "I really was not hungry anymore." And well, I took my sardines out and I offered her and him. They didn't see that sardines for months and months. Oh they were so happy! And the evening, her sister came. Her sister went to the place where I escaped from to visit people and so on and so on and she says, "*Oj!* The *carabinieri* were so angry. One *carabiniere* says, 'If I catch him I will kill him.'" [laughs] Better they pretended to. Anyways, that was that. For the night they brought me in a place which was bombed, which people left because they were afraid of bombs. So they left to other places. It was empty. I slept all night there. You can imagine, without heat, I almost froze there. It's not cold; you don't have there 30° below. But listen, if even it's 20° above, it's cold. I wasn't protected and I had that [sounds like: *trishle* of *Tarkey*]. That coat, it was clean, but nothing. And next day the one girl came for me and why I came

back again and we talked about what shall I do to make a document. She says, "There's no documents. We are not going to make a document because if they catch you, they torture you and you'll say who made the document," and so on and so on and so on, you know. "And so what will happen?" "We will see." This was on a Thursday, the day before January 1, 1944. You look at a calendar and you will see. And I was there in that place until four o'clock, five o'clock in the afternoon and after, she says, "Well, *Avvocato* [attorney] Gelaski called up." He was an old man who worked with the committee. "*Avvocato* Gelaski called up to bring you to him. So the boy will accompany you." He accompanied me, the boy. And in Milan, they call it *scirocca*, which is smog. It's terrible, it's worse than in California. [inaudible] We didn't see. One person didn't see another. I came to that *Avvocato* Galeski. The first thing, he asked me whether I have money. I say money I have, to pay. And I said, "All I have is four hundred lira. That's all I had." Okay, and he said, "Well, I have here a letter to Madre Clara, it's the old, the head of some kind of an institution. I bring you to the streetcar." He brought me to the streetcar and I began to travel, there I met a man who was going to that place too, institute. My place was to Istituto Palazzuolo, Via Aldini, a place for old people, for chronic sick people, and sponsored by the prince, Umberto I. In other words, it was in his name. He maintain it, I don't know, but anyways, that man said, "Well, you want to go there? I'm there" So I said yes. So I was in good company and when I arrived there, you can imagine on that cold, wet, damp outside, I came in an office, there was a nun, and she expected me already, and I didn't see Madre Clara, you know, and she said because Mother Clara was an authority and she said, "We will change you. What's your name?" I told her. "No, your name will be Giovanni Pirola. You are from Sicily, but since Sicily is occupied, you are a refugee. You are here because you have the sickness..." How do you call a person, walks and falls?

JL: Epilepsy?

MR: "You are an epileptic. This is why you are here." Otherwise I was at that time thirty-two, thirty-four years, you know, old it wasn't my place. And after she rang a bell, a lady came, a sister, a nun, and she took me to the second floor, I believe. I said, "Sister, can you give me just little piece of bread?" She said, "I

give you a piece of bread." She brought me there, it was, I don't know, it was about eight o'clock already, everybody slept, and she gave me not as you say sticks [of] bread, it is long. This is the way they make it in Milano, not in other places — with, bread, and they put everything in that bread, but after the bread, she gave me rice and milk and a piece of cheese and I don't know what else, and had a quart of wine and all this stuff. I didn't eat too much that day because I was worried and this and that, and after she gave me a half a Tuscany, which means a cigar, and I cut that cigar and I wrapped it in paper and I smoked it, and whenever I want to think of happy moments, this is the happiest moment in my life. She brought me to a place, you know a bed, you know, with four blankets and it was warm, too. It wasn't very hot, nice, and I said, "No more being delivered to the Germans." And I slept.

JL: I think we'll end right here, the tape is about the end.

END OF TAPE 10, SIDE 1

TAPE 10, SIDE 2

MR: So I was woke up on Friday morning about six o'clock. When I was waking up, they had the bells on tape ringing, calling the people. It was the first of January. And I was treated to a sermon from a man who was a *monsignore*¹³² — a man who happened to embezzle money from Cardinal Ferrari Institution, so the Catholics, they punished him. And from a *monsignore* he became just a priest, and there he was, chaplain of that institution. A very fine man. He talked about Jesus. And I still remember this, what he said, not to expect “Jesus to give them Tuscany cigars. If they expected, they'd be very much deceived.” Where was Jesus? Jesus was in a little crypt in straw on the pulpit there. And the first time, of course, I figured. I functioned as one of the Christians. There were lots of people, old people. And after we came back, I was offered a glass of milk, a ration of bread — something like three ounces of bread a day, hundred grams — and they said to go slow with the bread because it's for all day. Lunch, I would get lunch, yes and supper was again a glass of milk.

JL: What did you do there all day?

