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ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA
LEGACY PROJECT**

MEMOIRIST: ELIEZER (ELI) SOTTO
INTERVIEWER: SARA GHITIS
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INTERVIEW BEGINS

<Begin Disk 1>

Sara: Today is Sunday, September 16, [2001]. We are in Atlanta, Georgia. My name is Sara Ghitis. I am conducting an interview with Mr. Eli Sotto. Mr. Sotto, could you pronounce your name for me?

Eliezer: My name is Eliezer Sotto. I came from Salonika,¹ Greece in 1952 . . . January 23, 1952 . . . to the United States.

Sara: Where were you born?

Eliezer: I am born in Salonika, Greece.

Sara: On what date?

Eliezer: April 27, 1923.

Sara: What do you remember about your life in Salonika?

Eliezer: Since my childhood . . . always the Jewish people have problems.² Also, I don't know why, the Jewish people like to live in neighborhoods all together . . . like a ghetto. Ninety-five percent Jewish and five percent gentiles . . . in there, they have some [that] throw rocks . . . stone

¹ Salonika, or Thessaloniki, is the second-largest city in Greece. As of February 1943, there were about 56,000 Jews in Salonika. By the end of the war, this great community had ceased to exist. Today, Jewish community life has revived somewhat, and Salonika is now the second largest Jewish community in Greece, behind Athens. There are approximately 1,000 Jews living in Salonika.

² In the late nineteenth century, Salonika's Jews became the target of Greek and Armenian pogroms (violent riots aimed at massacre or persecution of an ethnic or religious group).

rocks . . . like [what is] happening in Israel.³

In 1940, the Italians declared war against Greece . . . October 1940.⁴ The Italians [did] not succeed, and then the Germans came, and took over the country. But before that, going to the synagogue, Friday night service . . . that was in 1938 . . . after the services, the rabbi make a speech. [He] say . . . what is going on in Germany to threat[en] the Jews, and throw rocks, and beat them in the streets. From that time on . . . I can't forget it . . . that speech, but only up to now . . . why the Jewish people don't put in consideration that this was . . . something was going on, to know that it was not good news. But I guess what happened is the next day, probably they forgot all about.

After that, two families . . . come from Vienna⁵ [Austria] to Greece. The Jewish community . . . they put them two doors from where I live. The one family . . . they have two children: a boy and a girl. Because they only speak German, I was trying to help to teach [them] Spanish and Greek . . . I used to take [them] with me to my school because one was nervous. After 1940, the Italians started bombing the country. We have to move from the neighborhood because we were living close to [the] railroad station. So we moved to the other side of the town, and we [were] separated from those people. Then, the Germans took over Greece,⁶ and those two . . . a boy and a girl, which left Austria to survive . . . they become interpreters for the Germans.

When the Germans came, the first thing they [do] is to find out how many Jews live in Salonika. The second, they put it in the paper that the Jews from age 16 to 45 to be presented in the square.⁷ Whoever is not present will be severely punished. Many times, what they done is, they catch [a] couple of people that try to leave the country, and they hang them, so everybody was afraid . . . we [must be] present in the square. When we [were] in the square . . . which a lot

³ Incidents in which rocks were thrown as weapons by Palestinians have killed, and injured many Israelis, particularly in the areas of Judea and Samaria, in Israel.

⁴ Greece entered World War II on October 28, 1940, when the Italian army invaded from Albania. The Greek army was able to stop the invasion, and was even able to push the Italians back into Albania, thereby winning one of the first victories for the Allies. The Greek successes, and the inability of the Italians to reverse the situation, resulted in the intervention of Germany, which invaded Greece on April 6, 1941, and overran the country within a month. Greece was occupied, and divided between Germany, Italy and Bulgaria, while the king and government fled into exile in Egypt.

⁵ Vienna is the capital and largest city in Austria. Austria was occupied on March 12, 1938, and annexed into the German Third Reich.

⁶ When the Germans arrived in April 1941, anti-Jewish measures were enacted. Some of the Jews fled to Athens (occupied then by the Italians, who were regarded as relatively benign compared to the Germans).

⁷ *Plateia Eleftheria* [Greek: Liberty Square].

of people [did] not live close to town, [so] they was a little late, to . . . present them[selves] there . . . 9:00 sharp. It was a terrible day.⁸ They beat them up . . . they take their glasses. They have the speakers, and they say, “Now you all have to work for the Germans, and do [what] they demand. Go up the street to that building and register.” So me and my older brother . . . went and registered. They said, “Fifty in a group” . . . Monday morning, to be standing in a corner . . . “the army trucks are going to come, and pick you all up” . . . with two blankets.

Monday morning, we went to the corner where they told us . . . about 50 people [in] the group . . . they took us 20 miles from the city . . . and many others . . . we start digging to make a . . . space for the airplanes. When I started working . . . they give you a shovel and a pick, and . . . what they call it . . . wheel barrow. They have those Greeks, *kapos*⁹ in charge, and [they] keep saying, “Fill it up, the bag.” It was so hard. But a couple hours later, [there] was no way I can keep doing it. So I look around. That was in the field with farms. When I see the *kapo* walk to the other side, I left. I went through the fields. I went [to] the main road. I went home. My mother said, “What are you doing [here]?” I said, “It was not enough work, they sent us home.” I didn’t tell her that I took off. My older brother, he worked that day through the night. He left, he comes home, and for two or three months, we went back, and started working. Two months later . . . me and my brother [went] to the movies . . . when we go home, there was the Germans, with the Greek police, they come, and arrest us, and they put us in jail, with so many others . . . the same thing, they left.

Sara: How old were you when this happened?

Eliezer: I was 15 years old.

Sara: Fifteen?

Eliezer: Fifteen.

Sara: And your brother?

