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Memories in Translation, Part I: Oskar Gerber Testimonial and the Italian Holocaust

Edited by Valentina Concu and Wesley R. Bishop
Translated by Valentina Concu

Introduction:

Studies of the Holocaust have always been fostered by testimony from survivors of Nazi Fascism. These survivor accounts have helped scholars with the unpleasant, but vital, task of giving shape to the horrific death machine put in place from 1933 to 1939 by the Nazis behind the gates of numerous death camps. Because of Germany's role as the main perpetrator of the genocide, the history of the Holocaust often overlaps with the history of the German nation, and with the destiny of countless Jewish people whom the Nazis imprisoned and killed in the many concentration camps scattered throughout central Europe. Any discussion on the Holocaust can, however, benefit from the stories of those survivors who experienced the waves of discrimination and persecution in different contexts, as fascism spread in Europe in the early twentieth century. Many of these non-German stories come from the instances where the Italian fascist regime confined and harassed its own Jewish people during the Holocaust era. According to historian Simon Levis Sullam, much of the historiography of the Italian war era selectively focuses on the Italian people who fought in the Resistance on the side of the Allies, while very little attention has been dedicated to the persecution of the Italian Jewish population.⁶³ Despite this attempt to ignore and avoid the Italian fascist Anti-Semitism during the

⁶³ Simon Levis Sullam, *The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews in Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

period between the declaration of the first racial laws in 1938 and the fall of [Benito] Mussolini in 1945, Italy's role in the Jewish Holocaust has been well documented.⁶⁴ As Michele Sarfatti claims, "at a moment still not properly identified between the end of 1935 and the summer of 1936, the anti-Jewish question became for the regime an issue of internal policy they could no longer put off."⁶⁵ From that moment on, the Italian Jewish community became the center of numerous attacks aimed to disrupt the lives of many. Not long after that, the fate of many Italian Jews under the Fascist regime meshed with that of those foreign Jewish people who had entered Italy while trying to escape the Nazis in central European countries such as Hungary and Poland. The testimonies that we will present in this section, "Memories in Translation," recount the journeys of two of those non-Italian Jews: Oskar Gerber and Hertha Gerber. Although their stories started in two different cities (Budapest and Bielsko,⁶⁶ respectively), they both ended up confined in the southern concentration camp of Ferramonti. The Shoah Foundation in 1998 first recorded their testimonies in Milan and have since made the documents available to the public through the foundation's website. To our knowledge this is the first time that these interviews have been made available to the public in English. The English translations were commissioned in 2019 by one of Oskar's relatives, and were initially meant for private use only. However, the significance and relevance of their testimonies called for the present piece. We at the *North Meridian Review* offer these stories, slated for publication in the first two issues (Oskar in 2020 and Hertha in 2021) to contribute to the field of Italian Holocaust studies.

The testimonies of Oskar and Hertha are part of those stories that highlight the two faces that Italy displayed during wartime. According to an article in the *New York Times*⁶⁷, many Italian and

⁶⁴ Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews: German-Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy 1922–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue and Survival* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Renzo De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History* (New York: Enigma Books, 2001); Liliana Picciotto, *Il libro della memoria. Gli ebrei deportati in Italia (1943–1945)* (Milan: Mursia, 2002).

⁶⁵ Michele Sarfatti, *Jewish in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

⁶⁶ Bielsko is today the western part of the city Bielsko-Biala in Poland. It used to be an independent town until 1951.

⁶⁷ The article appeared in print as "Scholars Reconsidering Italy's Treatment of Jews in the Nazi Era," *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 2010, p. A28.

foreign Jewish people experienced firsthand the puzzling behavior of the Italian Fascist regime. Italy enforced its own racial laws in 1938. This meant Jewish children were expelled from school, Jewish people lost their employment and property, and Jewish people could no longer hold public office. Despite this, the regime did not encourage any physical abuse against Jewish citizens and did not commit any executions in its own concentration camps. There was also a very strong anti-fascist resistance movement, the Partisans, which fought not only against the Fascists, but also against the Germans when they occupied northern Italy in 1943. Further, many Italians often risked their own lives to hide Jewish people in their homes and brought them much-needed supplies such as food. Many scholars have recognized the ambiguity of the Italian regime, and this ambiguity is also present in Oskar's and Hertha's testimonies. Oskar's testimony, specifically, sometimes depicts Italy as a benevolent society that helped him and his family escape certain death in the German concentration camps. Hence, while his testimony should be seen as a valid recounting and as a valuable resource to better understand Nazi Fascism, one should not forget Italy's responsibility in taking away the freedom of many of its Jewish citizens. Oskar's and Hertha's testimonies should, therefore, be read keeping in mind Italy's explicit collusion with Germany's horrific anti-Jewish policies. Oskar's resentment for the Hungarian government is also still very present in his words, and while it is important to recognize the role of Hungary in the persecution of Jewish people, the complexity of the situation should make anyone refrain from labeling entire nationalities as guilty or innocent, as Oskar does when talks about Hungarians (guilty) and Italians (innocent).

Oskar's and Hertha's testimonies are, ultimately, collections of memories in which the voices of those who experienced these events guide readers on a journey of resistance and hope during one of the darkest periods of European history. It is essential to see both their experiences as broader stories of humanity because they belong to a time when the humanity of many was consistently and systematically denied and annihilated. For this reason, Oskar's and Hertha's testimonies are also

relatable to our own moment, as the issues of persecution and discrimination are very much present in our modern society. Therefore, this interview is a document that offers lessons for readers in the present, especially now when many of the modern European nations are on the verge of returning to authoritarian right-wing rule.⁶⁸

Interviewer: I'm Lisa Sacerdote, we are in Milan, in Italy, and today we are interviewing Mister Oskar Gerber. Today is April 14th, 1998 and the interview will be in Italian. Could you tell me your name?

Oskar Gerber: Oskar Gerber.

Interviewer: When were you born?

Oskar Gerber: March 12th, 1911.

Interviewer: And how old are you?

Oskar Gerber: 87 years old.

Interviewer: Where were you born?

Oskar Gerber: In Budapest, Hungary.

Interviewer: How big was your family?

Oskar Gerber: I'm the firstborn. There was my mom, my dad, myself, and my sister who died last year, Rosi, Elena, and then Ladislao, and then Agnese.

Interviewer: Could you tell me the names of your parents?

Oskar Gerber: My dad's name was Salomone. My mom's name was Enzia.

Interviewer: And the last name of your mom?

Oskar Gerber: Rosenberg.

Interviewer: Do you know how your parents met?

⁶⁸ The following translation has been edited for clarity and length. For the original document in Italian, please see the Shoah Foundation's archives at the University of Southern California.

Oskar Gerber: They met in Budapest. My mom was one year old when she came to Hungary; she went to school in Hungary. My dad came to Budapest when he was 20–21 years old, and he met my mother. He got married, they got married.

Interviewer: At home, which languages did you all speak?

Oskar Gerber: So, at home, at my grandmother's place, Swiss German—so German from Switzerland—or Yiddish, because they didn't speak Hungarian well and with my parents [they spoke] Hungarian. Hungarian, German, [and] Yiddish, as we needed.

Interviewer: In which part of Budapest did you live? Do you remember that?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, the city, in Budapest, and the street, so I was born at 25 Dobosi-úta-- úta means street. Then 31 Színháza-úta, úta means street again, in Slavic "uliza."

Interviewer: In the part of the city where you lived, were there other Jewish people?

Oskar Gerber: Yeah, it was a part where a lot of Jewish people lived. And in Budapest, 300,000 Jewish people lived there. Of those, almost nobody is still alive. Because of those 'good Hungarians,' they were so good that they exterminated all the Jewish people.

Interviewer: What was your father's job?

Oskar Gerber: Furs, but also tailoring, for men and women. In Hungary, you would work three or four months with furs, but the year has twelve months, you need to live, so he also added tailoring, tailoring for both men and women.

Interviewer: Did your father travel for work?

Oskar Gerber: Yeah, of course, he had to.

Interviewer: To which school did you go to?

Oskar Gerber: So, I went for the first two years of elementary school to a district school. The rest, the other four years of elementary school, and middle school, to a public school. And then to high school, to a business academy that wasn't founded by the State, although it was public, but [which was founded] by some Jewish businessmen.

Interviewer: So, you didn't go to a Jewish school the first years of school?

Oskar Gerber: No, no. The first years I did not, and then it didn't work because, you know, every day, scuffles here and there. My mom saw that too. Sometimes I was the victim, sometimes I was the perpetrator. One couldn't go to school anymore, for every little thing you would hear "dirty Jew." And then one would get into fights right and left. Then [at the Jewish school] it was only Jewish people, it was home.

Interviewer: What were the differences between a 'normal' school and a Jewish school?

Oskar Gerber: Oh well, the no-Jewish, but the Christian school, in one week they would teach one hour of religion. A rabbi would come and teach us the first basic things of Judaism. There [in the Jewish school] everything was based on the Bible, the Old Testament, and then the others, you know?

Interviewer: In Budapest, when you went to the Jewish school, did you see other non-Jewish people?

Oskar Gerber: Sure, but not in my class. In my first two years of elementary school, and in the high school, in the business academy.

Interviewer: How were the relationships with these people?

Oskar Gerber: Terrible. Terrible. I told you, every day with scuffles, scuffles. One of my dearest friends, during the war in Spain, before World War II, he was there and he worked with his uncle, now I don't remember if it was in Barcelona or in Madrid. He was a... how do you say it?... he was a disabled person because a trolley had cut one of his legs. And he would lean on me, he would take [his prosthetic leg] out because it was a piece of wood from a broom... [and he would hit the bullies in these fights].

Interviewer: Mister Gerber, how was the Jewish community in Budapest?

Oskar Gerber: Very active. In Hungary, there were 1 million Jews in total, and three hundred thousand only in Budapest, the capital, the rest was all over Hungary... five thousand; three thousand; ten thousand... depending on the city. In my district, where I was born and I lived, there were five synagogues. And then in all the districts, the entire city of Budapest, I think, there were seventy or eighty synagogues, bigger and smaller ones.