MR: Yeah, this is a very good question. There were people who were *gratis* — poor people — and rich people. The rich people, those who paid or somebody who paid for them, they had their own room, very nice furnished. But the poor people, they had there was one room, a big room where they would be and there you certainly could cut the air with a knife. There were all smells and of, course damp, and it was terrible. There was a room, it was not heated, with the windows open, which was very cold. You could stay here or you could stay there. All day there was nothing to do. Yes, they gave you a special suit for that institution. It was something with stripes, you know, a pair of pants and like a jacket and that was that. The first days of course was paradise because being free, not being afraid of being taken away, being killed or being beaten or being tortured, was something. But after, when we are very much forgetful, and I began to be not only bored but also I couldn't sleep and the food was absolutely nothing. It was not enough for me. True, the Mother Clara said I'm a young man, so she ordered to give me two

¹³² Italian for ‘monsignor’, a Roman Catholic prelate.

portions of bread, which meant six ounces of bread a day, but it still was not enough. So, I said there to the nun who was to keep the place clean, I said, "Nun, you can see I am a young man, still young. I still can work. Give me a few rags and I will clean the windows and I will wash the floors." And she gave me a rag and she gave me soap and she gave me all the things, and I did it. And she gave me a piece of bread, she gave me a little marmalade, she gave me this, she gave me that. But, in that institution, everybody wants to work. You don't have Jewish people. In fact, I was the first Jew. After, other Jews came in. A man who was in jail with me, I forgot his name, he was a spy. He was a Yugoslav spy. They could not show his guilt — they had no proof against him, but they kept him as a Jew. He was baptized. He had lots of money and he would have all the food. There of course, I still am grateful for having saved my life. But there, I saw how the preaching, "Love thy neighbor as you love thyself," how they interpret this. Because people, moneyed people, they had the best things in the world there. They ate everything, how do you call it, on the menu, and the poor people literally ate grass, because the twelve liras a day which the city sponsored for each man was not enough for the water they had because the lira was very inflated. Twelve dollars in peace time, yes, was good. But twelve dollars in those times was not enough. The people would die — I don't know, a dozen people everyday. They would walk and die just out of exhaustion. While other people, the money people, they had the best things in the world. But this is human and I saw it later and I saw it. It's everywhere, not only in Italy and not only in Istituto Palazzuolo. It's a very nice preaching, "love thy neighbor as thyself," as long as it's not put into practice.

JL: Did they try to convert you and the other Jews?

MR: No, they never tried to convert me. I had to go to the services, though. Never tried to convert me. But when a man there, Ochshorn, died, they converted him after death because they had to bury him. And of course his wife protested and I protested. And they, she, one of those assistant chief of Mother Clara, she gave me, she said, "What do you mean? You think you came here — if not for Cardinal Schuster who ordered us to, you wouldn't be here. So you want to rule here? You want to be the boss here?" Something like that. But he was there and they baptized him and they buried him and that was that. Yes, there was

a place, there was a barber, he had a room and that room they had small — like bath tubs, very small to wash their feet. Every I don't know, twice or three times a week they were entitled to come and wash their feet. The barber had to shave them, yes. He had to shave them *gratis*. What did he have? What usefulness did he have of being a barber? He had a nice room to stay instead of staying with other people and each and every one of them gave him something — pennies. But when he would, when he made, for example, fifty beards a day, he could make money enough to buy a portion of bread. They had, in fact, they had two barbers. And one day Mother Clara came to me and she says, "Pirola" — because my name was Giovanni Pirola, you have my document — "Pirola, the barber is sick" — the barber So-and-so, I don't remember his name — "and he's dying. Could you be a barber? You will have, it will be very good for you because instead of being lost like the lost sheep, being a stranger everywhere, you will be in your room. You can do whatever you want, and everyone will give you a few pennies." I say, "Mother Clara, you are asking whether I am a barber? My father was a barber, my grandfather was a barber, but I don't know for how many generations we had barbers in our family." Okay, so she gave me all the stuff, she showed me, and that was that. I had to shave and to cut hair. But I told her, "Cut hair I'm out of practice," and I couldn't make it, "but I shall try." And the first beard I began to shave, the man got up, I cut it to pieces! [laughing] And, he began to shout, half a beard shaved and the half unshaved and he would not go back to the chair. But little by little I learned. And the best thing I learned was to get good soap because they had no soap. The soap was made with sand and when you took that razor, it was not a razor like today, a controlled razor, it was an old used razor. And it would get dents like, and this is what cut their skin. So I made there a deal with a nun. I gave her money so that she can buy candles for the Madonna, but she bought wine for herself as I know for sure she used to drink. It's okay. It was okay with me. And she would give me soap which was old, twenty, thirty, fifty years, I don't know how many years. Most wonderful soap which makes such good, how you call it...lather and in no time I learned to shave. I used to shave. On a *Shabbes*, I used to shave a hundred beards and make loads of money. But what did I do with the money? I couldn't go out could I? Well, since we had very many