⁸ July 11, 1942 is still called “Black Saturday.” Nine thousand Jewish men between 16 and 45 years of age were ordered to assemble at *Plateia Eleftheria* (Liberty Square), where they were humiliated in the burning sun all day. They were forced to stand without moving, and anyone who tried to shield his eyes from the sun was beaten. The men were forced to roll on the ground, and perform bizarre and difficult calisthenics. The Germans took pictures the whole time from the balconies around the square, and applauded. When the men were granted permission to return home they had to run the first 150 meters or crawl on all fours, turn somersaults, and roll in the dust. About 2,000 were sent to forced labor for the Germany army, where the death rate was high.

⁹ A *kapo* was a prisoner in a concentration camp or labor camp who was assigned by the SS guards to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks in the camp. The *kapo* system minimized costs by allowing the camps to function with fewer SS personnel. It was designed to turn victim against victim, as the *kapos* were pitted against their fellow prisoners in order to maintain the favor of their SS guards.

Eliezer: My brother . . . 17. After that, we stay in jail for a month or so. They used to come every day, the jailers . . . big jail . . . they come every day, and pick up people, and kill them . . . shoot them . . . two from each bunker. After that, they come back with the trucks, and took us back to work.

In the meantime, the Jewish community, they begged the Germans . . . if you can, go and pick up the sick people because . . . they were going in creeks and rivers, and they were having malaria, and they started dying. They ask them to go pick up the bodies, and the sick people. The Germans reply, “If you give us \$6,000,000 . . . \$5,000,000¹⁰ we will put the gentiles to work.” The [Jewish community] agreed to that . . . the concept . . . the program. The way I know this is this brother and sister interpreted for the Germans . . . so I meet [them] downtown where the Jewish community is . . . because [they] always work with the Germans. They say they are going to cancel the program because they are going to give ransom to the Germans so everybody can come home. They cancelled the program, everybody come home.

But after two weeks, they announced in the paper that Jews have to wear a Jewish star¹¹ to be identified. About a month later, they put another announcement that the Jews . . . they have to live in ghettos,¹² and [they] are going to be deported to Poland to be [with] all the [other] Jews . . . united. I was wondering why . . . I was a young boy . . . I didn’t have the experience . . . but other people, why they don’t do something to escape, to survive.

Anyhow, after that, they said, “You have to move from the neighborhood where you live, you have to live [in] separate areas, the ghetto” . . . in other words, if you live on Biltmore Drive, you have to go ten blocks down there. We moved to the ghettos, and then they put an announcement at the time that tomorrow, Ghetto One¹³ will be transported to Poland. They come . . . the army come . . . Germans, and evacuate the ghetto. Maybe they take about 2,000 to 2,500

¹⁰ The Jewish community paid a fee of two billion *drachmas* to ransom the Jews who were rounded up for slave labor.

¹¹ The Star of David [Hebrew: *Magen David*] is generally recognized as a symbol of Jewish identity and Judaism. A Star of David was used by the Germans during the war as a method of identifying Jews. If a Jew was found not to be wearing the star in public, he or she could be subject to severe punishment. In Greece the star was yellow.

¹² In February 1943, the Jews were concentrated in two ghettos, one in the east of Salonika, and one in the western, Baron de Hirsch quarter, near the railway station, in preparation for impending deportations. The Baron de Hirsch ghetto near the railroad station became the transit point for transports to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. The deportations began on March 15, 1943, and ended on August 10, 1943. There were 19 transports in total that carried 48,533 Jews. About 37,000 were murdered on arrival in Poland.

¹³ This is a reference to the Baron de Hirsch ghetto near the railroad station, which was filled and then emptied in a transport, only to be refilled again for the next transport.

people . . . men, women, and children. They brought us to the railroad station, they put [us] on the cargo trains, and they ship us to Poland, which took eight days from Salonika to Poland. We got there about midnight.

They stop the trains, and said, “*Raus, raus, schnell!*” [German: “Out, out, hurry!”] It means “fast.” Then we have those other prisoners, and [they] help us because from sitting in the train all those days, we . . . our low circulation doesn’t move . . . we don’t have energy. So they pick us up, and then [when] we’re standing, put us in line. The Germans are separating maybe 300 or 400, maybe 500 youngsters, men and women. They say, “You all go this way. You are going to meet the families later.”

When we get there, we see the first camp . . . it’s Auschwitz [Main Camp: Auschwitz I].¹⁴ We see the “*Arbeit Macht Frei*”¹⁵ sign. “Work will give you freedom,” and we go there. They have the barracks. We went through the barracks. They take . . . our clothes. We went to the other side of the barracks, and they give us prison clothes. There is [an] interpreter over there. The interpreter say, “You have to work for the Germans, and do [what] they demand. Whoever is not complying, they will be severely punished.”

Sara: Where was the rest of your family?

Eliezer: We were separated when we got to Poland . . . midnight after eight days. They separated the families. When we got there, I ask in Auschwitz-[Birkenau] . . . ask the other prisoners, “Where are the other families? They are supposed to come.” They say, “You see those two buildings across . . . one is the gas chamber, and the other is crematorium . . . already they [are] exterminated.” I said, “What are you talking about?”

Sara: Who else in your family went to Poland?

Eliezer: The whole [of] my family went to Poland.

Sara: Who were they?

Eliezer: Four sisters and three brothers, father and mother. We are nine in the family.

Sara: Would you name them? What was the name of your father?

¹⁴ Auschwitz-Birkenau was a complex of camps: the Main Camp (Auschwitz I), Auschwitz-Birkenau and Monowitz (Auschwitz III). Many smaller sub-camps were attached to the complex which drew their labor from the Main Camp and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Main Camp is where the museum is today, and has the famous ‘*Arbeit Macht Frei*’ gate. The Main Camp was established on the site of existing Polish army barracks just outside the town of Oswiecim (renamed ‘Auschwitz’ by the Germans), and could hold about 10,000 prisoners.

