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## Memories in Translation, Part 2: Herta Gerber Testimonial and the Italian Holocaust

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# Memories in Translation, Part 2: Herta Gerber Testimonial and the Italian Holocaust

Edited by Valentina Concu and Wesley R. Bishop

Translated by Valentina Concu

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## **Introduction:**

In our Fall 2020 inaugural issue, we at *The North Meridian Review* offered the first of a series of two Holocaust survivors' testimonies. These translations of Oskar and Herta Gerber, two Jewish Europeans imprisoned by fascists at Ferramonti di Tarsia from 1941 to 1943, provide a key insight into the experiences of Jewish folk during the Italian Holocaust. Oskar and Herta met in this camp upon Herta's arrival, fell in love with each other not long after meeting, and spent the rest of their lives together following the war.

The testimony of Oskar that we published last year was an examination of the Italian fascist regime and how the country implemented its infamous racial laws against its own Jewish population.<sup>77</sup> Herta's testimony complements Oskar's descriptions of fascist Italy while also describing her own experience of forced removal from the Polish city of Bielsko to the concentration camp in southern Italy.<sup>78</sup> Herta's memories will also add to the understanding of Italy's behavior toward its own Jewish citizens and the European Jews that were captured and imprisoned in the Italian camps—displaying open hostility and anti-Semitism but often not with the same ferocity as their German counterparts. *The New York Times* reported on such behavior, highlighting how, on one hand, Italian and European

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<sup>77</sup> Michele Sarfatti, *Jewish in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

<sup>78</sup> Today Bielsko is situated in the western part of the city Bielsko-Biala in Poland. It was an independent town until 1951.

Jewish folk lost many of their civil rights because of the racial laws. On the other hand, the Italian regime did not perpetrate the same type of executions in its concentration camps as did the infamous German ones.<sup>79</sup>

As we mentioned in the introduction to Oskar's testimony, the English translations of Oskar and Herta Gerber were commissioned in 2019 by one of Herta's relatives, who received the original interviews in Italian from the Shoah Foundation. The name of this relative is Joyce Field, a prolific Jewish genealogist. For the conclusion of this series we were honored to sit down and interview her for this issue of *The North Meridian Review*:

**Concu & Bishop:** Dear Joyce, could you briefly introduce yourself? Where were you born? Where did you go to school? What was your major?

**Joyce:** I was born in Bronx, New York, and we moved to Detroit when I was about 4.5 years old. I received my B.A., graduating summa cum laude at Wayne State University, in Detroit. I majored in English literature, with minors in Italian and Sociology. My graduate work was at Indiana University and Purdue University, where I focused on English and American literature and literary criticism.

**Concu & Bishop:** How did you end up in Indiana? What were your first impressions of the Midwest?

**Joyce:** My husband and I both received graduate teaching assistantships at IU. It was very challenging in the 1950s for a married couple, both majoring in the same field, to receive teaching assistantships at the same department. The Bloomington campus was gorgeous, and I loved the bucolic atmosphere after living in gray midtown Detroit. Then we received jobs at Purdue University. Well, Dutch elm disease had just killed all the lovely trees lining State Street and the campus was like a barren desert. My reaction was the opposite of what I felt about Bloomington. To console me my husband said that we would stay only one year, but here I am 64 years later.

**Concu & Bishop:** What do you currently do?

I am "retired" from paid employment. But I am active in political and cultural areas. I chair the redistricting reform committee for the League of Women Voters Greater Lafayette, and I am the Metropolitan Opera Live in HD Ambassador for the Lafayette area with a mailing list of 160+ opera lovers. I also maintain my involvement with genealogy by being a consultant with JewishGen.

**Concu & Bishop:** How did you live the last four years with Trump's presidency?

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<sup>79</sup> "Scholars Reconsidering Italy's Treatment of Jews in the Nazi Era," *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 2010, p. A28.

**Joyce:** Not well! I spent too much time reading about the daily insults to civil society and bemoaning the destruction of causes that I had fought for in the 1960s and 1970s. I spent too much unproductive time emailing people of like values about the latest Trumpian horrors.