Interviewer: Did you go to the synagogue?

Oskar Gerber: Of course, a little bit less after I was done with school because I didn't have time, I had to work. But we went there on Friday evenings. We would finish early, at 3 or 4 pm, and then we went to the synagogue.

Interviewer: Which synagogue was that?

Oskar Gerber: Mmm, the progressive ones, because there were two types of synagogues. The Hasidic ones and the progressive ones. We went to the progressive ones.

Interviewer: Did you also do Shabbat at home?

Oskar Gerber: Shabbat at home...my mom had the candles. My dad would say the Kiddush, or my grandparents [would while] they were alive. The food was exactly how [it was] prescribed by the laws, the hygienic laws of our region, you know? Meat could not be eaten with dairy, and vice versa, because if you eat dairy, butter, milk, you have to wait two hours until you can eat meat. But, if you eat meat, you have to wait eight hours to eat the other.

Interviewer: So, your parents were practicing Jewish people?

Oskar Gerber: Practicing, yes, at home the food was strictly orthodox. There were two sinks, one for the dairy and one for the meat, and they would not mix anything. You could not do that.

Interviewer: Do you remember your Bar Mitzvah?

Oskar Gerber: Of course, yes.

Interviewer: What do you remember about it? Could you tell me?

Oskar Gerber: Oh well, all our friends were there, relatives and friends. But I did it at school... No at the Hasidic temple, I remember. But also Christians, my Christian friends came too, to assist me, to visit me, they attended for the entire time until I was done with my prayers. And then my father's friends, there were a lot of Christians, customers [from my dad's business] also. The temple was full.

Interviewer: Who helped you prepare for the Bar Mitzvah?

Oskar Gerber: That was Doctor Krener Abraham, he was the one who prepared me, also for Italian, the basics, the first ...steps for Italian, for German, and for English. He helped me a lot, also, with Hungarian.

Interviewer: How long did you study for the Bar Mitzvah? Do you remember it?

Oskar Gerber: Oh, one year, one year more or less, except for the rest days. On Friday-- on Friday and Saturday-- I did not study. [I studied from] Sunday until Friday.

Interviewer: How old were you when you had your Bar Mitzvah?

Oskar Gerber: 13. You cannot do it before that, or after. After you can, maybe if you were sick, or... I don't know... someone died in the family...

Interviewer: Mister Gerber, do you have any memories from World War I?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, yes, when I was a child, the misery. The misery, it was terrible. There wasn't any bombing like in World War II, because of the shortage. My mom back then rented a cart with two horses, and she would go to the farmers to buy stuff, there was the black market, she went to buy stuff for us, for the grandparents, for my aunts and my uncles... but after that, there wasn't anything to buy. At least they would sell bread, 200 g of bread per day, butter, meat, so, nothing special, so one would not starve. Then I remember, the 'Spanish flu,' it was terrible. And every morning, the garbage trucks would come to collect the bodies. And I saw from my balcony how they would pick them up and throw them on top of each other, like old rags, nothing, like old rags, all piled up. fifty, sixty, thirty.⁶⁹ And these trucks would go around until they were full. And then they would burn them. It was terrible.

⁶⁹ Due to Oskar's age, and also the informality of spoken language, sometimes during the interview he jumps around with numbers and dates. Part of this is, undoubtedly, due to trying to remember and recount his life in Italian which was not his first language.

Interviewer: Did you always live in Budapest?

Oskar Gerber: During the war, yes. But after that, Communism came, 1919... until 1917, the Hungarian communists were getting together, especially those that were more active. Russians that spoke Hungarian, because they were from those parts in Hungary— Satmar— where my grandfather from my father's side was from. And... wait... I lost my train of thought--

Interviewer: So, what we were saying, you didn't always live in Budapest, right?

Oskar Gerber: After the war, Communism came to power in Hungary. So, my dad was rich, you could not stay there, because they would take all the rich people, all the well-off people, and they would deport them. They would kill them in the forests, and in their prisons. Then we went, on foot, from Budapest to Vienna, 250 Km. We would walk in the night. Further, my mom was pregnant with my second sister, you know? Elena. And during the day, we would hide in some caves. I think we arrived almost at the border, then my dad gave a lot of money to a boatman because there was... [the Leitha River]... my dad paid this man that brought us to the Austrian side. And so, we saved ourselves. I also went to school in Austria, in Vienna, one of [the Jewish] schools.

Interviewer: The trip from Budapest to Vienna, how long did it take?

Oskar Gerber: On foot...ah, I think 10 days, because we would walk only at night when people could not see us. There was a lot going on, on the streets and in the countryside. We could not take trains because they would take us off the trains immediately. And then, when we arrived in Vienna, my dad had a lot of customers there, so he started working as soon as we got there. Then, during the war, during World War I, my dad worked with some Austrians, and then also with some Italians, from Trieste, a banker, [named] Castiglioni, and then...wait, another one... I saw his last name because it is the same as a big fur seller around here... Meloni... he was a banker. They financed my dad back then because he would do some services for the state, for the military, you know? For instance, for the Hungarian alpine, the alpine hunters, they needed the interior parts for their clothes, so they would need to buy it, they would buy the raw material to be tailored. After the war...who knows, he stayed and he still worked. It was our luck to be able to go to Italy and get help from them.

Interviewer: What did you feel when you left Budapest?

Oskar Gerber: A great pain. I spent almost all my childhood there. There were some breaks in between, but always in Budapest. A lot of friends, Christians, and Jews, female friends, such as Goldstein, Magda, Rose... I don't remember... it was seventy-five years ago, almost eighty.

Interviewer: Where did you live in Vienna?

Oskar Gerber: We went to live in the second district, it was called "Hotel New York" in the Kleine Sperrgasse, from Tabostraße, on the side. We stayed in the hotel for the entire time of our stay in Vienna.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in Vienna?

Oskar Gerber: Oh well. Wait, so... we escaped from Budapest in... May, from May until November, November or December. So by staying among Germans, Austrians, I forgot Hungarian. Because there, they would always speak German, I mean, it was a German dialect, but it was more German... Viennese, the dialect of Vienna. So, I forgot a lot of Hungarian, [which] I needed to learn again.⁷⁰

Interviewer: To which school did you go in Vienna?

Oskar Gerber: The Jewish school. Always the Jews school, it was religious.

Interviewer: Was it different from the one in Budapest?

Oskar Gerber: Of course, it was different, because it was more German than Yiddish. More than anything it was Viennese, the dialect from Vienna. But the teaching was in German, pure German, with some dialectal traits.

Interviewer: Did you go to a synagogue in Vienna?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, on the Seitenstettengasse.⁷¹ On the other side of Vienna, because the second district of Vienna it was on one side of the Danube. After crossing a bridge, you arrive at the Rottenturm-Straße, the first street on the right, going up the stairs, there is... or there was, now I don't know... the biggest temple of Vienna, the biggest Jewish temple in Vienna, and it was called Seitenstettengasse-- Seitenstettengasse Temple—in which the main cantor was the father-in-law of my uncle. He was an ex-opera singer, and then he became the major cantor of the temple. There was also a smaller temple where I went to school, like a chapel, Seitenstettegasse. The ritual bath for the Jewish women. You know, before getting married, women must go through this ritual.

Interviewer: Do you remember when you went back to Budapest?

Oskar Gerber: In 1922.

Interviewer: Were you happy about going back to Budapest?

Oskar Gerber: Of course, it was my hometown. And there hadn't been any murders yet. Everything changed afterwards. But I did not speak their language anymore. But after a couple of months, I learned it again. I remembered it again.

Interviewer: When you came back, did you go back to school?

Oskar Gerber: Went back to school...

Tries to remember exact year.

.... Oh yeah, the Jewish school.

⁷⁰ Oskar is referring here to the eventual move back to Hungary he would make, and the need to relearn the language he had forgotten during his family's forced migrations.

⁷¹ The Stadttempel (in English "City Prayer House"), also called the Seitenstettengasse Temple, is the main synagogue of Vienna, Austria. It is located in the Innere Stadt 1st district on the Seitenstettengasse 4.

Interviewer: How old were you when you finished at Jewish school?

Oskar Gerber: When I was fourteen and a half. In the least year, the fourth year of middle school, I went to high school. I wasn't quite fifteen yet.

Interviewer: And how long was high school?

Oskar Gerber: Four years. I graduated when I was nineteen.

Interviewer: Did you like this school?

Oskar Gerber: No. No. I did not like the professors.

Interviewer: What was it you did not like about it?

Oskar Gerber: Oh well, every opportunity they would have, they would use it to attack me. 'You Jews,' you are the 'others.' You are the others, because we were 'different' from them. I don't have good... I have very bad memories of Budapest.

Interviewer: Do you remember anything in particular?

Oskar Gerber: We would fight and beat each other almost every day. What more do you want to know?

Interviewer: And the professors?

Oskar Gerber: Oh no, the professors no. One of them told me because I would always eat a lot... I think he taught stenography and dactylography. It was very boring, the way they would teach, it was a one-hundred- or 150-year-old system. Gabsberger was his name. So, I got bored and I had my snacks I brought from home, and I would start eating them, and the newspaper about sports was on the shelf in front of me, so I would eat and read. But he noticed, so he came behind me, going through the chairs in the room. He saw what I was doing, and I did not notice it. He beat me twice in the back of my head and I could not hear anything for half an hour.

Interviewer: Did any of your professors ever mention the fact that you were--

Oskar Gerber: Yes, the class leader, he taught... I think he taught... French and Hungarian history. There were others too, one who taught Mathematics and Physics. The others were neutral, we can say that, no pro-Jews, but neutral.

Interviewer: How old were you when you finished school?

Oskar Gerber: Almost nineteen. Eighteen and a half. Eighteen and a half, yes, March...so, July..so, March, April, May, June, July, so five months after that.

Interviewer: Did you go to college?

Oskar Gerber: Oh, I couldn't do that; it is not that I didn't want to. There were racial laws back them.

Interviewer: But you would have wanted to continue?