¹⁵ ‘*Arbeit Macht Frei*’ is a German phrase meaning “Work makes [you] free.” The slogan is known for having been placed over the entrances to a number of German concentration camps, including most infamously Auschwitz I, where it was made by prisoners with metalwork skills, and erected by order of the Germans in June 1940.

Eliezer: David Sotto. My mother . . . Victoria Sotto. My older sister was Gracia [sp], Bella [sp], Rachel, and Sarah.¹⁶ My older brother was Charlie, Isaac, and my name is Eli. Those two pictures over there <pointing at the wall> they are my two sisters . . . that I find after I [was] liberated.

Sara: How long were you in Auschwitz-[Birkenau]?

Eliezer: When we got there, we stayed eight days in Auschwitz [Main Camp], and then we got transferred. Me, and my older brother, and my younger brother went to Auschwitz-[Birkenau].¹⁷ After eight days, they put us in line to be transported to another camp called ‘Buna’ [Monowitz: Auschwitz III].¹⁸ They said, “If there is anybody younger than 13 to . . . remain in Auschwitz-[Birkenau].” Me and my older brother told him, “Isaac, you must stay because you are almost 13.” They put the youngsters on the other side, and then we make the transport, and we transferred to Buna.

After working in Buna for six months, one night there was [a selection] for people not able to work no more. I was [in a] separate block from my brother. I was block 22, my [brother] was block 26 . . . so they separate me for the gas chamber. They took us to . . . maybe about 500 prisoners . . . Birkenau for the gas chamber. But at that time, the gas chamber was busy with bringing people from Hungary,¹⁹ and they put us on reserve. After the next day, the Germans

¹⁶ The Museum owns several images of Eli’s family. They can be found in the Eliezer Sotto Family Collection, ESF 255.

¹⁷ When the Germans wanted to expand the size of Auschwitz, they built Birkenau about two and one-half miles away from the Main Camp. This is the camp with the iconic brick gate and the railroad tracks leading to the ramp. Birkenau had the largest total prisoner population. Originally, Auschwitz-Birkenau was supposed to be a huge pool of political prisoners and Russian prisoners-of-war to be used for slave labor, but sometime in 1942, it was decided that it was the perfect place for the ‘Final Solution’—the extermination of the Jews. Birkenau was divided into more than a dozen sections separated by electronic barbed-wire fences, and was patrolled by SS guards. The camp included sections for women, men, a family camp for *Roma* (Gypsies), and a family camp for Jewish families deported from the Theresienstadt ghetto. Birkenau is where the four gas chambers and crematoria came to be located, each with a disrobing area, a large gas chamber, and crematorium ovens. The SS continued gassing operations at Auschwitz-Birkenau until November 1944.

¹⁸ The Monowitz camp (or Auschwitz III) was about four miles east of the Main Camp. The German chemical firm IG Farben built a huge complex for the production of synthetic fuels and rubber (*buna*) in April 1941. The availability of thousands of slave laborers in the Auschwitz camps, rail lines, and nearby natural resources for fuel was the reason the camp was built there.

¹⁹ With the deportations from Hungary, the role of Auschwitz-Birkenau as an instrument of the German plan to murder the Jews of Europe achieved its highest effectiveness. Between late April and early July 1944, approximately 440,000 Hungarian Jews were deported, around 426,000 of them to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The SS sent approximately 320,000 of them directly to the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and deployed approximately 110,000 to forced labor in the Auschwitz concentration camp complex. During this period as many as 8,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered on a daily basis. The crematoria were unable to keep up and open-air pits were used. Thus, it was Eliezer’s ‘good fortune’ that the gas chambers were overwhelmed by the Hungarian arrivals

came by, and they told the *kapos*, “For the time being, put those prisoners back to work.” They brought us back to camp, and they put us to work.

Sara: What kind of work?

Eliezer: Digging ditches, picking up [unintelligible: 18:47] empty, take us through the railroad, empty bags of cement, bricks, move lumber, stones, all kinds of stuff. After a week or two, they make another selection from the barracks, and start to select the people. I noticed when they were selecting people not able to work no more, that when I was in line, they took one in front of me. What I did is I make one step . . . because the remaining ones got to go to the other side . . . so I make one step. Then when they stop the line to select, you go this way . . . instead, you go to this way, and go to the barrack and register. I went to the barrack with the others and register[ed] . . . give the number.

Sara: Show us your number.

<Eliezer folds up his sleeve to show the number tattooed on his arm: 115303>²⁰

Eliezer: We went to the other side, and we registered . . . to the barrack and registered. Then they transfer us to the capital of Poland [Warsaw]. I survived the gas chambers at that time. When we was for bringing now to go to Poland, we stop in Auschwitz-[Birkenau] because Auschwitz-[Birkenau] was on the way. The first thing I [was] looking for my young brother, who we left at Auschwitz-[Birkenau]. I saw my younger brother. I said, “How are you doing?” He said, “What are you doing inside here?” They put him in the barracks. That is better than being outside because you’ve got to make hard labor. He said, “No, they took us the number because we are going to be transferred to Warsaw [Poland] also.” Then, the transport, that day, took off . . . they put us in the cargo train to Warsaw. About a week later, another transport come from Auschwitz-[Birkenau], and there was my brother. I meet my younger brother and from then, we was all the time together.

Sara: What was his name again?

Eliezer: Isaac Sotko. In Warsaw, he stayed in Barrack 5. I was in Barrack 2.

Sara: Where in Warsaw was this?

at this time. You may see images of the burning of bodies in pits at www.yadvashem.org: archival signatures 20AO8, 1495/47 and 5318/200.