I donated money to liberal candidates and political action committees and to activities trying to overturn gerrymandering. My son called me Don Quixote, but I said I had to do what I could to achieve a more just society.

**Concu & Bishop:** Could you talk about your activity and work as a genealogist? Why did you decide to embark on such an activity?

**Joyce:** I got inspired in the mid-1990s. I had “retired” and purchased my first Apple computer. The internet as we know it didn’t yet exist. All we had was a dial-up connection which was quite expensive because the connections were slow, and you had to buy time by the minute and hour. I was just browsing when I came upon the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum site and a datafile on transports to Auschwitz. I remember it was a cold winter day, and I was dressed in a wool plaid skirt, an Aran turtleneck sweater, and warm tights. I had a steaming cup of coffee on my desk, and the sun was shining brightly through my window reflected on the heavy white snow. A cardinal was sitting on a tree branch. I recall this background because of the contrast between the horrors of the concentration camp transport file and my warm comfortable home. My brain was flooded with images of the cold, starving Jews in the cattle cars to Auschwitz compared with my life. It was an “ah-ha” moment. I knew instantly that I had to be involved in Holocaust research. Of course, my husband and I had read and studied about the Holocaust for decades, but nothing was as vivid and soul-wrenching as seeing the transport lists on my small computer screen.

I then started searching for more Holocaust material, and in a short time I discovered JewishGen, an online Jewish genealogy site. They were looking for volunteers, and I immediately wrote to them. When I described my background, they brought me aboard. I assumed more and more responsibilities and developed cooperative relationships with other organizations worldwide to secure data that could be converted to searchable databases for researchers. I was promoted to VP for Data Acquisition and Research and oversaw three important projects: the Yizkor Book Translation Project, the Worldwide Burial Registry, and the Holocaust Database.

The purpose of the Yizkor Book project is to translate into English the many hundreds of these memorial books on European towns whose Jewish population was murdered by the Nazis. These books contain some of the most important information on these destroyed communities.

The JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR) is a database of names and other identifying information from Jewish cemeteries and burial records worldwide, from the earliest records to the present. It is a compilation of two linked databases: a database of burial records and a database of information about each particular cemetery. JOWBR aims to catalog extant data about Jewish cemeteries and burial records worldwide.

JewishGen’s Holocaust Database is a collection of databases containing information about Holocaust victims and survivors. It contains more than 2.75 million entries, from more than 190 component datasets.

Why did I dedicate 12 years of my “retirement” to Jewish genealogy? It became a mission to recover the names and fates of Jews whose identities the Nazis intended to obliterate. They and their lost worlds should not be forgotten.

**Concu & Bishop:** What does it mean to you to be a descendent of survivors?

**Joyce:** It is very difficult to explain my feelings: gratitude that my parents had the courage to leave Europe for the US with no money, no language skills, minimal job skills. I don’t know if I would have had their strength, fortitude, and belief in a better life here. I also am forever sad and angry that most of the relatives who did not immigrate did not survive and that I never knew them. I guess the emotions are anger and sadness. And I live with admiration for my parents’ lives.

**Concu & Bishop:** Why is it important to keep talking about the Holocaust and its survivors?

**Joyce:** The Holocaust is not only a horrific historical event but a warning to the world that it could happen again, that those horrible dark forces could unleash similar events. What happened on January 6th could be a harbinger of the future, as Timothy Snyder pointed out.<sup>80</sup> Jews are taught the importance of memory, of being witnesses. We are taught to be the guardians of memory so that the world will learn and never forget.

**Concu & Bishop:** Could you tell us who Oskar and Hertha were and your relation to them?

**Joyce:** Oskar’s father and my mother were siblings. Oskar was one of the oldest of twelve children and my mother was the youngest. My mother spent part of World War I living in Budapest with Oskar’s family, and she was like a nanny to Oskar. My mother and the other siblings who had immigrated to the US tried to get Oskar’s parents, his siblings, and his wife visas for the US before World War II began, but it was very complicated because Herta had a Polish passport while all the others had Hungarian passports. As a result, they were on separate quotas.