funerals — across the street was a bakery. So I was going to the funeral and while they were going I would stop at the bakery, buy the bread and after all of that and continue. I had still my rations, my coupons but after, the coupon ended. Instead of paying twenty cents for a ration of bread I had to pay three or five liras on [the] black market, the same way. So I found out another way. It was that, *Madre*... I forgot, Sister Domitilla, that's the same who used to sell me or give me the soap. I knew that people would die and their rations of Tuscany cigars remained. She had them. Tuscany cigars were rationed like all other tobacco and Tuscany cigars were very precious because many Italians in Milan, they chewed the tobacco. They'd take a piece of Tuscany cigar and keep it under their tongue. So I would give her, I would buy these Tuscany cigars from her and I went to the baker who was a Tuscany smoker and chewer and I said, "Sir, let's make a deal. I give you Tuscany cigars and you give me bread." And in such a way my misery ended. I had bread as much as I wanted and this was most important than anything. I was not, because the noon meal was composed of one little spoon of potatoes, a little piece of meat — you had to use a microscope to see it — and that was that.

JL: But they didn't mistreat you physically did they?

MR: No, mistreat me physically — never. The only thing is on Sunday there was a nun who would say "Pirola, here's a man. Making, shave him his beard. So you want to shave it." Why? Because on Sunday, Dialetus would come. But the assistant head, she shouted at me and she punished me. She put me in bed. I had to stay all Sunday in bed because Sunday I had to be at rest. This was the only humiliation I got. People, meanwhile, the people that Mrs. Leoni — so-called by the pseudonym "Monti" — and her niece, *oy yoy yoy* what was it?

JL: Oh, it doesn't matter.

MR: The niece would come, too, they would come every once in a while, Comelli, Pina Comelli. She was ugly, may God help her, but was she good! Something an angel, I'm telling you. I never saw such a woman. It was on that Sunday when I was in bed she came and she brought me pastry and cigarettes and bread and *castagnaccio*. *Castagnaccio* is made of walnuts...

JL: Chestnuts.

MR: Chestnuts, that's right. Chestnuts made it such like a pudding. It's not a pudding, it's almost like a pie, but it doesn't have the crust. And she brought me all God's things and after she says, "Now we have to plan to bring you to Switzerland." This is the idea which was born, bringing me to Switzerland. I cannot forget that woman. She was so wonderful to everybody. And why, there was a lady, the wife of that Ochshorn who died, second wife or third wife, I don't know. She was very very ugly. She had smallpox. She had two daughters. They both were in Cantello and later in Tradate. These are places where they had convents. One was thirteen years old; one was seventeen years old.

JL: They were hidden?

MR: They were hidden there. What happened? And there was the Cardinal Ferrari had an institution, people would come there, people who could not buy things. People would sleep there, people would have a cheap meal, all you can *gratis*. And there many Jews were hidden. One day the SS came in and with dogs and they did not ask, "Are you a Jew? Are you not a Jew?" There were Jews and non-Jews. They themselves, by looking at people, they would know. "You Jew, to one side. You non-Jew, the other side." And seldom did they make a mistake. And when this happened, the nuns in Tradate and Cantello, they got scared so that woman brought the girls with us.

JL: To the Istituto Palazuollo?

MR: Yes. Well, that woman she was very smart. She was a German. Her husband was Polish. They met in France in Montpellier. In Montpellier, it was the law that old people would be in the rest home. If a man had a wife, even if she was not old, she could stay with him to take care of him. This is what the French made. So this man married this woman. She was in her sixties or in her fifties and he was in his seventies and it was such a marriage to save their life and, after, they were both there. And one day the man just died, just died. And The woman stayed with her children. And they were taken care by another committee which was affiliated with Cardinal Ferrari. Not with me. That Pina Comelli would come and she took care. There were many, many families, Jewish families, and those Jewish families who were

rich. They were from France and from Germany. They used, as I said, they used to eat on the menu. They used to smoke English or American cigarettes. They used to go out with these chinchilla coats, the best luxury in a place where people literally ate grass. And right away they were detected. They right away began talk to Jews. "They are Jews. Those people are Jewish people," and so on. It created very bad feelings. It was a terrible thing. I'm telling you it was a shame. They just wanted to show off that they have luxury. And was more than one, were about at least a half dozen of these couples. They would be with among themselves and have the most luxury and they wanted to show off with that luxury.

JL: So how did you finally get out of there?