²⁰ On April 13, 1943 approximately 2,800 Jewish men, women and children from Salonika arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. After the selection, 500 men were given Nos. 114875 to 115374. Eliezer was among this group. Three hundred sixty-four women are also admitted. The remaining 1,935 Jews are murdered in the gas chambers.

Eliezer: The capital of Poland.

Sara: Yes. What part of Warsaw? Was it a special labor camp?

Eliezer: In Warsaw, there was . . . what they have . . . the Ghetto.

Sara: In the Warsaw Ghetto?

Eliezer: When the Jews have the Ghetto, that's where they make the camp, where the Ghetto is. As a matter of fact, we walk in the buildings, and we find bodies, and people was hiding . . . still was hiding in those buildings with . . . the resistance.²¹

We stayed until 1944 in Warsaw. In 1944, they evacuate the camp because the Allies was pretty close, and they took us to Dachau.²² We march a whole week, and they put us in the train to go to Dachau. We arrive in Dachau, and we stay for a couple of weeks, and then we transfer to another camp: Number 4. They have different camps, Number 1, Number 4, Number 7. Then from Number 4, I went to *Lager* [German: camp] 7. I think that was in Landsberg, Germany.²³ Then from Landsberg, Germany, we got transferred to Leitmeritz.²⁴ That was in Czechoslovakia.²⁵ We were working in a town over there. After working in Czechoslovakia . . .

²¹ On July 19, 1943, after the Warsaw ghetto was officially liquidated, a special concentration camp was sent up in Warsaw, Poland. Between August 31 and November 27, four transports of 3,683 Jews arrived from Auschwitz-Birkenau to clean up the area, and reclaim building materials for construction in Germany. The camp was called 'Konzentrationslager Warschau' but was known as "Gesiowka" after the prison for Jews that had been in the ghetto, and in which they were now housed. Other Jewish prisoners retrieved the bodies of Jews who had died in the ghetto during the liquidation. They were brought to Gesia Street, and burned on pyres. Miraculously, a handful of Jews survived in the rubble of the destroyed ghetto until the end of the war. About 2,000 Jews of Warsaw survived in the camps, and about another 10,000 in the 'Aryan' part of the city.

²² Dachau, established in Germany on March 22, 1933, was the first regular concentration camp established by the Nazis. It was originally a camp for political and criminal prisoners. It was located on the grounds of an abandoned munitions factory near the northeastern part of the town of Dachau, about ten miles northwest of Munich in southern Germany.

²³ Landsberg am Lech is a town in southwest Bavaria, Germany. There was a German concentration camp in Landsberg. By October 1944, the camp held more than 5,000 prisoners. It was liberated by American forces on April 27, 1945 after which the camp was turned into a displaced persons (DP) camp.

²⁴ The small town of Litomerice (Czech: Litoměřice; German: Leitmeritz) is located within the Sudetenland, in former Czechoslovakia, and was mainly inhabited by Germans. It was annexed by the German Reich in August 1938 as a result of the Munich Agreement, signed by Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy. In official German documents, the concentration camp at Litomerice was called 'Arbeitslager Leitmeritz' or 'SS Kommando B 5.' The first transport of 500 prisoners came from the Dachau concentration camp on March 24, 1944. Over 18,300 inmates passed through the camp between 1944 and 1945, coming from Poland, the former Soviet Union, Slovenia, France, Germany, and former Czechoslovakia. Its inmates also included Belgians, Italians, Dutch, Serbs, Croats, and Bulgarians. A numerous group numbering 4,000 inmates consisted of Jews, mainly from Poland, Hungary, former Czechoslovakia, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, and other countries. The death rate at the camp was very high due to atrocious living conditions, and disease epidemics. In April 1945, the SS began dissolving the camp under chaotic circumstances. About 1,200 prisoners were left behind in the camp, and liberated by the Russian army during the final days of the war.

²⁵ Czechoslovakia is the common reference for the Czechoslovak Republic, a state that was established by the Versailles Treaty in 1918 from several provinces after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian state at the end of

I don't recall exactly how long it was, I think five, six months . . . they evacuated the camp. They put us in the cargo train. That was probably on March, 1945. Where the train was going . . . they make many stops because I think this part . . . the trains . . . there was bombing so the train cannot continue. At that time, the Czech civilians come, nuns and all kinds of people, and begged the Germans to take the sick people from the trains. They convinced the Germans to [let them] go because some of the trains were the open tops, and because they were *Tsechia* [Greek: Czech], and Polish, and Russian, they know the language . . . they was asking for help. They begged the Germans to get the sick people . . . so the Germans agree . . . so they was coming down.

When I saw the nuns and people with the Red Cross,²⁶ I said to my brother, "Let's jump from the train." We jumped. Then the nuns come, and took us to a barrack over there to all the sick people. Then, when we are standing there, the Germans come to check everybody, make sure [they are] sick. The way they checking is stepping your stomach. If you make a sound, that means you are okay [well, not sick]. I told my brother, "[When they] step on you, say not a sound." They checked, and told the Polish . . . the nuns, the Red Cross, "You can have them." They come with trucks, with army stretchers, and they took us to a Catholic hospital. We stay in the Catholic hospital.

Sara: Where was the hospital?

Eliezer: In Prága [Czech: Prague] and the name of the hospital was Bulovka.²⁷ The first thing the doctors . . . they told us to make sure not to give us enough food. But after a week or so, we . . . me and a Russian guy . . . we go to another room where all the doctors eat. We used to go over there, and eat all we can. The doctors were surprised how so fast we gain so much weight. In the meantime, by March 28, we hear on the speakers that the war was over, which was later, but Czechoslovakia was liberated, and we are free.²⁸ After we are liberated, we went to find out how

World War I. During World War II it was occupied and divided. The Germans split it into Slovakia (an ally of Germany) and the rest was merged into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in the Greater German Reich.