**Concu & Bishop:** What do you think these interviews represent in today’s world?

**Joyce:** They are a reminder and a warning. This could happen again. Trumpism was frightening to me as it reminded me of the 1930s in Europe and even the U.S. The rhetoric, the anti-Semitism, the nativism, the white supremacists, the religious bigotry, the fear mongering, etc. We are not out of the woods yet. Witness the political situation in Poland and Hungary. We still have the KKK, the Proud Boys, QAnon, and other groups here. We cannot blind ourselves to the hate and the fascist white supremacists here.

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<sup>80</sup> Here she is referring to the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol Building by Donald Trump supporters and far-right-wing groups trying to overturn the presidential election results. Timothy Snyder is the Richard C. Levin Professor of History at Yale University who, during the Trump presidency, wrote prolifically on the dangers of encroaching fascism in the United States.

To “help the world to never forget” the horrors of the Holocaust and the threat of fascism, in a season not long after an attempted coup at the U.S. Capitol Building which reminded many of the political turmoil of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe, we at *The North Meridian Review* are pleased to present Herta’s testimony for the first time translated into English. May we never forget, and never fail to rally against these destructive forces.

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**Interviewer:** Today is April 14, 1998, and I’m interviewing Herta Gerber Bratspiess. The interviewer is Maurina Alazraki. We are in Milan, in Italy, and the interview will be in Italian. Good morning, could you tell me your name?

**Herta Gerber:** My name is Herta Bratspiess Gerber.

**Interviewer:** When were you born?

**Herta Gerber:** I was born on the 23rd of September 1922 in Bielsko, Poland.

**Interviewer:** Could you tell me a little bit about your family, your parents?

**Herta Gerber:** My parents worked in commerce, my dad had a dental warehouse and he supplied all the dentists and doctors in the area. My mom would help out, and my dad would travel a lot. We were kids and we went to school, first the Jewish school, then high school. . .we had to go to a cloister, which was safer because they would attack us in the public school because we were Jews.

**Interviewer:** What was the name of your dad?

**Herta Gerber:** My dad’s name was Paolo Schuling, in Yiddish, and my mom Amalia. We lived in the same building where my grandparents lived.

**Interviewer:** Did you have any sisters?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, a sister, who now lives in Israel. Her name is Lili, Lea Schaffran. She has a daughter, who is married, and two grandchildren.

**Interviewer:** Is your sister older than you?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, she is. She is two years older than me. Until the end of the war in Italy, we stayed together. Then they moved; they did the Aliyah and went to Israel. My parents too, around one month after they went there.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Aliyah is the historical immigration of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, which corresponds today to the modern state of Israel.

**Interviewer:** Could you describe to me your house? Where did you live exactly?

**Herta Gerber:** We lived...well, Bielsko was kind of an important city for the production of fabrics; we lived in a beautiful area, the entire building was owned by my grandma, so we lived very well there.

**Interviewer:** Did other Jewish families live there?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. On the first floor, there was a Jewish family. On the ground floor, there were Catholics. And living together was good enough. There weren't a lot of Jewish houses close to us; this square was a little bit isolated, because there was a big fabric industry, and the owners were friends of my grandparents. We lived well, we felt safe, although sometimes there were some problems against the Jewish residents; the attacks would come from the side of Polish people.

**Interviewer:** To which school did you and your sister go?

**Herta Gerber:** The elementary school was a Jewish school. Later, we went to high school, it was called the Humanistic School.

**Interviewer:** What kind of Jewish school was it? Could you describe your school to me?

**Herta Gerber:** The school was kind of traditional, with religious rituals, they educated us with religion classes. I took a Hebrew class that I liked very much. It was a good school; we were among us. I have to admit that, although we lived in Poland, the language we used at home was German.

**Interviewer:** So, you spoke German at home?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we spoke German at home. The Polish people would complain about that... but my mom did not go to school in Poland, so she would speak in German, and we did that too.