Oskar Gerber: Business and commerce, you know? And the commerce is connected also to the languages. And I had already an advantage, actually two, because if I went to the commerce academy, I would have skipped the first year at the university, you know?

Interviewer: Did you like your job?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, I did, I knew that I had to learn if I wanted to survive, you know? And that is why when I arrived in Italy... but this is another long story. So, after two months I had already thirty-six employees. Not only internally, but also externally, they would get paid based on how much they would work. And it went pretty well. They arrested me when the war broke out. My dad, my mom, and my sisters, they all stayed at the shop, as I was still there. Nobody would bother us, everybody would help...until the Germans came. Then it was a life threat.⁷²

Interviewer: Could you tell me when did you and your family decide to leave Budapest?

Oskar Gerber: In 1938.

Interviewer: Why?

Oskar Gerber: Because it became impossible to stay there. It was dangerous even to go out. Pogroms after pogroms. Do you know what 'pogrom' means? Everybody knew me, everybody knew that I was Jewish and not Christian. What could I have done alone by myself if four or five people would attack me and maybe take out a knife? I couldn't have done anything. I was alone...with my parents... my brother was younger than me, he still went to middle school, second year. He was a young boy still. And my mom? There was nothing we could do.

Interviewer: Had the situation in 1938 become worse for Jewish people?

Oskar Gerber: Day by day. It was impossible.

Interviewer: Did something bad happen to any of your relatives or friends?

Oskar Gerber: Oh, when I came back, I didn't find anyone anymore. The dad of someone would tell me 'Oskar, is that you? Pietro is gone, they burnt him, I would run home and cry. I couldn't stand that anymore, you know? I went back in 1948 to see what was remaining, because we left our shop there, we hid our goods, gold, gems, everything we could hide. We sold all our goods before leaving with nothing. There wasn't anything anymore. The counters of the shop were gone. They found our stuff, and I know who it was. But I could not do anything.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to come to Italy?

⁷² Here Oksar jumps ahead in time and begins discussing his memories of Italy in World War II.

Oskar Gerber: Oh well, my dad worked with Italian customers, in Trieste, in Fiume, in Padua, and in Mestre. He had customers [there]. He wanted to try it out in Italy, otherwise, we would have gone somewhere else. In Switzerland, but I didn't like that idea, because Switzerland was too close to the Germans.

Interviewer: Was it possible to leave Hungary?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, by buying some passports... not fake ones, true Polish passports, paying what we had to pay, you know? With them, we were able to leave, not as Hungarians but as Polish people. In Italy, we went to the Italian embassy in Budapest for a visa, and they said, 'You don't need one. Why do you want to go?' [We said], 'To take some baths,' I didn't say that I was going there to work. [I said] to take some baths because I had rheumatism arthritis...and they said, 'Yes, you can go.' And we all came to Italy.

Interviewer: Where did you buy those passports?

Oskar Gerber: Because with a Hungarian passport, I would not be allowed to leave. First of all, I needed to show that I had paid all the taxes I needed to pay, that I served in the military, but then, knowing that I'm a Jew, that would have been impossible. A lot of my friends who died were deported to collect landmines in Ukraine, and they would be blown away, you know?

Interviewer: Mister Gerber, from whom did you buy these Polish passports?

Oskar Gerber: Oh.. They were... what were they called... lawyers and they would do that, of course, they would make money, and not just a little. They probably would split 50:50 among them. Do you know how much money my in-laws paid for four passports? My wife told me, 25,000 gold dollars for each passport. 100,000 gold dollars for four passports. And today, one dollar back then is 20 dollars today. Do you know what that means?

Interviewer: What about your passports?

Oskar Gerber: Oh, ours weren't that expensive. I don't remember, all together it was 10,000 dollars.

Interviewer: But you don't know who did these passports for you, right?

Oskar Gerber: Well no, but I know one thing. I could have gone to the embassy to renew them because they were legal. Probably the embassy in Budapest knew about it and it was ok with that.

Interviewer: So, with whom did you leave Budapest? You and then, who went with you?

Oskar Gerber: My entire family. Mom, dad, my three sisters, and two brothers. I mean, my brother and me.

Interviewer: What did you and your family take with you?

Oskar Gerber: The things that we wore. Maybe we had like 800,000 dollars left. A little bit of gold, a gold watch, a gold cigarette holder. My mom had some jewelry, earrings that my daughter wears today.

Interviewer: What did you leave in Budapest, what did you hide?

Oskar Gerber: We hid stuff underground. Gold, jewelry, and then the goods of the shop, we sold a little bit of them, and some we brought them to Italy, as personal items, my mom and my three sisters did that, and those goods were valuable because they were furs, Persian goods, mink furs, and fox furs. With that, we started our business again.

Interviewer: Where did you go to live in Italy?

Oskar Gerber: In Milan. First in a hotel. In Agnello Street, there was ... at the corner with... how do you call the street close to the Milan Cathedral? Venice Avenue... yes... Venice Avenue. There was a hotel there, Agnello Hotel. We stayed there for two to three months until we met a Hungarian that was going back to Spain. He had sold his house, he had sold actually his severance pay because he couldn't sell the walls, those were owned by the landlord. And we stayed there even after the war, during the war, and after that, in 1948 or 1949, my parents found a house to buy on... wait, it is close to here.... My three sisters and my little brother still live there. Well, when my wife comes, she will tell me the name of the street.⁷³

Interviewer: How was the trip?

Oskar Gerber: The trip was twenty-four to thirty-six hours. It wasn't a direct trip, it was a local one, it would stop in Budapest. When we were arriving at the border with Yugoslavia, in Kotoriba, the train would stop everywhere. Also when we were traveling through Yugoslavia. Then in Trieste, we changed the train and it was a direct one. We arrived there in the evening, and in the morning of the day after, we arrived [in Milan].

Interviewer: How was the trip?

Oskar Gerber: Oh well, we were very anxious because we were afraid that they would take us off the train, you know? In Hungary. In Yugoslavia, we were more relaxed, but you never knew. The Croatians, they were Jews-haters, you know?

Interviewer: Did you speak any Italian at all?

Oskar Gerber: I didn't know much, I used what I had learned at school first. I would use a lot of infinitives.⁷⁴ I did my best. And then, after 4 months, I started speaking correctly.

Interviewer: Did you start working again in Milan?

⁷³ Oskar seems to have trouble here remembering due to his attempts to recall the street names and buildings.

⁷⁴ In Italian, verbs need to be conjugated for every form of the pronoun. Using the infinitive forms with the personal pronouns is incorrect but still understandable. For instance, the infinitive in Italian of "to speak" is "parlare." The correct conjugation for "I speak" would be "io parlo," instead of "io parlare."

Oskar Gerber: Yes. So, when we found the house, we rented all the backyard and the first floor. We were like thirty-six workers. We made it into an article in the newspapers. Back then, the fascist government didn't give money to import goods. All the goods that arrived came through the black market. Goat and sheep's fur, material from Abyssinia. The quality was average, but we had to work with that. Bunny and hare fur, everything that we could put our hands on. But after we opened... a couple of days after, two or three weeks after, I had already thirty-six employees. They buried me with orders, and I would travel to Genoa, to Bologna, to Turin, to show the samples we made, and customers would put the orders in.

Interviewer: And what did your sisters and your brother do?

Oskar Gerber: They would help in the shop. The oldest and my younger brother. Agnese was still going to school. The oldest...no, she worked at the shop... the second oldest was a dental technician, and she worked during the war, all those years, she worked at the Vipla. They knew she was Jewish, but she was unreplaceable.

Interviewer: What about your mom?

Oskar Gerber: My mom... well, she was a housewife. She was too old, and she started getting sick.

Interviewer: What about your dad? Was he still working?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, yes, he did. In the administration, because he was also old, you know? My mom had a paralysis, you know, her mouth was on the side here. I didn't want to see it...

Interviewer: When you and your family arrived in Italy, did you go to visit the Jewish community in Milan?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, right away. We signed up as regular members. We reserved the spots at the temple, the big temple there.

Interviewer: Were there some differences between the Jewish community in Hungary and the one in Italy?

Oskar Gerber: Of course, because we were Ashkenazi Jewish people. So, we would pray and speak in Hebrew, not in Yiddish, in Yiddish was the translation... Austrian-Hungarian-German. Here they were like the Sephardi Jews. But they would also depend on German.

Interviewer: Were there any other Jewish Hungarians in Milan?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, yes. There were a lot of them. But almost nobody could leave Italy.

Interviewer: Do you remember what happened in 1938 when they introduced the racial laws?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, of course. First of all, my younger sister and my younger brother, they were expelled from school. Everyone. I wasn't going to school anymore, one of my sisters was working, the other one was working at the shop. Then all my Jewish friends lost their jobs. They were CDOs

in the banks, professors at the University, singers at the Scala.⁷⁵ There was this [man named] Veneziani. Veneziano or Veneziani, I don't remember, he was the director of the choir at the Scala. And then singers, Ghildingorin, who was a famous bass player. Now, if he is still alive, I'm sure he works in the Netherlands, in Ajax or Amsterdam. I saw him twice while I was going to London with the train... back then you would take the train because the Jewish people were powered by propellers, and not by reactions.⁷⁶ Once I saw a memorial for the fallen Jewish people here in Linate. But the thing that I saw there, it was terrible. Hands all over the place, I felt I was about to pass out at some point. But a lot of them have died there. Only a few survived. Then I started going to London by plane, because, you know, with the train, it would take twenty-three or twenty-four hours. You have to go through Switzerland, northern France, or through western Germany along the Rhine. Then the Netherlands, the port of Rotterdam, the Baltic Sea, and then you would arrive in Harwich.⁷⁷

Interviewer: When they introduced the racial laws, did your work change? Could you still work?

Oskar Gerber: Nobody would bother me. I would tell my employees 'keep working.' Once a federal employee from Milan came to visit us. Our neighbors, and the owners of the shops around us, they would care for us and they would give us great information. And they came to see and what they found was almost a factory, and we would work night and day. And they would say 'good people, good people.' And so, we worked, we worked for all the duration of the war, until the Germans came.