²⁶ The International Committee of the Red Cross ("Red Cross") is a humanitarian institution based in Geneva, Switzerland. During World War II, the Red Cross—although limited by the Germans—had access to and was a crucial source of information about civilians, prisoners of war, and concentration camp prisoners. At the end of World War II, the Red Cross worked with national Red Cross societies to organize relief assistance to those countries most severely affected by the war.

²⁷ Faculty Hospital Bulovka is one of the largest hospitals in Prague, Czech Republic. It is affiliated with the Faculty of Medicine of the Charles University.

²⁸ Areas that had been annexed or occupied by the Germans to the west of Germany proper were liberated by American and British forces before Germany itself had been officially beaten (that is, Berlin fell). This included the

we [can] go back home. So many other prisoners . . . we got together to go to the railroad station and find a way. The train was going to take off, and we went inside the train. We not know which direction it's going. That train stop . . . I was with my younger brother. I said . . . me and another guy . . . we see a store across the street, and we try to go get something. By the time we went, the train took off. It was in the middle of nowhere. So we start walking to the rail station . . . we come in a little place. It was *Oukrania* [Greek: Ukraine]. Nothing but Ukrainian women were there. They was waiting to board [the train] to go to Hungary.

The train . . . we went inside there . . . it was nighttime . . . dark . . . with all these women inside the train. The train took off to go to Budapest [Hungary]. Without knowing anybody, and suddenly all the Russians come inside there. The first thing we notice was . . . I don't know if it was a good sign or not . . . we went to a corner, laid down . . . and then we arrive in Budapest. The first thing, those Ukrainian women . . . they know where the Jewish community was . . . the Jewish school was. It was not too far so we walked, and there was other prisoners over there. We stayed in Budapest. Then we find out how to go home again, so we went back to the railroad station. From one train to another, so finally it took about two months to go back home.

Sara: How did you get money for the ticket?

Eliezer: The number . . . just show the number. We don't have no money. Every place we go, there are some organizations . . . they give us food. Then we got home. Now, when we got to Salonika, we don't know how to start a new life.

Sara: What about the rest of your family?

Eliezer: First thing when we was in camp, we don't know what is going on, but after we liberate, we realize they are really . . . they are not around no more . . . they are gone. It was so hard. I meet a woman . . . and [she] said, "How are you doing?" I say, "I feel bad. I don't know how we are going to make new lives." She said, "You find someone and get married, start to make a new life." I say, "How will I find anyone, I don't know nobody."

In the meantime, I open a little fruit stand. This woman came to shop with another young girl that she knew. When she was shopping, she was turned around, and I noticed that girl. I said, "Who is that girl?" She said, "A friend of mine, you want to meet?" She called and

area that had been called 'Czechoslovakia' and had become the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The official surrender date for the entire European war is May 8, 1945.

introduced [her] and said that she was a Holocaust survivor, too. I said, “Do you mind, we can get together Sunday?” [She said,] “No.” I went to that woman’s house, and we met. From then on, we got engaged, and after three months, we got married. She lost everybody, and I lost everybody.

We tried to come . . . we want to go to Israel, but at that time it was difficult. Then, we applied to come to the United States. When we came to the United States, the first thing is my visa²⁹ was to go for Los Angeles [California] but there was somebody else came before me, and said, “Atlanta [Georgia], the climate’s better in Atlanta.” When I got up to New York [City, New York], I asked the women who were in charge if it’s possible to change the ticket to Atlanta. [One of them said,] “I don’t know. The American consul is across the street. I can take you over there.” We went over there, and [she] said, “This young guy wants to go to Atlanta.” They took the papers, and scratched out [Los Angeles], and said, “You go to Atlanta.” When we came to Atlanta, the first thing we find out the Sephardic³⁰ synagogue.

Sara: What was the name of the girl you married?

Eliezer: My wife that I met was Lucy Sotto . . . Lucy Levy. She also . . . she lost everybody, except that one brother survived, and went to Israel. He went from the camps back to Israel, and he went to the 1967 war and he got shot. He was sick for a long time, and then he died.

Sara: So you came to Atlanta, and you were saying that you found the Sephardic synagogue. How were you received?

Eliezer: Again, we start a new life in this country. The only thing is we didn’t know how we were going to start with no language in a new country. Things were difficult. The good thing was that my father was a barber. One thing I forgot to mention when I was in camp . . . in one of the camps, they ask if you were a barber or electrician. I raised my hand, and I said I was a barber. That was in Landsberg, Germany. I went every day, and shaved the commander, but then they evacuated the camp, and so I lost.

²⁹ A visa is a conditional authority given by a country for a person who is not a citizen of that country to enter its territory, and to remain there for a limited duration. Each country typically attaches various conditions to their visas, such as duration of stay, the territory covered by the visa, dates of validity, etc. Immigrant visas are issued to those intending to immigrate to the issuing country.

³⁰ Sephardic Jews are the Jews of Spain, Portugal, North Africa and the Middle East and their descendants. The adjective “Sephardic” and corresponding nouns Sephardi (singular) and Sephardim (plural) are derived from the Hebrew word ‘*Sepharad*,’ which refers to Spain. Historically, the vernacular language of Sephardic Jews was Ladino, a Romance language derived from Old Spanish, incorporating elements from the old Romance languages of the Iberian Peninsula, Hebrew, Aramaic, and in the lands receiving those who were exiled, Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Greek, Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian vocabulary.

Anyhow, when we came . . . my father was a barber, and I had learned the trade from my father. I was wondering how we were going to start a new life to work. I was talking with someone, who said, “I know somebody . . . [he] is Italian and Spanish. If you want me, I take you over there. I get my hair cut down there.” I went, and [was] introduced [to] this guy. [He] had a place on Georgia Avenue. His name was Chris Perez [sp]. I went, and got introduced. The man, right away, he say, “You got a tool?” [I say,] “Yes.” He say, “Go bring your tools.” I say to the man, “I don’t know how to speak it English. I don’t know how.” “Don’t worry,” he say, “because the men speak Spanish also.”