**Interviewer:** Did you also speak Yiddish at home?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. Our grandparents spoke Yiddish and we liked to hear it so much that, when I can, I still buy some recordings that remind us of our language, our dialect.

**Interviewer:** Could you describe your life? You went to school, then what were your hobbies?

**Herta Gerber:** Oh well, it was the so-called bourgeois life, we had piano classes twice a week, we had gymnastics, that was at the Makabi. Our classmates went there too. We met new people. When we were on vacation, we would go not too far to the little town in the mountains, the little lakes. We would go there with my grandma; she would bring us everywhere because my mom was always busy. She would come with us on Saturday or Sunday. I had a little cousin, who was the son of one of my aunts; it was very beautiful.

**Interviewer:** Did you go to a synagogue?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. In Bielsko there were many. We went to the more progressive one, and a little bit more flexible about its traditions.<sup>82</sup> A beautiful synagogue and I think it still exists today. And then, there were a couple more where my grandparents would go, and those were for what they believed... first of all, the Hazzan<sup>83</sup> sang very well and they liked that, and it was smaller and more private. So, we would go from one to another.

**Interviewer:** Would you go to the temple on every Shabbat?<sup>84</sup>

**Herta Gerber:** When we were going to the Jewish school, yes. Later, I would not stay for lack of time, but you know, the school was a little bit more challenging, and since we had to go to school on Saturday, because it was a Catholic school, it became almost impossible to go. But we would go for all the festivities. And back at our house, there was Kasher.<sup>85</sup>

**Interviewer:** Could you describe to me the Shabbat at home? What would your mom do?

**Herta Gerber:** Oh well, first of all, Friday evening was almost more important than Saturday. My grandma would prepare the challah. She would prepare such beautiful bread loaves, that when I buy it here by Garbagnati, which has very good bread loaves, well my grandma would do them even better. She would also prepare all the fish the way we liked it, in the Polish way, you know? Fish fillet... she would also make some broths that are not allowed today anymore. The first plate was always for my dad and that was always a lot of respect between her and her son-in-law. When we did the kiddush, the mozah, those are things that I remember with a lot of nostalgia because here, yeah, we could do it, but life has become a little...

*Herta trails off here thinking about the food.*

**Interviewer:** Do you remember any other festivity? For instance, Pesach?<sup>86</sup>

**Herta Gerber:** Oh, it was very beautiful. We would start from the attic and collect all the dishes. The glasses with the golden edges, those were red glasses made of crystal, very beautiful, for the wine. My grandpa would prepare the wine himself, with some special raisins that he would order from a shop called Delikatessen<sup>87</sup> and that shop would also get stuff from foreign countries. They were light-colored raisins, not the dark kind, he would cut them into little pieces and put them in very big containers of a liter or a liter and a half. He would fill those up until a particular level, and then he would put... now I do not remember, he would put them on a little stove because back there, we had only those, but they were beautiful. He would start weeks in advance, and it had a unique smell.

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<sup>82</sup> Jewish communities distinguish themselves on how strictly they follow the Jewish law. While the most traditional communities follow a specific set of rules determined by the rabbis, the most progressive ones see Jewish law more as a guideline for their daily lives.

<sup>83</sup> The Hazzan is a Jewish cantor in a synagogue.

<sup>84</sup> Shabbat corresponds to Saturday, and it is the weekly resting day of the Jewish people.

<sup>85</sup> A set of dietary rules to prepare food according to the Jewish Law.

<sup>86</sup> Pesach, also known as Passover, is a major Jewish holiday celebrated in the spring.

<sup>87</sup> A shop that offers various types of food and pre-cooked meals.



**Interviewer:** So, everyone would celebrate Pesach?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, everyone. Then I remember, and this doesn't have anything to do with the Pesach, the pickles, that we normally buy, my grandpa would put those in big barrels with some acidic little apples which would make the pickles go naturally sour. He would put the sauerkraut...because in Poland those were vegetables, there wasn't a lot to choose from... Anyway, we would make it like this because we also had a vegetable garden that would border on the river Biala, which divided Bielsko from Biala, which were two separated cities back then. In this vegetable garden, he would plant everything: vegetables, flowers. We would spend hours there when he was working, but when all the vegetables were ready, we would go there. We enjoyed it a lot.