Interviewer: But when they passed an ordinance to expel all the foreigner Jewish people...

Oskar Gerber: Oh, that was only on paper.

Interviewer: What happened?

Oskar Gerber: They decided on a census.

Interviewer: And nothing changed?

Oskar Gerber: Nothing. On the papers, you wouldn't have any rights, but practically nothing really changed.

Interviewer: But weren't you afraid that something would happen?

Oskar Gerber: I was afraid when we would see a lot of Germans. I told my mom, 'Look, this doesn't look good, come up, bring the goods and we will do what we can.' And they came, unfortunately not with all the goods.⁷⁸ My dad would say, he was annoyed, that we couldn't leave a shop without goods. At least we should have left the samples. But those samples, in 1943, there were those famous bombings all over Milan, you couldn't leave them there, because the roof of the

⁷⁵ La Scala is an opera house in Milan, Italy. The theatre was inaugurated on August 3, 1778, and was originally known as the Nuovo Regio Ducale Teatro alla Scala.

⁷⁶ It is not entirely clear what Oskar means by this phrase. Perhaps he is being poetic to make a larger point? Perhaps it is a phrase or idea lost in translation as he recounted this story in Italian?

⁷⁷ Harwich is a town in Essex, England, and one of the Haven ports, located on the coast with the North Sea to the east.

⁷⁸ It is not clear, entirely, who Oskar is referring to with "they" and "goods" here.

house would burn, and we were also on the last floor. Nothing happened but they could not survive at all. Then they were afraid. My mom, my dad, and I... we were already in Gandino.⁷⁹ And my 3 sisters and my little brother, they came immediately.

Interviewer: You never thought in 1938 to leave Italy?

Oskar Gerber: No, no one could do that.

Interviewer: Even with the ordinance?

Oskar Gerber: Listen... yes, there was this ordinance... and they would give 3,000 or 4,000 liras to everyone with a foreign passport, with five or six passports, that would have been a lot of money, but nobody would do that because people would know that we were Jewish. The Swiss, France, let's not talk about France. England, nothing.

Interviewer: No country wanted the Jewish people?

Oskar Gerber: No, no. It was impossible.

Interviewer: So, Mister Gerber, you were saying that in 1938 Italy introduced the racial laws and the decree of expulsion.

Oskar Gerber: Yes.

Interviewer: And you remained in Italy?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, we couldn't go anywhere else. But nobody would touch us, we had more than thirty-six employees, internal and external. There was no reason for us to leave.

Interviewer: Did the relationships with the non-Jewish people change?

Oskar Gerber: No, they did not. Look, Italy was an exception, like Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. See, the king of Denmark, when the Germans invaded Denmark, he was the first to put a Star of David on his chest, a yellow one. And nobody could touch him. And the Danish people helped Jewish kids to escape to Sweden during the night with the ferries. And Italy was the only country in southern and central Europe that did the same, maybe even more than them.

Interviewer: Mister Gerber, do you remember what happened in 1940?

Oskar Gerber: Oh, well, I remember that the war broke at 10 am and at 11 am they arrested me.⁸⁰

Interviewer: Do you remember that day? Could you tell me more about it?

⁷⁹ Gandino is a commune in the Province of Bergamo in the Italian region of Lombardy, located about seventy kilometers northeast of Milan and about twenty kilometers northeast of Bergamo.

⁸⁰ When the war broke, the Fascists started arresting those Jewish people which they considered the most "dangerous" for the regime. That is why Oskar's mother and sisters were not deported to a concentration camp.

Oskar Gerber: Oh, well, the Jewish people were treated like the other prisoners and put in those cars and you couldn't really see anything. You could see through the bars, the normal people, and [then] we arrived at San Vittore.⁸¹

Interviewer: Where were you on the day that you were arrested?

Oskar Gerber: At home. At 4 am they came to take me. For five minutes. But those five minutes became five years.

Interviewer: What did they tell you?

Oskar Gerber: 'Come with us,' they said, 'it is just a formality, five minutes.' Then I said, 'But now? I can come in the morning, or at noon, as you want. Or you can come to pick me up.' 'No, no, come now.' Then I knew what was about to happen.

Interviewer: So, you weren't expecting to be arrested...

Oskar Gerber: When they came home, yes. But before that, no, I wasn't.

Interviewer: Who arrested you? Who was it?

Oskar Gerber: The guards from San Fedele... I don't remember the name.

Interviewer: How old were you when they arrested you?

Oskar Gerber: thirty... no, I was twenty-seven.

Interviewer: Where did they take you?

Oskar Gerber: I was in San Vittore for twenty-three days.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what happened as soon as you arrived in San Vittore?

Oskar Gerber: They took us first to take our fingerprints, then we had to change clothes, take a shower. After that, we could have our clothes back. They brought us to the second area, where the political prisoners were imprisoned. Among us there were a lot of anti-fascists and Christians already incarcerated. And we stayed there until they deported me to Eboli, in Campania.

Interviewer: But these twenty-three days in San Vittore, how were the days in there?

Oskar Gerber: We called each other 'comrade.' We talked to each other, they were British people, Germans, French people, Austrians, other Hungarians, and Polish people.

⁸¹ San Vittore is a prison in the city center of Milan, Italy. Its construction started in 1872 and opened on July 7, 1879. During the German occupation in World War II (1943–1945), the prison was partly subject to German jurisdiction, with the SS in control of one of the wings. The prison gained notoriety during the war through the inhumane treatment of inmates by the SS guards and the torture carried out there.

Interviewer: How many Jewish people were there?

Oskar Gerber: Almost everybody was Jewish. And three or four Christians. French and Polish people, and two British people.

Interviewer: In San Vittore, what did you eat?

Oskar Gerber: Oh, I ate in the tavern, paying, I could not eat what they gave to us.

Interviewer: Whom did you pay?

Oskar Gerber: The tavern. I had money with me. I had to deposit all my valuable things, my watch, my ring, little gold things. A Parker Pen, and another golden pen, that was also a Parker Pen.

Interviewer: So, that was the black market in San Vittore?

Oskar Gerber: No, no, you didn't need it. I would buy all the things that I needed at the tavern. Paying. I didn't write a check, but I signed an authorization that they could take the money from my account, you know?

Interviewer: Was this tavern authorized to sell food to you?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, it was. The prisoners could go there, pay, and eat.

Interviewer: What did you buy?

Oskar Gerber: Things you could eat. Meat, bread, beef, pork, and veal. And then pasta, but they did not do it like that in the prison. It was made normally. White bread, everything. Wine.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of people who could afford to eat at the tavern?

Oskar Gerber: Not many. But for those who could not afford it, we would give food to them. We collected some money, or I would authorize them to get money from my account for someone else.

Interviewer: What about the restrooms in San Vittore, how were they?

Oskar Gerber: It is better to not talk about it. In the beginning, we were in a cell where only up to four or five people were supposed to stay. We ended up with twelve. When you had to do your thing, you had to go to the corner, and everybody would see you. You can picture for yourself how bad it was in there.

Interviewer: How would the guards in the prison treat you?

Oskar Gerber: Oh well, one was [*pauses to think*]... but the partisans killed him afterward. Because some of us spoke up and told them that this one guard ... he did speak to us like prisoners, he had a southern dialect, he couldn't even speak well. But when we arrived in Naples, we were all in chains. Then the people working at the port asked about us: Who are they? Oh, you had to see all the money, the chocolate, the cigarettes, and the oranges raining down. I could never understand the

hate between northern Italians and southern Italians. Then, on the way from Ferrammon... from Eboli to Ferramonti, we were again in chains, and then I told one of the guards "Sorry, but I didn't eat anything in the last twenty-five hours, because when I'm cold, I can't eat, because I'm sick in the stomach. We went to the restaurant in the station, where you would change the train to go to Ferramonti, and they said, "Eat, we will pay for everything." I talked to the others, and they were all like, "Yes, sure, no problem." We went inside with the chains, but once inside they took our chains away. Then the owner asked, "But who are they?" He heard us, and they told him, "Those are Jewish people going to a concentration camp." Then he let us eat all we wanted and he didn't want any money for that. I had never seen stuff like that.

Interviewer: In San Vittore, did someone ever interrogate you?

Oskar Gerber: Once, the director came, he was a very good person, and he asked, "Why are you here? What is your name?" There were Polish people, there were people who were Christians, the same for French and British people, and we said, "[We are here] because we are Jewish and there are racial laws." And that was pretty much it. But we were never officially interrogated. I can say that they treated us well. Afterward though.... The Germans have taken a lot of money away from me. I could buy half of this street [with] all money that the Germans had stolen from me. Because we were from the San Pietro dell' Orto Street, there were four people, or six I think. And they were seven people. They were there, it was a big block, Germans, SS soldiers. And when the bombing started, we were already imprisoned back then, the air pressure made the store, the warehouse, and the laboratories explode, they got blown away. The windows and the glass were all broken. And the Germans inside. They took everything away. And the things they could not take away... there were so-called Blendmaschine (mixing machine), those were machines to take the grease away, to clean, and to iron the skins. They took pieces away using the stock of the rifles, and back then that would happen only in America. And I needed those machines...we came back with nothing, we lost everything. But then I heard that in Zurich, I read in the newspaper, in big letters, in the Züricher Zeitung (Zurich newspaper), that the Germans voted to offer a refund for sicknesses, imprisonment, damages to properties, stores, and laboratories. Then I said "awesome!" I was home and I wanted to find out more about it. I went to a notary with two Italians that lived close to me and witnessed what the Germans did, how they took everything away. I made a request in German and delivered to the German embassy and they said that I needed to get it signed by the central police station. And I went there, and they told me that they had to destroy everything after five years. And I was like, "How can I do it now? I don't want anything from the Italians, they didn't do anything to me, I don't have any requests from them." And they said they couldn't give me anything. Then I went to San Vittore, a couple of years ago. The director of the prison was Doctor Pastore. I told him, "Doctor Pastore, I was here twenty-three days, they took my fingerprints." And he said, "There is nothing we can do," because they had to do the same after five years. And I said, "How do you [keep records], if there is an old criminal, from where do you get the information if you destroy all the documentation after only five years?" And he replied, "Oh, I don't know about it." And there was nothing I could do on that end. And I'm not talking about a little bit of money, but millions that I lost there! Not only mine but also my dad's. And that is how it went. Because Italian authorities are masters in running away from their own responsibilities, you know? I wasn't asking anything from the Italians because the Italians didn't do anything to me. But they shouldn't have incarcerated me at all, because Hungarians and the Polish people like my wife were never at war against Italy. The only thing they could do is to send me away, you know? But no, they arrested me, they incarcerated me, and sent me away.