Sara: What was his name?

Eliezer: Chris Perez. He said, “*No problema. Voy yo te ayudar.*” [Spanish: “No problem. I’ll help you.”] I went back, got the tools, and I went to the shop. He told the other barbers to switch a chair [for me] to be next to him. When the customer come, he put them in the chair, he tell the customer, how they want their hair cut? He tells me in Spanish, “*Regular.*” [Spanish: regular]. So, after six months, I don’t have no problem. I learn . . .

Sara: ‘*Regular,*’ which means ‘standard’?

Eliezer: Regular, yes. *Corto* [Spanish: short] or *regular*. After six months, I don’t have no problem. I pick it up . . . have a clientele. After that, I was looking in the paper, and I see this place was for sale . . . no, I find this place, they have rent for chair, to make a little more money, and I went. There was the barber shop where I am now, on Peachtree [Street]. I was working, and after the other barber taught me, the guy wanted to sell the place over to him, but he was not interested. I went home. I was thinking. I like the shop. How to buy it [when] I don’t have no money?

The next day, I go when I can to get a haircut. I say, “Is there any way you can tell me how to buy the shop? I don’t have no money.” He said, “Give me the man, the owner’s name. I talk to him.” He called the owner, and say, “Eli, your employee, want to buy your barber shop, but he don’t have the money. We can go apply for loan. You can co-sign so he can buy the shop, and get you all the money. If he don’t pay, you get your shop back, nothing to lose.” He said, “Okay.” We went to the bank, and we make the loan. He got the money, and I got the shop. That was in 1954, and I have been there since.

Sara: What’s the name of your shop?

Eliezer: The name of the barber shop is the ‘Trim Shop.’

Sara: Where is it located?

Eliezer: [At] 849 Peachtree [Street—Atlanta, Georgia].

Sara: Is that downtown?

Eliezer: It's on Peachtree between . . . I don't know if you know where the Fox Theater³¹ is, it's three blocks from the Fox Theater . . . between 6th and 7th on Peachtree.

Sara: Do you like what you do?

Eliezer: Yes, thank G-d. I raised my family. I sent my children to school, sent my son to college.

Sara: Tell me about your family. Your wife's name was Lucy?

Eliezer: She was my wife. She had a brother, which was a teacher also. He got killed in the Greek army, with the Italians. Her mother, when they find out the news her son got killed, she got a stroke. She had a hard time . . . my wife had a hard time from childhood. Then, after this happened, we were liberated, she lost everybody.

We come to make a new life. We was doing okay, but in 1995 . . . my son got married . . . and after a year or so, went out to eat, on Friday night, a big 18-wheeler [truck] came, and they hit him. They kill his wife, and my son got a head injury.³² My wife took it very hard . . . the accident, and she was crying all the time. I told my wife . . . my wife said, "After all this happening it is not enough what we went through, why this happen to us?" I told my wife, "You come with me to the shop. Don't stay home. We are going to work together." Then, we have the other shop of my son, who went to the synagogue. After we come back from the other shop, my daughter and my son together, we separate. As soon as we come home, she said, "I don't feel good." I said, "Let me call the doctor." I called the doctor Saturday . . . he said, "If it is an emergency, take her to the hospital." I called the children. I said, "Mama not feel good." The ambulance came . . . we called the ambulance. They came. They put her in the ambulance, and halfway going to the hospital, she died inside the ambulance.

Sara: Could you describe her? What kind of a person was she?

Eliezer: For me, she was the best woman in the whole world because that woman, who was so

³¹ The Fox Theatre is located on Peachtree Street in Midtown Atlanta. The theater was originally planned as part of a large Shrine Temple as evidenced by its Moorish design. The theater was ultimately developed as a lavish movie palace, opening in 1929. The auditorium replicates an Arabian courtyard under a night sky of flickering stars and drifting clouds. The Fox Theatre now hosts cultural and artistic events, and concerts by popular artists.

³² Eliezer's son David was married to Cindy, who died in the accident.

. . . create things, and so intelligent. If [she] see what you are wearing, she can copy right there. In other words, at one time, they [be]come popular . . . *ponchos*.³³ I don't know if you know what I'm talking about. She saw the women had one, and right away she make those ponchos. My daughter, she got married, and moved to Seattle, Washington. She sent a knitted poodle to the in-laws. We went to visit the in-laws. My wife saw the poodle. She come home, and right away she make the poodles. David, can you bring them from there . . . is in the other room, and you can bring what Mama knitted, the knitting. She make *yarmulkes*³⁴ for the Hebrew Academy,³⁵ and also, for children, for babies . . . booties, little blankets, little hats, which we used to give to the people who had babies.

Sara: How many years were you married?

Eliezer: We were married 49 years. We were going to celebrate 50 years. What I was thinking is that I was going to make surprise because my wife saw . . . they never come with . . . a limousine came. My wife say, "The Amatos have a limousine." . . . From that day . . . we are 49 years married . . . when we celebrate fiftieth anniversary, I am going to have a limousine to take us to the hotel, which is where we invite, and make the 50 years anniversary. She didn't make it. I want to show you . . . can you go through . . . I show you what my wife . . . <pause while someone hands him a blanket> Can you believe if you touch this how this woman used to do all these things for people, not just for us? This is what she used to make for babies.

Sara: Did she sell it also?

Eliezer: No, no, give to people . . . like we have bazaar. One time, she make about 50 of those <referring to a large blanket> for the bazaar.

Sara: She never sold them.

Eliezer: Always made blankets.

Sara: Can you say what bazaar you are talking about?

Eliezer: What they call it, Or VeShalom bazaar. You know what bazaar is? They make every year . . . *Hanukkah*³⁶ bazaar, that's what it means.