**Interviewer:** So, you went to a Jewish school until when? You said that after that, you attended a public school?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we went to a cloister. So, keep in mind that it was in 1939 when the war started, and I was starting my high school diploma. So, I went to the Jewish school 5 years before that, so it was 1934.

**Interviewer:** Why did you change schools? Because the Jewish school was gone?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, there was no Jewish school anymore. I wanted to study, but then the war started in 1939.

**Interviewer:** When you changed schools, did you have any problems because you were Jews? Did you hear—

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. My sister, who was 2 years older than me, went to public high school. The school was led by and full of people who were anti-Semites. They were all the children of officers and employees. Also, the professors—, they not only didn't have any respect but they also did not care about the Jewish students in class.

**Interviewer:** Did something happen in particular that you can remember?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. They would refer to us using a terrible word that they would repeat almost daily... how do you say that? You know, where people who are very sick in their skin, mangy?<sup>88</sup> That was the word. Many Jews went back to Palestine. Well, my sister after 2 or 3 times hearing that, she hit a girl who was the daughter of an officer, someone in the military. This girl fell down the stairs, and when she went back home, she told her parents about it. The principal called my mom. My mom had already told my sister that she wasn't going back to that school. He called her and he said to her, "Do you know what your daughter did?" and she replied, "Yes. I know, she told me. Since you are not able to protect my daughter, she had to do it herself. So, I'm taking my daughter out of school." So, there was this cloister, it was a high school with a cloister, like the Marcelline and the Orsoline here. It was an Austrian one, from Vienna, Saint Hildegard, and it was a fancy school. It was kind of expensive, you know? But it was a safe school, and for the religion class, a rabbi would come. I still remember his name, Rabbi Hirschfeld. He was a rabbi with red hair, a red

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<sup>88</sup> She is referring to the term "leper."

beard. He was the portrait of a stereotypical rabbi. He came to the school and taught where we played sports in the gym because there wasn't a crucifix there, while in the other rooms there was always one since it was a cloister. We did well there. There were also teachers of German. There was a noble lady, she was very nice, and she told us "You both speak very well, I would like for you guys to join us in the garden." She knew that the Polish people at the school didn't have an opportunity to learn this language. German is hard.

**Interviewer:** So, there were other Jewish girls in the cloister?

**Herta Gerber:** We were the majority there. Because once we transferred to the school, the others did it too. It was also dangerous to stay in the old school. I remember that my cousin was still going there... When he would get out of school, they would hit him. We needed to go and pick him up. Those were always horrible scenes. Since my sister was a little bit quicker with her hands, she was the one who always went to pick him up. With the backpack, she would punch people on the left and the right. And this was at a time when Adolf Hitler wasn't even in power. Oh, that was Poland back then. That was an innate anti-Semitism with them. And I also remember this, that our cleaning lady would go to church on Sunday. Sometimes, she would ask us, "Do you all want to come to walk around?" and we would go with her, she would bring us to church and we could hear the priest from the pulpit saying, "don't buy from the Jews," and this from the pulpit, after the homily, "because all the Jews are communist, and they should go back to Palestine." And this in Polish, you know? And guess what, they are anti-Semitic today as well, even without Jews. Hitler wasn't there yet. That was in Poland, but it originated in Russia. A pogrom. Do you know what a pogrom is, right? We experienced that in Bielsko<sup>89</sup>, before Hitler.

**Interviewer:** Tell me about it.

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, the house in which we were at, in that square. That square was all close, except for an exit on a little narrow street. And that street, which was also called "narrow street— enge Straße." On this street, when you would take it to reach the big street, there was a tavern of a Jew. On Saturday evening, workers would go there to eat but mostly to drink. One of them got drunk and didn't want to pay. The owners of these taverns also owned weapons because they always had to deal with drunken people. So, the owner of this tavern got scared that night because of these drunk people and shot them, injuring one of them. After that, the workers gathered together outside of the restaurant, and this started the pogrom. They started to go from one house to the other to rummage. They did not come to us because the doorman of the firm blocked the little road that would face that big street.