Interviewer: Mister Gerber, when you were in San Vittore, did you keep in contact with your family?

Oskar Gerber: They came to visit me once a week. My dad came first, and I told him to not let my sisters and my little brother come. For all the duration of my stay, they came two or three times.

Interviewer: Did they bring you anything?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, they did. They would send me all the things I needed from outside. And in prison, they would check everything. They would open the boxes and look inside. The Hungarian bread, which is so delicious, I can't even. They would cut it up.

Interviewer: Did they inform you about your departure [from San Vittore to the concentration camp at Ferramonti]?

Oskar Gerber: No. That was that guard in San Vittore at 3 am who told me. "Abraham, take you chains," and I said, "What? Why?" And he answered, "You are going to Germany." He didn't say we were going to Southern Italy. Because you know, Germany meant death, with Auschwitz and Birkenau. And so the Partisans killed this guard. It was one of us that gave the signal to the Partisans. My friends and I, right after the liberation, we didn't go home, we went to San Vittore. We went inside and looked for [this cruel guard], but they had already killed him. I don't know if it was true or false, but it was a big satisfaction.

Interviewer: You didn't know about your departure?

Oskar Gerber: No, no, he had told us that we were going to Germany. At the central station, we were on the first platform, and it wasn't a freight train, but it was a normal one, and it would stop in all the stations. The trip was thirty-six hours long, thirty-seven or thirty-eight hours. On the train, they took our chains away.

Interviewer: When did you notice that you weren't going to Germany?

Oskar Gerber: The guards told me. We were two prisoners and two guards on our sides. But they were good people, very good people.

Interviewer: How was the trip?

Oskar Gerber: It was hot, I would sweat a lot, and not sleep at all.

Interviewer: Did you meet anyone on this trip?

Oskar Gerber: Oh, a lot of people. Carlo Levi.⁸²

Interviewer: What do you remember about Carlo Levi?

⁸² Carlo Levi was an Italian painter, writer, activist, anti-fascist, and doctor. He is best known for his book *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Stopped at Eboli), published in 1945, a memoir of his time spent in exile in Lucania, Italy, after being arrested in connection with his political activism.

Oskar Gerber: I have very good memories of him. He had a degree, and he was a doctor, and he was also a painter. He was already incarcerated in southern Italy and he asked to be sent again to Eboli because every little town in the Eboli province was all for the incarcerated, the antifascists, and the Jewish people. But unfortunately, they separated us. I didn't get the chance to see him again.

Interviewer: Where did you arrive at the end of the trip?

Oskar Gerber: Somewhere in Eboli, in a little town that was more than one thousand years old.

Interviewer: How many people were with you during this trip?

Oskar Gerber: Between five hundred and one thousand people. All foreign Jewish people. But there were a lot of Italians too, anti-fascists.

Interviewer: Where were you exactly in Eboli?

Oskar Gerber: We were incarcerated in the San Bartolomeo police station. Before the war, the soldiers would stay there. But during the war, they transformed it into a prison because all the soldiers were sent to Russia, Albania, Africa, South Africa. And they made room for us.

Interviewer: What would you do during the day?

Oskar Gerber: They would wake us up around 6 or 7 am, now I don't remember. Then we would take a shower in the courtyard, half naked. Then we ate, everybody would eat what they wanted to because the tavern was inside. It was owned by a hotel that was close to the prison. And then we would chat, play cards, swim. There was a little stream a little bit further up, and I would stay there almost all day to swim... Then we would sunbathe and play cards, you know?

Interviewer: Were you free to go out whenever?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, yes. Free, very free.

Interviewer: And nobody would control you?

Oskar Gerber: In the morning and in the evening. Nobody wanted to go away because it was convenient for us to stay there. We knew what was waiting for us outside.

Interviewer: Were you able to contact your family?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, yes. I would ask permission to call or I would send a card asking them to send me stuff, money.

Interviewer: How was your family doing in Milan?

Oskar Gerber: They lived like nothing had changed for them. Like before the war.

Interviewer: How would they treat you all in Campania?

Oskar Gerber: I was among the few people that could speak Italian, you know? Then the priest, I was like an interpreter for the Jewish and Polish people. I met a priest and he said to me, “Mister Gerber, do you want to see something interesting?” and I said “Why not?” and he told me, “Come see me tomorrow.” And he told me the time, it was in the afternoon when he was free. And he showed me where they would record every birth, death, wedding, and baptism. He showed me recordings from 1600 and there were a lot of Spanish Jewish people that had escaped from Spain during the inquisition. And he said, “I’m showing this only to you because I don’t want to get in trouble with my authorities, the bishops and so on.” I saw how the people of the town were of Jewish descent. In fact, they would do the evening services earlier, as I saw in Milan, like the Maariv. They were all descendants from the Marranos, which were the Jews who converted to Christianity to save themselves from the Inquisition.

Interviewer: Would you do any Jewish religious activities in Eboli?

Oskar Gerber: Among us, yes. Because for us, you just need ten adults to hold a service. The religious ones would do that. Myself, I would go only if I felt like it. But I would try to avoid them. I didn’t want anything to do with them. All the bad things they do, fanatics, they are integralists⁸³, as bad as the Muslims. The poor Rabbi, he got killed by them.⁸⁴

Interviewer: Were there any women?

Oskar Gerber: No, no. But in Ferramonti, yes. I met my wife there.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in Eboli?

Oskar Gerber: Three or four months, I don’t remember. Like around fifty people got transferred with me to Ferramonti di Tarso.

Interviewer: Why did they transfer you?

Oskar Gerber: I don’t know; nobody knows.

Interviewer: Did they give you any notice about the transfer?

Oskar Gerber: Two days before that, I think. When they called our names in the morning, they told us that in two days you would have been transferred to Ferramonti di Tarso, close to Cosenza.

Interviewer: So, did you know what Ferramonti was?

⁸³ Broadly speaking, the Jewish community can be divided into “Orthodox” and “Reform.” The Jewish Orthodox group strictly follows the Torah and its rules. For the Reform group, the Torah is still a holy document, but it is seen as rooted in the past and understood as a product of the times in which it was compiled. Thus, they do not observe some of the rules the Orthodox Jewish community follows.

⁸⁴ It should be noted that Oskar is clearly demonstrating his bias against the devout religious communities of both Jewish and Muslim populations. This is of particular note since this document is as much a reflection of late 20th century attitudes as it is a recollection of mid-twentieth-century historical events. Italy is if nothing, a culmination of several cultural influences including devout Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures, as well as secular humanist ideas.

Oskar Gerber: No, no. We knew it was a concentration camp, but they told us we would have the same freedom there too. In fact, inside the camp, we could do what we wanted. We shouldn't disturb the authorities, the guards, the directors and vice-directors of the camp. There was also a doctor and a vet.

Interviewer: How was the trip from Eboli to Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: So, it was shorter... because it was not as slow as the other train. One day and one night. We arrived the following day around noon. We left in the morning.

Interviewer: You weren't happy to leave Eboli, were you?

Oskar Gerber: No, because I didn't know what was going on there in that camp. Because in Eboli I could eat at the hotel, play cards, call home. Also, the food was good, the room was clean.

Interviewer: Were you handcuffed during the trip?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, always... No, only when they brought us to the station... Then yes. When you have to get off and change trains, then yes. Once or twice.

Interviewer: Did someone try to escape from Eboli?

Oskar Gerber: Nobody. We all knew that it was better to stay there, even if we didn't have all the comforts. We were very thankful to be there.

Interviewer: What was the first thing you saw when you arrived in Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: There weren't too many people there, because they were still finishing building the camp, the barracks, and the fences. There were some streams there too and that was land that had just been reclaimed from malaria.⁸⁵ Also, my dad got malaria and then he died because of that; he could not get rid of it. It was terrible. When he had some episodes, he would get such a high fever, between 40 and 41 °C (104–105 °F). And he would get cold and hot, cold and hot. We would give him three or four blankets and he was always cold. It was a horrible thing. But then he used quinine. They would give it to us every morning. We had to take two doses daily. I would take it too, then I didn't do it anymore.

Interviewer: Did your dad get sick there?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, and he could not get rid of it. He was already old. He wasn't that strong anymore.

Interviewer: What did you see in Ferramonti as soon as you arrived there?

⁸⁵ For a detailed account of the fight of malaria in Italy, see Frank Snowden, *The Conquest of Malaria: Italy, 1900–1962* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

Oskar Gerber: My father wasn't there though. I saw around one hundred prisoners, barefoot all over the place. There were people playing soccer, chess, who would go to the temple to pray. But then we got more people because new people were arriving every day.

Interviewer: Where did they take you when you arrived there?

Oskar Gerber: They brought me to a barrack. They assigned you to a barrack, I got assigned to the first one. The first and the second were standing next to each other. You would enter in the front and people would go left or right.

Interviewer: How many were you in every barrack?

Oskar Gerber: Thirty, thirty-five, thirty-six people.

Interviewer: How many barracks were there in Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: In Ferramonti I would say fifty. Maybe even more. Especially when the illegal group from Bengasi⁸⁶ came. My [future] wife and her family were there too. There were women also there.

Interviewer: When did you arrive in Ferramonti exactly?

Oskar Gerber: At the end of July or at the beginning of August, I don't remember.

Interviewer: Which year?

Oskar Gerber: In 1940.

Interviewer: You went to the barrack and then, what happened?

Oskar Gerber: I could choose to sleep or go out, always inside the fence, not outside.

Interviewer: What would you all do during the day?