³³ A *poncho* is a blanket-like cloak with the hole in the center to admit the head, originating in South America.

³⁴ Jewish men cover their heads during prayer with a small skull-cap called a '*yarmulke*' or '*kippah*.' Orthodox Jewish men wear it at all times to remind themselves of G-d's presence.

³⁵ The Katherine and Jacob Greenfield Hebrew Academy was the first Jewish day school in Atlanta, and was founded in 1953. As of mid-2014 the Greenfield Hebrew Academy (grades pre-K through 8) and Yeshiva High School (grades 9-12) merged into one college preparatory day school now called the Atlanta Jewish Academy.

³⁶ Hebrew for "dedication." An eight-day festival of lights usually falling around Christmas on the Christian calendar. *Hanukkah* celebrates the victory of the Maccabees in 165 BCE over the Seleucid rulers of Palestine, who

Sara: She would do it for the bazaar every year, and it was sold?

Eliezer: Yes, to donate for the bazaar.

Sara: Or VeShalom has a group that bakes Sephardic?

Eliezer: Yes, my wife, she used to go every Tuesday and make *bourekas*.³⁷ You know what *bourekas* is? The pastry they make.

Sara: Let's talk about your children? Who are your children? What are their names?

Eliezer: My oldest daughter's name is Rachel, my second daughter is Vicki, and my son, my youngest, David.

Sara: What can you say about them?

Eliezer: Rachel, she lives in Florida, in Tampa. She is married, and lives in Florida. Vicki, she is a teacher at the Hebrew Academy. My son [David] graduated from Georgia [Institute of] Tech[nology—Atlanta, Georgia]. He now buys houses, and renovates, and sells them. That is what he is doing now.

Sara: Do you have any grandchildren?

Eliezer: I have three grandchildren. I have a grandson, Happy Morris [sp], then is Denise, then is David Frank.

Sara: Let's talk about the community in Atlanta, the Jewish community. You said that when you arrived you contacted the Or VeShalom³⁸ congregation?

Eliezer: Yes, also the Jewish community . . . they was the ones that helped us until we got established, and then we make ourselves to pay for the others. I used to donate money for . . . what did they call it here . . . Federation. After 25 years, for those to celebrate, we have a reward. I went to the 25 years of service . . . donate to the Federation.

Sara: In what organizations have you been involved in, aside from the synagogue, and you donate money to the Federation?

had desecrated the Temple. The Maccabees wanted to re-dedicate the Temple altar to Jewish worship by rekindling the *menorah* but could only find one small jar of ritually pure olive oil. This oil continued to burn miraculously for eight days, enabling them to prepare new oil. The *menorah* with its eight branches commemorates this miracle.

³⁷ *Bourekas* are baked pastries that can be stuffed with a variety of fillings. Originally from Turkey, *bourekas* fall into the category of small savory pies common throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia. They are a favorite dish among Sephardic Jews, particularly on holidays and other celebratory occasions.

³⁸ Congregation Or VeShalom was established by refugees of the Ottoman Empire, namely from Turkey and the Isle of Rhodes. The congregation began in 1920 and was based at Central and Woodward Avenues until 1948 when it moved to a larger building on North Highland Road. The current building for OrVeshalom is on North Druid Hills Road.

Eliezer: We used to go, at the time it used to be the Jewish Center on Peachtree.³⁹ We used to take the children, and they have activities over there. We [are] members today, the [Marcus] Jewish [Community] Center.

Sara: What about your Judaism? How important is it to be Jewish, to stay Jewish?

Eliezer: Here is . . . the thing is . . . being Jewish is one thing, but sometimes, Jewish people make also mistakes. Not everybody is correct. That's part of life, you cannot correct those things.

Sara: For instance, what kind of mistakes?

Eliezer: I will say this. For instance, in World War II, a lot of Jews, they went and worked for the Germans . . . they volunteered for the Germans . . . that was a disgrace. Other Jews over here, they are not all good . . . like you have good people and bad people.

Sara: How helpful was the community to you when you arrived?

Eliezer: That was okay. They do the best they can.

Sara: What kind of things?

Eliezer: For instance, we don't have nothing . . . a total loss. The Jewish Federation, they help us to put on our feet, until we are able to work . . . until we can . . . that's why I feel like to those people . . . what they done to us.

Sara: Who were some of the first people you met when you first arrived in Atlanta?

Eliezer: The first people was from the Federation. There is Mickie Eisenberg [Krinsky], and her brother is Dr. Greenberg . . . what is the last name? I can't think of it . . . Irving Greenberg, I think his name. Anyhow, that's . . .

Sara: Do you have any friends here, people you know who had experiences similar to yours who also came from Greece, from Salonika?

Eliezer: No. There used to be . . . about 15 families over here.

Sara: From Salonika?

Eliezer: From Salonika, but they are all gone, they die. I think there may be one or two left.

Sara: How religious are you?

³⁹ The Jewish Educational Alliance operated from 1910 to 1948 on the site where the Atlanta- Fulton County Stadium was located. The JEA was once the hub of Jewish life in Atlanta. Families congregated there for social, educational, sports and cultural programs. The JEA ran camps and held classes to help some new residents learn to read and write English. For newcomers, it became a refuge, with programs to help them acclimate to a new home. The JEA stayed at that site until the late 1940's, when it evolved into the Atlanta Jewish Community Center and moved to Peachtree Street. It stayed there until 1998, when the building was sold and the center moved to Dunwoody. In 2000, it was renamed the 'Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta.'

Eliezer: Like I said, in my childhood, I used to go to services, and my wife used to go every Saturday. I say, “When we retire,” because of the job I have. I used to work on Saturday. She goes to the *shul* [Yiddish: synagogue] on Saturday. When I retire, we could together to go to the synagogue. But I lost them. I feel depressed. I have to go work . . . go to the shop. That’s my . . . that’s what I am now. I have two dogs, that’s part of my life now . . . two dogs and my children. Thank G-d, I have good children. They look after me. They call me five times a day to know how I feel.