**Interviewer:** How old were you when that happened?

**Herta Gerber:** I was born in 1929, so I was 8 or 9 years old. And I remember that, after a couple of hours, you could hear it. They started burning down things, they cut the duvets because we used them on the bed. They cut them open and all those feathers. The city was full of those things flying around. And it was a pogrom. They ruined the windows of the shops, beat up people, cut beards of those people they met on the street and could not escape. For us, it was very weird because normally

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<sup>89</sup> The pogrom in Bielsko took place in 1937. The stores owned by Jewish citizens were boycotted, and many windows were broken.

those things happened in Russia or in those little towns close to Russia, but never in a city like Bielsko. So, with this, I want to tell you that the Polish people were perfect perpetrators also without Hitler. Hitler wasn't there yet.

**Interviewer:** There is something I would like to know. The summer of 1939. What did you all talk about at home? Was your dad worried?

**Herta Gerber:** It was terrible. I remember that my dad wanted to pack our stuff, take all we could take, and move to Israel in Palestine. He was an old Zionist, but it wasn't possible. My mom didn't want to leave her family, my grandparents. They were old already, sick, and she didn't want to leave them. And it wasn't easy. I don't remember it anymore, but in order for you to be able to go to Israel in Palestine you had to buy something, and that wasn't easy to buy. Anyhow, when the war started, close to Danzig, the Polish government called first the Jewish people to fight at the front. Look how evil they were. If you said no, they would take your citizenship away, but if someone had to die, they would send the Jewish people first and foremost. It was the Westerplatte battle, which was in Danzig. Gdańsk is the Polish name for Danzig. Hitler was taking over this piece of land. They didn't want to give up, and the first to die was a Jew, and he was the son of the Jewish family who lived in our house, Morgenstern. His older brother was able to survive. The first emigrated to Israel with a backpack, I remember. He went through Turkey, and he arrived even before the 1930s, in 1927 or 1928, he entered Palestine illegally. Then he started working on the farms, collecting oranges. He is still alive today, thank God. He is old, of course. The other brother, the youngest one, he survived too. The middle one was called to serve, and he died very soon.

**Interviewer:** So, your dad tried to get these visas to Palestine, but he couldn't?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, he was trying but couldn't get them. And it was already late. Then we tried to leave because they were saying that Silesia was going to be occupied by the Germans because we were so close to Germany. Then my dad had this supplier who asked him to go to Warsaw and stay at his house if we wanted to get away from Bielsko. We didn't have another way to escape, and we went there.

**Interviewer:** When did you go to Warsaw?

**Herta Gerber:** In August. The first ones to leave were the children and my aunts. My dad stayed there with my mom because of my grandma. My grandpa had already passed away some years before that. My grandma was very sick. When we arrived in Warsaw, we moved into the house of my dad's supplier.

**Interviewer:** This was before the war, right?

**Herta Gerber:** It was between the last day of August and the 1st of September. The second day after we arrived, the war began. On September 1st. During the first bombing, all the glasses broke, and we slept with the windows open. The apartment had 10 rooms. My dad took the last train... all the men left Bielsko. My mom stayed with my grandma because she couldn't leave her. My dad took the last train with many other Jews. That train stopped, I think, after Krakow, it didn't go any further. All the people got off and started walking. They wanted to go to Russia. They said, "we are going toward Misrach." When my dad was still in the train, a ticket inspector came on, and at the time, they didn't sell train tickets anymore, there weren't any ticket offices anymore. He asked my