Oskar Gerber: People would learn, I would learn Italian and other languages. I would also play soccer, or I would go to the stream and swim. The water was deep enough, so you could swim there.

Interviewer: But you couldn't leave the camp?

Oskar Gerber: No, absolutely no. The stream was inside the camp. There were guards all over, on the corners, in the middle, and in the middle, the guards would walk, they were two or three, they were from the fascist militia, but they were good people. They would say to me, "I'm wearing a black shirt⁸⁷ but I'm red (for communist) inside."

⁸⁶ Bengasi was the name in Italian of Benghazi under Italian rule. The city was promoted to the status of capital for the Italian province in 1937.

⁸⁷ The *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN, "Voluntary Militia for National Security"), commonly called the Blackshirts (Italian: *Camicie Nere*, CCNN, singular: *Camicia Nera*) or *squadristi* (singular: *squadrista*), was

Interviewer: Do you remember who was in charge of the camp?

Oskar Gerber: He was the vice chief of the police from Naples. I don't remember his name, but he was a gentleman. And there were many doctors among us, they went to school in Bologna, Milan, Turin, Siena, and Rome. [These doctors who were imprisoned] even treated one of his sons. He didn't know how to pay us back, because he did not get any money. He tried to favor us in every way possible.

Interviewer: Did you work in the camp?

Oskar Gerber: No, I did not.

Interviewer: But was there someone who would work?

Oskar Gerber: The people who wanted to work could go out escorted and come back in the evening. You had to apply for it. But they would allow us everything. For instance, I saw that the elderly people and the kids didn't have any vegetables. Then I asked the director—actually I asked the sergeant first—I told them that I wanted to buy some greens for the elderly people and the kids to improve their meals. The sergeant told me that he would talk with the director. I could go out to San Marco and eat at the hotel. And there were a lot of potatoes, onions, other vegetables, and bread. All the things that I wanted. Nobody would control me.

Interviewer: What about the food in the camp?

Oskar Gerber: Every barrack had his own kitchen. It was a shared kitchen.

Interviewer: Who did the cooking?

Oskar Gerber: Well, there were some chefs among us; they could cook. The food was okay. If I didn't like it, I would go to the tavern to eat other stuff, like ham, raw ham, sausage, bread, and sweets. I could have all I wanted.

Interviewer: Where did the food for the barracks come from? Who would give it to you?

Oskar Gerber: We had the kitchens and the chefs that every day would cook something different. Every day they would ask us what we would like to eat, and they would do what the majority wanted. We would vote so that they didn't cook only what they wanted, but what we wanted.

Interviewer: Did these chefs get paid somehow?

Oskar Gerber: No, no. We would get 4 liras every day as an aid for prisoners.

originally the paramilitary wing of the National Fascist Party and, after 1923, an all-volunteer militia of the Kingdom of Italy under Fascist rule.

Interviewer: Everybody would get some money?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, yes, up to 50 liras and the rest would go into the account.

Interviewer: Did you all get some sort of financial aid?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, it was 4 liras, then 6 liras, and at the end 8 liras. Because of inflation.

Interviewer: Could you go and eat in another barrack?

Oskar Gerber: No, no. And I didn't want to. I wasn't interested at all. You know, in prison you are on your own, otherwise, it doesn't go well. With trust and everything, it is better to have only a couple of friends but good ones. For the most part, they were all doctors with degrees. For instance, they let my brother-in-law go and defend his thesis in Pisa with two guards. He was a veterinarian. He had his defense, he went back to the police station, and then back to Ferramonti di Tarsio. But they let him finish his degree.

Interviewer: Where did the prisoners in Ferramonti come from?

Oskar Gerber: From everywhere in Europe. Even from Asia. The Italians had captured them and sent them to prison. The majority were from Central Europe: Polish, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Rumanians, and Yugoslavia. Then French and British people too.

Interviewer: Which languages would people speak?

Oskar Gerber: All of them. Sometimes, if someone didn't speak Italian, we would ask if he spoke Yiddish. And that was it, the Yiddish language was what kept us united, that saved us and showed that we were still Jewish people. Those integralists, though, with their rigor, they saved us too, that is the only merit I recognize for them.

Interviewer: Would you have any religious service in Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: Secretly yes. Almost every day we would get the *Baseler Nachrichten* (a newspaper from Basel), *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (a newspaper from Zurich), and the *Stürmer*⁸⁸ also, the journal of the Nazi party, you know?

Interviewer: Why?

Oskar Gerber: Because we wanted to know. I got it from someone in the camp and paid for it, of course. They wouldn't care; they would send them to us. Sometimes we would get Hungarian newspapers, Slavic ones too. I wanted to read the German ones. In English...once I got to read the *Times* in Hungarian. Back then I didn't know all the bad things that the Hungarians were doing.

Interviewer: Were you aware of what was going on?

⁸⁸ Der *Stürmer* was a weekly German newspaper published by Julius Streicher, the Gauleiter of Franconia, from 1923 to the end of World War II. It was a significant part of Nazi propaganda and was vehemently anti-Semitic.

Oskar Gerber: No, we were not. We did know that Jewish people were incarcerated and treated very badly. But we didn't know about all those people dying. Afterward. We knew that some cities at the border were free, such as Gandino and Clusone. The son of my landlord lived in Gandino and he was part of the armed forces that fought with the Germans against the Russians and the Slavs. He was invalid at some point, and he would cry continuously, so he saved himself. And he was the one who provided us the newspapers and all the things we wanted to read.

Interviewer: Was there a temple in Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, there were different temples, Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish temples. And then the temples of the integralists.

Interviewer: Did you go there sometimes?

Oskar Gerber: I would go to the Ashkenazic temple, and to the Italian one, the Sephardic temple. But not to the temple of the integralists, I didn't go there at all.

Interviewer: Did people get married in Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, very often, not only once.

Interviewer: Do you remember any Jewish festivities taking place in the camp?

Oskar Gerber: We would celebrate all of them. Kippur, Rosh Hashanah and then... All the others, how is it called... the festivity of Purim, but before Purim there was...I don't remember now... and then all the others...

Interviewer: Would they let you do everything?

Oskar Gerber: Everything. They wouldn't do anything. Once the Bishop of Cosenza came to visit, and he asked us what you are asking me now, "Are you allowed to celebrate your festivities and recite your prayers?" He knew all our festivities. That is because all the Catholic priests, before becoming priests, had to study Hebrew, you know? Because Jesus Christ was Jewish. I was in Jerusalem, and I went to the temple where Jesus did his rabbinic studies, he got a degree and he was called Rabbah. I was exactly there. I was told by a representative of the temple there, in Spanish.

Interviewer: Do you remember the first time you saw your wife?

Oskar Gerber: Oh, when they arrived, I saw her and I said, "Her or nobody else."

Interviewer: When did you talk for the first time?

Oskar Gerber: My uncle introduced me to her. I started wooing her and I said to her, "If you want, we can wait" because nobody knew how it would end. You don't want to add even more misery to your own situation, you know? And this is the story.

Interviewer: In which language did you speak?

Oskar Gerber: A little bit in Italian, because my wife knew Latin. She learned Italian earlier than me. Or German. She didn't speak Yiddish very well. So, we would speak in "pure" German, Hochdeutsch, the German of the literate people.

Interviewer: When did she arrive in Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: At the beginning of August, the 10th, the 15th. I don't remember.

Interviewer: Did you get together soon after that?

Oskar Gerber: Not officially. We started talking though.

Interviewer: How often did you see each other?

Oskar Gerber: Every day. We would take walks inside the camp, we would go to the library, to the kitchen to eat.

Interviewer: Was there also a school?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, for the kids. It was a kindergarten more than a school. There was also an elementary school, always for the kids because the kids that were older, like fourteen or fifteen years old, were only a few. There were a lot of little kids, four, five, or six years old. And they would go to kindergarten.

Interviewer: How would you spend your days in Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: The first thing I would do in the morning was pray. Not everything but what I could or wanted to. Then I would get cleaned up, I would eat, and then I would read or study, you know? I would play soccer, or I would work out lightly or more intensively. I would go swimming and then read. I read a lot.

Interviewer: Would you sleep all in the same place?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, we were in the middle of the barrack, the beds close to each other. A bunk, some straw, that was it.

Interviewer: Were there only Jewish people in Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: No, also Christians. French and Polish people, Slovaks. There weren't any Hungarians or Serbs.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in Ferramonti?

Oskar Gerber: More than a year. So, 1940 and 1941, July. And then they transferred me in October 1941. Mid October.

Interviewer: Why did they transfer you?

Oskar Gerber: Because of a transfer order from the fascist party, I think. The families could not go to the *confine libero*.⁸⁹ My dad and I, we were a family, but my uncle couldn't come.

Interviewer: Did you ask to be transferred?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, as soon as possible. We didn't know about this order, so we asked for it as soon as possible. And they agreed right away.

Interviewer: Did they accept all the requests?

Oskar Gerber: Yes. And my wife's family was transferred to Clusone,⁹⁰ in the province of Bergamo, in the Seriana Valley. We were separated for a couple of months. So, I did another request for Quero Vas,⁹¹ to the Belluno's police station, with that justification that I wanted to marry my fiancé. And they agreed immediately.

Interviewer: How was life there in Quero Vas?

Oskar Gerber: Oh well, Quero Vas was a very small town where there were horrible battles during World War I. That is why one of my forms of entertainment was... I had an uncle who fought with the Polish people against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Veneto region was full of cemeteries for soldiers who died during the war. We went from one cemetery to another because so many died, millions—captains, soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and graves with no names on them because all the things they wore got lost or burned. There was a town called Schievenin⁹² and during the German counteroffensive, all the people died there because they bombed everywhere. I went inside an abandoned house, on the table, it was a simple table, there was still the rest of someone's lunch that had stayed there for twenty years.

Interviewer: Where did you sleep in Quero Vas?

Oskar Gerber: We rented an apartment, a sublease actually.

Interviewer: Were you free?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, completely free. In the town. If I wanted to leave the town, I would go... the closest town was Valdobiadene,⁹³ I had customers there, from before the war, in Padua too, but I could not go to Padua. To Valdobiadene yes, to Belluno yes, I could visit them, and I would do some businesses there. They placed some orders and I called home, and they would send them the stuff.