Sara: Do you have something you want to tell your children, at this moment?

Eliezer: Yes. That’s my life. Thank G-d, they are so good to me. I have a blessing to them.

Sara: Do you have something you want to tell your grandchildren?

Eliezer: I love . . . that’s all I have . . . that’s all I have in the whole world, the children and my grandchildren.

Sara: I want to go back to your name, Eliezer Sotto. What is the origin of your last name?

Eliezer: I tell you, it’s very hard because here in the [United] States . . . to pronounce it . . . Eliezer Sotto. Some people “E-lize-er,” is not Eliezer. Then, Eli [French: pronounced “el-ee”] is French, Eli [pronounced “ee-lie”] is English. It doesn’t matter, as long as it’s the name, that’s fine.

Sara: Where does the name ‘Sotto’ come from?

Eliezer: That’s a Spanish name. Our ancestors, all the Jewish . . . Sephardic Jews, they all come from . . . their background from Spain. Then, 500 years ago, when they throw the Jews from Spain,⁴⁰ they went to Greece, to Turkey, to Amsterdam [Netherlands], to New York, they spread everywhere.

Sara: The Spanish name ‘Soto’ is spelled with one “T.” Do you know why yours is not?

Eliezer: I don’t have any idea what is the . . . why the two T’s are.

Sara: Do you know why you survived?

⁴⁰ Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile established the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, commonly known as the ‘Spanish Inquisition,’ in 1478. It was originally intended to ensure the orthodoxy of those who converted from Judaism and Islam. Those Jews who converted were called “*conversos*” (converts), and were regarded with deep suspicion by the tribunal. Eventually, all Jews who refused to convert were totally expelled from Spain in 1492. The figures vary dramatically from 800,000 to more modern figures of 40,000 (with about 40,000 Jews converting to avoid expulsion). The Jews immigrated first to Portugal (which in turn kicked them out in 1497), and then to North Africa. Some went to Italy, Greece and other places in Europe. These became the “Sephardim.” The “*conversos*” who remained in Spain were heavily persecuted, and, if accused and convicted of being a “crypto-Jew,” were often burned at the stake. Other minorities suffered as well.

Eliezer: A miracle. I survived five times from the gas chamber, so that . . . and also for the Jews that survived, also, that is a miracle . . . because the Germans . . . if their war could have stayed four, five months [longer], there would be no survivors. That's number one. Number two, if the Germans can win the war, you and me would not be here, so that is another miracle.

Sara: In your message to your children, you said that you love them. You speak several languages. Could you tell them that you love them in the languages you speak?

Eliezer: They know, they know.

Sara: Let's hear it.

Eliezer: *Te quiero mucho en mi corazon.* [Spanish: I love you very much in my heart.]

Sara: That's Spanish, Ladino. How about Greek?

Eliezer: *S'agapó pára.* [Greek: I love you.]

Sara: How about Italian?

Eliezer: *A molto bene cara mucho.* [Italian: Very well-loved; *mucho* is Spanish for a lot]

Sara: How about French?

Eliezer: *Non, j'ai oublié.* [French: No, I forgot] But . . . *Moi, je parle bien après la guerre, mais non, j'ai oublié. Je ne sais pas.* [French: Me, I spoke well after the war, but no, I forgot. I don't know.]

Sara: *Je vous aime?* [French: I love you.]

Eliezer: *Je vous aime beaucoup.* [French: I love you very much.]

Sara: What other languages, in what other language do you speak?

Eliezer: It has been 50 years. All those languages I learned through the war, I just got lost. Only if I hear somebody, I can pick it up a little bit. Otherwise, it's difficult . . . back.

Sara: Is there a song that you used to sing at other times in Ladino, for instance?

Eliezer: I can't recall now. I just . . . this is not. Since I lost my wife, I no have desires.

Sara: But this is for your children.

Eliezer: I understand . . . children knows me, the way I am now. It's just . . .

Sara: Do you know *Avinu Malkenu*?⁴¹

Eliezer: *Si. Estas el son canciones de religion. Lo siento todos dias.* [Spanish: Yes. These are

⁴¹ Hebrew for "Our Father, Our King." This is a prayer recited during services on *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, the Jewish New Year, and *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Repentance, as well as on the Ten Days of Repentance from *Rosh Ha-Shanah* through *Yom Kippur*. Each line of the prayer begins with the words "Avinu Malkeinu," and is then followed by varying phrases.

the songs of my religion. I will remember them/feel them all my days.] But, *yo no se cantar. Tus puedes ser sabes. No tampoco.* [Spanish: I cannot sing. You can understand. Not anymore.]

Sara: Do you have something you want to tell future generations, as a survivor?

Eliezer: A future generation . . . is to peace in a war, also in Israel, and now what is happening here in the [United] States. This is very serious, what's happened now. I hope some miracles. The way the Jews live is with miracles. I hope a miracle can come to solve these problems all over the world. See I have . . . in my business . . . I have all those counselors from Israel who come to United States. The first thing I ask them, "You are an Israeli, *sabra*?⁴² Tell me . . . when the Jews are going to have peace." He say, "I am sorry to tell you. They say there is no answer to that. Jews live on miracles. That's the answer." You believe that. All the time . . . like for instance, there were many miracles . . . how I survived from the gas so many times. They take me by my hand to the gas chamber, and they left me, and grabbed somebody else. So many times, miracles happen in this world. That's how the Jews live now, with miracles.

Sara: Thank you very much.

Eliezer: You are welcome.

<End Disk 1>

INTERVIEW ENDS

⁴² Hebrew for a Jewish person born in Israel.