dad for the tickets and my dad replied, “look, no one on the train has a ticket, that is why I don’t have it. And they said this train was to evacuate the area, so no ticket was needed.” The ticket inspector said, “No, no, you will now come with me to the station.” And they started walking through the woods, and my dad thought that he was about to get killed, to get robbed and killed. He had a lot of money with him because he didn’t know where he was going to end up at. But then, after a while, he let him go into the woods. After crossing through the woods, my dad arrived at a highway. But there were no cars. After a while, a car passed by, and then my dad went in the middle of that street— and this was what he told us when he arrived in Warsaw— He went into the middle of the street to stop the car. He saw that in the car there were two Polish officers, and they asked my dad what he wanted? My dad spoke Polish very well and said to them, “I’m fleeing because I was afraid to be caught by the Germans. I’m going to Warsaw because my family is there.” And they replied, “Look, we can take you for a little bit on this road, but then we have to go another way.” They were very nice, and they took him. Later, my dad tried to take another train that was still working. Anyway, he made it to Warsaw. When he got to our place, Orla Street 6, which means “the eagle,” he rang the bell, and we went to look out of the window because we were afraid. We saw an old man with a beard and who was messy. We didn’t want to open the door, but then he started screaming, “Open, open, it is me, it is dad!” For me it was... I had left not very long before that day and what did the man become? A part of it was fear, what he experienced, and then the trip to Warsaw. Anyway, a part of our family was there but we didn’t have any news from my mom. We didn’t have phones or stuff like that. So, we decided to go back, me, my aunt, and my little cousin. We arrived at the border between occupied Poland and Germany, we bought a magazine for my cousin, so he could read and hide himself behind it because he didn’t look German at all. Anyway, we made it to Bielsko. It was already very late at night, and we moved like robbers, and we went home. The same thing happened with my mom. She didn’t want to open the door. My grandma had already passed away and she was home alone. She was getting ready to leave because she had rented a place in Auschwitz. The Germans were saying that by the 25th of December Bielsko had to become Aryan, with no Jews. And she didn’t know what to do. She said, “I didn’t have any news from you all in Warsaw, how could I find you without any contact?” So, she rented an apartment in Auschwitz.

**Interviewer:** Why exactly in Auschwitz?

**Herta Gerber:** Because they said it was a beautiful city. My dad would go there very often, he had customers there— doctors, dentists, technicians. My mom also had good memories of Auschwitz. It was a nice city and there were Jews there. She thought that she could be together with other Jews. When she saw us that night, she almost fainted.

**Interviewer:** Then what happened?

**Herta Gerber:** We went back to Warsaw but when the Germans arrived, we started to look for ways to leave. We discovered that there were some consuls that were selling some passports. They had made a business out of it. The only one who was giving out passports for free, and we discovered that later, was the Italian consul. They would also try to find some Italian ancestors for the people who applied and gave them an emergency passport because in war times one could do that without asking the country for permission. We took the passports and citizenship from Nicaragua, which were 25,000 dollars in gold. We went to the Italian consulate in Warsaw to get a visa with this Nicaraguan passport, and I remember that there was a very long line. We had the only passport that could get the visa immediately, the others had to wait. I went there with my sister, and

they asked us where we wanted to go, what we were going to do in Italy. What we planned to say was that we wanted to do some health treatments with sand, close to Trieste. And they said to us, "You can get a visa for a year." It cost 6 liras, but at first, we didn't have the money for it. So, we borrowed some money and we got it.

**Interviewer:** Before we move on, could you tell me how was it in Warsaw, how did you get around, what was happening?

**Herta Gerber:** Warsaw was... and I don't know if you can call it "a life." So, it was impossible to find anything. Warsaw was terribly destroyed, especially in the parts of the ghetto because the bombing lasted one month, and during that month, the sirens there did not help us much. They also did not let us use the Polish shelters. They would not even let us come down. I remember very well that in the house where we were staying, the backyard was like a graveyard. There were last-minute graves of people killed...we could see the pilots above us. We would go down to the street holding our hands, my dad, my sister, my cousin, and my aunts. Sometimes, there was fire, and the ashes would burn our hair when we were standing against the wall because they would not let us inside. In the shelter, they would let the horses in, and the soldiers that had escaped, they were the first there. Those were the Polish heroes. The food situation was terrible, we could not find anything, not even with money.