Interviewer: How was the relationship with the people of the town?

Oskar Gerber: It was great.

⁸⁹ A form of internment for prisoners during fascism.

⁹⁰ Clusone is an Italian town in the province of Bergamo, Lombardy, Italy.

⁹¹ Quero Vas is a town in the Province of Belluno in the Italian region of Veneto.

⁹² Schievenin is a town in the Province of Belluno in the Italian region of Veneto.

⁹³ Valdobiadene is a town in the Province of Belluno in the Italian region of Veneto.

Interviewer: Did they know that you were Jewish?

Oskar Gerber: Of course, they knew. They had never seen Jewish people before, they thought we had horns or something [*Laughs*].

Interviewer: Were there other foreign Jewish people in Quero Vas?

Oskar Gerber: Yes. Austrians from Wien, two or three families, then Germans.

Interviewer: Where was your fiancée?

Oskar Gerber: She was in Clusone.

Interviewer: Were you in touch with each other?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, I would call or write her a letter. We always stayed...in the attic, I have a basket full of my and her letters. We exchanged them that year that we were separated.

Interviewer: Did you have to go and check in [with the authorities]?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, we need to check in with them once a week, on Sunday, at the police station. We had to sign a register, and that was it.

Interviewer: During the time in Quero Vas, you did also have money, you were doing well, right?

Oskar Gerber: Oh yes, we had everything. We also had this financial aid, there was already 6 liras daily. And then our money.

Interviewer: For how long did you stay in Quero Vas?

Oskar Gerber: Seven or eight months, more or less. And then they transferred me. We had to check-in in Clusone. First, at the police station of Bergamo, wonderful people. You know, when Germany invaded Italy, all the officers took our papers and hid them under a bunch of anthracites, and then on top of that, they put some wood they would use in the winter. So, when the Germans came and they asked "Do you have any Jews," they answered "Yes, but they are all in Switzerland now, they all escaped."

Interviewer: Did you ask to be transferred again?

Oskar Gerber: We knew that we were going to Gandino,⁹⁴ but at the police station, they asked us when we wanted to go. And I told them, "First of all, I want to see my fiancé in Clusone, then we will see." "Ok, that works, all right then." We went there by train. We took the last train at midnight, we went there, to Clusone. We went to a hotel, and there we started to look for a house, for an apartment.

⁹⁴ Gandino is a town in the province of Bergamo in the Italian region Lombardy.

Interviewer: And in Clusone was your fiancé there?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, yes. I would see her every day. Then I started working, after a couple of months, after I got used to the place, and to the priests, others also. So, my mom would send me the raw material, and then I would work there. My wife helped me, she learned the job. My brother-in-law, too, was also still able to work.

Interviewer: How was life in Clusone?

Oskar Gerber: I would work all day, in the evening we would go to the movies or take a walk, or we would go to the hotel to eat, because we were accommodated by the hotel, we would always eat there at noon.

Interviewer: How were the people in Clusone?

Oskar Gerber: There were a lot of fascists that would try to hurt us, but they weren't able to do that because the police, the carabinieri, the public officers, they all were on our side. The major too...wait, he wasn't called that... What was his name? ...wait...the podestà.⁹⁵

Interviewer: Did something bad happen there?

Oskar Gerber: No, nothing. Also, my brother-in-law was a vet, so he would work under the table with the farmers, and he would bring eggs and butter. He would also bring meat because he went also to the slaughterhouse. He would always bring a piece back because he didn't take any money, they would pay him with goods.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in Clusone?

Oskar Gerber: In Clusone...almost a year. Yes, more or less. And then they transferred us to Gandino, Gandino Valley. The people there were also fantastic. Look...in January 1945, the SS were quartered in the public school. They started deporting the young population, but not to Germany. There was an organization called "Tod"⁹⁶ that would repair roads, railways, bridges, and stuff like that. And they asked if there were Jews somewhere, and they didn't say anything, also those people whose sons were taken away to work. Nobody said, "Why are they taking our sons away if there are Jews here from all over Europe." There were also French, American, and English soldiers, hidden, of course, because after September 1943 all escaped, but they couldn't go to Switzerland anymore. So, they stayed there hiding.

Interviewer: Did the people of Gandino protect you?

Oskar Gerber: Oh yeah, those were people, you can't even imagine. Everybody knew, but nobody said anything when they took their sons away. And I will never forget that. And I said to myself, "If

⁹⁵ Podestà is the name given to high officials in many Italian cities beginning in the later Middle Ages. The Fascist regime created its own version of the podestà. In February 1926, Mussolini issued a decree which abolished the autonomy of the municipalities. Instead, all communes except for Rome were to be headed by a "podestà", an authoritarian mayor with executive and legislative powers.

⁹⁶ Tod means "death" in German.

I survive, I will get Italian citizenship.” Because what I saw there, I didn’t see anywhere else in the world. I traveled a lot, 20 or 22 years traveling, I was always traveling, to Lipsia, to Vienna, to London, you know? Also to Paris, you know? But I have never found people like that.

Interviewer: When did you arrive in Gandino?

Oskar Gerber: In Gandino... it was still winter...but at the end of the winter... in November 1943...no...yes... October or November. We stayed there until the end. Because before I did...the Germans tried out some stuff, they went from one house to the other, and if they found a young guy, they took him away. But people would know when, so they would tell us to run away. I hid seventy or eighty meters away from where the SS were. I hid inside a gap with my dad. They wouldn’t take the women because they didn’t know who they were. But it didn’t happen often, the SS came to raid maybe twice to take the young people away. Until the end. Then the young people that got deported, at the end, when we knew that the Germans surrendered, they wanted revenge, so they with the older people of the town, with the vet, with the doctor, with the mayor... but we didn’t let them, because the Germans, for every German killed, they would kill thirty Italians or thirty Jews, you know? We told them to let them go away.

Interviewer: Did you hide your Jewish identity?

Oskar Gerber: We had fake IDs. We got those through a Partisan. I got an ID from a town close to Pavia. They would call me...wait...they would call me Bari. Dari Battista, and they gave me thirty years more than my age. Anyway, I...well, there was no place to take a bath, to wash you would use the snow. I couldn’t take it anymore, I wanted to go to Bergamo. And I went there, to the public baths. I was there, drying myself, then I heard the Germans coming inside. I heard them talking in German, “March there, give me that!” I thought it was the end of the world. I waited until they went to get undressed, I didn’t even finish drying myself, and I ran away. And the lifeguard was like, “Mister?” and I asked her to remain silent. She understood and she let me go. I went directly to the city center of Bergamo—it is very beautiful. But I was hungry. But I went to the movie theater first, to hide, so that they wouldn’t see me on the street. What happened? The Germans blocked the movie theater, and they came inside to check the IDs. They were from the Black Brigade⁹⁷ and they asked for my ID. I gave them my ID, but I, still today, I don’t look my age, and back then even more. So, I gave him my ID, he looked at it and then he looked at me, he made a smiley face and then he gave me the ID back and went away. As soon as I got my ID back, I got up and went away. I ran away and went downtown. There was a tram line that brought me up to the old town. I was afraid to walk into a restaurant. Then I walked into a butcher, and I asked him if he had some food that I could buy. “What do you want?” he said, and I replied, “A little bit of ham... four or five sandwiches.” But he didn’t want the money because he understood that I wasn’t Italian because of my accent. I wasn’t able to lose my damned Hungarian accent, because Hungarian has the accent on the first vowel, you know? They don’t say “dománi” (tomorrow in Italian), they say “dómani.” He understood, but he let me go. He didn’t want any money, and I asked, “Why? I have money, I’m not here to beg, if you don’t want the money, I will give it to charity for the Church.” But he didn’t want it at all. I will never forget that.

⁹⁷ The Corpo Ausiliario delle Squadre d’azione di Camicie Nere (Italian: Auxiliary Corps of the Black Shirts’ Action Squads), known as the Black Brigades (Italian: Brigate Nere) was one of the Fascist paramilitary groups, run by the Republican Fascist Party (Partito Fascista Repubblicano, PFR) operating in the Italian Social Republic (in northern Italy), during the final years of World War II after the signing of the Italian Armistice in 1943.

Interviewer: When did you arrive in Gandino, were the Germans already there?

Oskar Gerber: No, no, they weren't there. They arrived in January 1945. They arrived, they quartered in the public school at the entrance of the town and kicked out the students. When they would raid the town, I hid in a gap in the yard of a friend of mine, well, he then became my friend.

Interviewer: What did you do when the Germans arrived? Where did you go?

Oskar Gerber: Close to my house. Because I had two apartments. The street was called Vicolo Ferretti. On the third floor, I had an apartment where I also worked. My laboratory was there. And he lived two houses next to mine with a big wall and a big gate, a fortress. He was a butcher and he would make all the sausages at home. He has...how do you call it... pigs, everything, ham, everything. And he would keep the food in a warehouse. Behind that, there was a gap that you could access from outside. But you couldn't see it from the outside. When the Germans would go on a raid from house to house, I would go there. They wouldn't go to him.

Interviewer: Was there another family in Gandino that helped you?

Oskar Gerber: All the families. When I went up there, now I don't go there anymore because of a heart condition, and I'm afraid. And all my friends have died because of sickness and stuff like that. Only the widows survived, not all of them. Their children are different because of communist propaganda. So, I don't find any pleasure going there, some widows now, yes. They also come to visit me. Anyway, unforgettable. If I go up there, they would all say, "Oskar, let's drink, let's have a drink together!" In the evening then I would be drunk. Then I stayed at the hotel, I slept, and I departed the day after.

Interviewer: When the Germans arrived, did you stay in the town?