MR: Well, one day she came, Pina Comelli, yeah that woman, when she lost Cardinal Ferrari, she came and she fainted, pretended, before Comelli, so Comelli put her in her, she took care of her. She put her on her under list of the people who had to be saved. One day Pina Comelli came and as usual when she came I was called and she was called too, that lady, Mrs. Ochshorn, and Pina Comelli says, "Pirola" — she used to call me Pirola, too — "get ready. In ten minutes you have to leave. You have to clean all your place what you have. You are going to Switzerland." That woman, Mrs. Ochshorn, she had two girls, very beautiful girls, and that little girl she had a synovitis here. She had a thing like this, swollen. And she said, that woman said, "*Herr*¹³³ Relles, to whom do you leave me here? If you go, what will happen to me? And when this girl will have to walk, how will she walk mountains?" I once promised her that I would wait for her. I don't know. "Herr Relles." Well, you know, and I said to Comelli — the trouble with her, Mrs. Ochshorn, was she didn't know a word Italian. She talked a few words France... I don't remember. Just a few words, that's all. And she began to cry and I said to Comelli, "You see, I would like to stay to go with her, that I can help her with the daughter." And she said, "Pirola, you are putting your stick among my wheels." You know what it means — you are frustrating me. "You know that everything is organized and the smugglers are paid much money and we have difficulties and so on and so on." So, I said, "Listen, what you are doing for me, don't you believe I should now begin if I can to be a little grateful?" So she

¹³³ German for 'Mister'.

says, "Well, okay, you win." And she called another one, from [sounds like: Nitsa Sabori], a lady, to take my place. And I waited for that lady and for her daughters. It happened that a week later they came for us. We took the streetcar from Milan, from Milan we took the train to Como, from Como we took the *imbarcadero*¹³⁴ to Bruzzella, it means the last place of Italy, you know. And there were policemen every places and *finanzas*. The woman, Mrs. Ochshorn, she wrapped her face all around and she pretended being deaf, she was no deaf, she didn't know Italian, anyways.

JL: What was the date now? Or approximate.

MR: This was May...June...July...before May.

JL: April?

MR: Yeah. April 15, how do you know that?

JL: From the preliminary interview.

MR: April 15.

JL: Forty-four [1944].

MR: Yeah, '44, and we arrived there was — I was later told this was a — they used to call it, Topolino, you know, a small car like a Volkswagen. This is what they used to call, waiting for us We were told that it was a Fascist [inaudible] gave this Topolino. But that lady was with us, that Comelli...no, not Comelli, Monti, Signora Lerone or Monti, she was with us, and we were, you can imagine a small car — Mrs. Ochshorn, two girls, Mrs. Monti, I, and the chauffeur. We arrived to a place I don't remember. It was about eight o'clock. To the last it was just from there are the mountains, you know. It was we called it a *bitta* by a small house, and there were shepherds and peasants and smugglers and everything.

JL: Where was this now, still in Bruzzella?

MR: It's not Bruzzella, I forgot the name, I forgot it now. It was not Bruzzella, it was a place. No, Bruzzella is another place. It was already in Switzerland [inaudible]. I don't remember the name of that place, but I remember we had to wait until 11:45, when the smugglers came, and she brought, that Mrs., she

¹³⁴ An Italian type of boat.

brought a pair of shoes for me, not mountain shoes, to go, these tennis shoes, you know, to walk easily, not too heavy, and after she says, "Pirola, now before we part, tell me what would you like to eat?" And I didn't think long. I said, "A plate of rice with milk, something I will eat after the war, if I eat nothing else, give me a plate of rice and milk." She paid three hundred liras for it. You know, today for three hundred lira you can buy nothing, you know. And I ate. Yeah, I want to tell you, that before we left that institution, Mother Clara, she gave us cheese and meat and salami and chunks of meat that were old, years and years. They know how to make it, you know, that it doesn't spoil. The more it stays, the better it tastes. They gave us — I had a valise with food. I had one lira. All of it. Why? Because when I entered, I don't know all these things, I gave the money I had and I gave my things away, you know. I delivered there my bread you know, my bread coupons, too. But I had to eat. And we began to walk about twelve o'clock, midnight. It was the most wonderful walk on the mountains. We had to cross the mountains. It was the most wonderful walk. We had four smugglers. They carried, the smugglers carried our valises, and we walked. There was a path, we walked, we stopped in a place, you know where the shepherds sleep, and we had there water and we ate and so on. At two o'clock in the morning — it took us two hours. I'm telling you, it was the most — you know - and we have the moonlight, yes, during our walk, we saw all of a sudden it became day, you know and we heard planes. It was that night they bombed Milan. All the time I was there, they never touched Milan. I don't say it's my merit, [laugh] but in fact, the next day we arrived in Switzerland [and] we read in the paper that they bombed Milan and they made some [sounds like: *mishpete* come out.]

JL: I'm going to stop right here.

MR: Yeah, is that enough?

END OF TAPE 10, SIDE 2

END OF TRANSCRIPT