Oskar Gerber: No. The same night, I took two families from Yugoslavia, then I had a Hungarian friend, his dad was a notary, he worked with antiques, he was very famous from Milan. He let us stay in his villa in the mountains, in the Bergamo's mountains. I took my parents, and these families from Zagreb, they were old and sick, and then small children, they couldn't walk. The oldest son and I took a donkey and we went up at 1500...1600 meters. We started at 550 meters. Anyway, that was hard. And we stayed there. Then the Germans went away because they were afraid, then they came back. We came down then because my mom and my dad were sick. I put them on the donkey, but then the Germans came back.

Interviewer: For how long did you hide in the mountains?

Oskar Gerber: Six or seven months, until it got better. Then I brought my parents to the hospital, where they were clandestine. There were Germans there too. The hospital took care of them and then they returned to the apartment.

Interviewer: Did you keep hiding in the mountains?

Oskar Gerber: No, no. I stayed with them. I did not go back.

Interviewer: When you were in the mountains, did you ever have contact with the Partisans?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, yes. I was the interpreter among them. There were some Hungarians that fled from the SS because they saw how bad things were and wanted to be Partisans. They died because, during the fights against the Germans, the commander put them on the front line. The others did not die. There were also Germans, Yugoslavians, Russians from the Vaslov's Army. They were able to survive because they knew how to run away.

Interviewer: How did the Partisans contact you?

Oskar Gerber: Oh well, they knew that I could speak many languages. And they could not speak any Hungarian, or German, or French. They contacted me. When they wanted me, they sent me someone and he said to me, "Come." And I went with him, [it took] five hours to arrive there, and another five on the way back.

Interviewer: Where did the partisans hide?

Oskar Gerber: In the mountains and they did not stop. Maybe two or three hours during the night and then they would go away.

Interviewer: Did they ever ask you to participate more actively?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, but then I explained to them, "The risk is too big for me. You fight against the Germans, you lose people. If they get me, they will kill me on the wall immediately. If they catch you, you are a soldier, even if you are a Partisan. What they can do to you is to deport you, and you will always have the hope to save yourself because you are young and healthy. I'm neither young nor healthy. Back then I was thirty-three. Do you know that after the war I had five surgeries? One in my gallbladder, once I had an ulcer in my duodenum, two [surgeries] on my feet, and [surgery for] my eyes because of cataracts. First on the right, then on the left. One and a half years ago I had my last surgery. [These health problems are] all a present from the Germans. They are responsible. If they would not have come, I would have had to flee. Because in the mountains I smoked, but I didn't have any tobacco anymore. Do you know what I smoked? The leaves from the trees, the yellow ones because those were already dry. And I would put them in the paper from a newspaper, which was a grey paper. And I smoked that. And that is why I got an ulcer.

Interviewer: While you were in the mountains, did someone ever find you there?

Oskar Gerber: There were the Germans and the fascists that went on searches in the mountains. I saw death fifty meters away from me. Then I took a gun, a gun that I had and there were six bullets inside. Five for them, and one for me, because I wouldn't survive, but I wouldn't give myself to them. Then the son of a shepherd from there told me that he had a hiding place where his ancestors kept the cheese hidden because when the Austrians were there...you know that all North Italy was under the Austrian[s]. So, his ancestors hid the cheese there and nobody knew about it. And I asked him, "Where?" and he brought me there. You could not see it. And there were a lot of thick bushes. But I saw death coming close, the Germans and in front of them, the fascists. And the guy told me to not shoot because they won't see us. But the Germans spent like two or three days going around. I was afraid to leave, then sometimes I wanted to know where they were or if they were there at all. And I had to hang on at the entrance because it was a hole, like a cave, a hole. But then he would tell

me to not do that because he knew and he was born there. So, he tried to look out but as soon as he put his hand out, a snake bit him. That snake was for me, you see, the hand of god. But he did not die, because we were young, we had good teeth. We took turns to suck the venom out because the venom of the snake stayed in between the skin and the flesh. Then we put there the sulfur matches, the Swedish one, they were big, the matches. We took eight heads from the matches and we put them in the wound and put them on fire. He was screaming because of the pain, but it disinfected everything.

Interviewer: How long did you hide there?

Oskar Gerber: five days. And we had food. And we ate what we had.

Interviewer: Do you remember when the war ended? The liberation? How did you know that the war had come to an end?

Oskar Gerber: From the radio, at midnight. We woke all our friends in the town up. Shepherds, intellectuals, everyone. Revelry! In the hotel next to us, the one with the restaurant, I paid for two barrels of wine. And then for numerous bottles of dessert wine.

Interviewer: Had the Germans already left?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, yes. As soon as they heard about the armistice, with a truck, in two hours they were gone. They went towards Edolo because they wanted to go to Switzerland. Tonale, that is. But I don't know if they arrived there because after Clusone, after...wait...Lovere, Clusone, Tonale... the Germans did terrible things there, killed people, hanged people. [So, the Partisans] took revenge, I heard. There was a very famous hotel for skiers, Franceschini, even the boys that were fifteen years old that were part of the fascist militia... [were put against a wall by the Partisans and shot]. Did you know who ordered the execution? The archpriest of Roveto, where the parents of my fiancé were hiding. He was an ex-captain of the Bersaglieri.⁹⁸ And he saw all the things that the Germans [and fascists] did and said, "There is no forgiveness for them." And immediately on the wall, in the cemetery, but not inside the cemetery, on the outside [of the] walls they put people in rows of three or four, and they used the rifles [to shoot them].

Interviewer: Right after the war ended, where did you go? What did you do? Did you go back to Milan?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, to Milan, I had to make a living. There weren't any goods. I did that job for six or seven months. Then I wrote.... when the situation was quiet... I wrote to our ex-suppliers, and I told them about my situation, that we lost everything, and if they remembered my grandfather and father. I also told them once I came there in 1937. Then they answered, "Please come as soon as you can, our warehouse is available to you. If you don't have money," because they suspected that, "go and talk to our agents, our representatives in Lugano, you will find everything you need to come to us." I didn't have the money for Lugano, I didn't have anything. Only the clothes I was wearing. Then I asked some of my friends to lend me money, 10,000 liras, that was a good amount of money back then. Then I went to Lugano, they were waiting for me. I had the ticket already, they had

⁹⁸ The Bersaglieri, singular Bersagliere (Marksmen in English) are a special branch of the infantry corps of the Italian Army.

bought it, and then one hundred pounds, that was a lot of money back then. I thanked them, then I took the last train to Calais. The morning after I was at Calais maritime, then I took a ferry to Dover, and from Dover to London. They had also booked a hotel for me. The concierge told me, “Mister Gerber, please call Mister Isic, he has an important communication for you. If he doesn’t answer, call his home.” In fact, he wasn’t there anymore because it was, I think, Friday, Friday afternoon, and they don’t work there, he was one of the Hasidic Jews. He told me to come on Sunday morning. And I said, “Yes, yes, I will be there.” I took a shower, I changed clothes, I went down to eat. Then I went to the movie theater. On Sunday I went to the major Temple... no, on Saturday. Close to Cumberland Street, which is close to Hyde Park, Hyde Park corner. And I was there at the temple, I went there in the afternoon, to go around and refresh my memory because I was away from London for seven or eight years. And the day after, on Sunday, I went to Mister Isic, and I took the material. And he asked me, “Only this? Why don’t you take more?” And I told him, “Listen, I don’t know if I will be able to sell this right away, I have to pay you, and I don’t know if my clients are still alive, you have no idea,” and he replied, “Of Course I do, I saw the bombing in London, it was terrible.” Anyhow, I took material for what is today 30,000 pounds. In three weeks, I had sold everything, you know? Then I went to London again, and I bought double the amount I bought the first time, I paid one half, and the other half not, and then I started again.

Interviewer: When did you get married?

Oskar Gerber: So, that was during the Christmas of 1945. Because I didn’t have any documents, they were all back in Hungary, lost, burnt, who know? But we got married with a ritual. But then they called me to say it was invalid because there wasn’t any automatic transcription between the Rabbi and the town hall. Then we had to get married again in the town hall. Then we took two people to be our witnesses, people that did that for a living.

Interviewer: Mister Gerber, have you ever thought about going back to live in Budapest?

Oskar Gerber: No. After everything I learned after the liberation, I didn’t even want to see them. After learning about what had happened, I don’t read Hungarian and don’t speak Hungarian anymore, only with those who don’t speak any other language during auctions in London. They also come because they live in Germany, in Switzerland, or France. So, if they don’t know any English, they come to me to ask for help. Only then I speak to them, with the others I do not do that at all. I have completely erased it, the Hungarians, the Hungarian language, the Hungarian literature, no more! I don’t want to have anything to do with them anymore. And I wish that what they did to the Jews happens to them. Because what they did...from a million Jews—245,000 didn’t come back—the Germans also did that.

Interviewer: Mister Gerber, is there any message that you want to leave to your children and grandchildren, concerning the things you have gone through in your past?

Oskar Gerber: Yes, to avoid the Germans, the Hungarians, and the Slavic people. Only the Latino.⁹⁹ They should avoid the French, too, since they didn’t do good things during the war. They captured the Jews in Drancy¹⁰⁰ and gave those people to the Germans. Now they commended

⁹⁹ He is referring to people who speak languages derived from Latin, such as Italian and Spanish.

¹⁰⁰ Drancy is a commune in the northeastern suburbs of Paris in the Seine-Saint-Denis department in northern France. It is located 10.8 km from the center of Paris.

Papon,¹⁰¹ an ex-secretary general for the police-- he was a minister for Da Gaulle-- they gave him a life sentence. But they let him free because of his age, eighty or eighty-five years old. So, in Drancy, I also lost the husband of one of my cousins, she escaped alone. The children, all lost in that Drancy transportation.

Interviewer: Is there anything you would like to add, Mister Gerber?

Oskar Gerber: To avoid the Hungarians, the Germans, and the Slavic people. For us, the sun doesn't rise on the east, but on the west, you know? Never again. Oh well, I don't want to damn anybody anymore.

Interviewer: Very well. Thank you very much, Mister Gerber.

Oskar Gerber: Thank you.

¹⁰¹ Maurice Papon was a French civil servant who led the police in major prefectures from the 1930s to the 1960s. During World War II, he was secretary general for the police in Bordeaux and participated in the deportation of more than 1600 Jews.