**Interviewer:** Were you obligated to wear the star?

**Herta Gerber:** That happened later. They started distributing the food on the street. My aunt and I decided to go down to pick up some bread at least. The porter told the police about us, but luckily, the person in charge of controlling the lines was a soldier of the Wehrmacht, he came to us and asked me in German "Sind Sie Jüdin?" (Are you Jewish?). If that had happened today, I would have been smarter about it and said "no" to be able to save myself, but at the time I was afraid and I said "yes." And he said to me, "We can't give food to Jews, you know, but take it today." He was more generous than that pig Polish guy. So, life was becoming impossible. If you went around on the street, you could hear how they were taking people away, especially men. Then we saw that they started to isolate some streets, there were some bricks piled up, and we started wondering what those were for. We thought that maybe they wanted to fortify the walls, so they didn't fall. Nobody realized at the time that those were for the ghetto. Anyway, one day we were able to get all our papers and we left. There weren't any stations anymore in Warsaw, everything had been destroyed. In the middle of the road, there were the rails, and we got on the train there. We were the only passengers on the train. One can only imagine how scary that was. We were traveling in the direction of the Brenner, and then we arrived in Trieste.

**Interviewer:** Could you enter Italy with your documents?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we had an Italian visa. We got off the train and we asked where the Jewish community was because in order for us to leave... we could only have ten Deutsche Mark. So, we asked for help in Trieste and they told us that we could sleep in the temple. It was well organized because there were already people and cot beds. We heard at the shelter that they were trying to do an illegal "Aliyah," so we tried to contact our relatives in London through the Red Cross. We sent them a message saying that we were trying to get to London and if they could, send us some money. They got the message and through the Red Cross again we got the money. We paid.... I don't remember how much anymore, we paid for a transport that was still illegal back then. We had to go

to Siracusa to board and we were like 300 people that wanted to board this train that ended up in Benghazi, you know?

**Interviewer:** So, how long did you stay in the temple?

**Herta Gerber:** One month. Then we tried to find a house, and we rented a small apartment, and we were waiting for the right moment to go to Israel. They made us do some physical exercises because they were saying that the ship wasn't arriving at the port, but they would put us in boats and then let us arrive at the boat swimming. Can you believe that? My mom and my dad swimming. We attempted it somehow.

**Interviewer:** So, you left from where?

**Herta Gerber:** Trieste.

**Interviewer:** How did you get to Siracusa?

**Herta Gerber:** By train. We all had visas. We were in Italy. And I think that the other people as well were traveling without problems.

**Interviewer:** Who else was trying to board this ship in Siracusa?

**Herta Gerber:** There were people from everywhere. From Germany, the majority from Poland.

**Interviewer:** How much did it cost per person? Do you know?

**Herta Gerber:** It was a lot of money, but I don't remember anymore. However, my mom was very farsighted. She left the money with one person from Bielsko that was with us. He was a good person that we knew for many years and he said, "As soon as we set foot on board, we have to hand over the money." That is why my mom could get her money back. And this person that we knew gave the money back to us. That money was very useful because in Bengazi we were staying at a hotel instead of going... it was a good amount of money, but I don't remember now how much.

**Interviewer:** So, you boarded the ship in Siracusa. Did you stay a couple of days in Siracusa?

**Herta Gerber:** No, no. As soon as we got off the train, we boarded the ship. We could not even stay. The majority of the people had just the amount of money for the trip.

**Interviewer:** The crew of the ship was Italian?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, they were Italian.

**Interviewer:** And the first stop was Benghazi?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, the boat brought us to Benghazi. They allowed us to get off the ship and we were all happily waiting [to continue the journey] but then June 10th arrived, and they arrested us all. We were staying at a hotel like a lot of other people when they arrested us. Actually, if I remember

correctly, I think that everybody went to a hotel. They brought us somewhere between Derna and Barce, in the desert. A police station in the desert. I mean, there were things around, because if there was a police station, there must be something else as well. We could not leave but once a week, we could go back to Benghazi to buy some stuff.

**Interviewer:** Who arrested you?

**Herta Gerber:** The Italians, because we were Jews, so they arrested us. They could not have done that with the nationalities because Nicaragua wasn't at war against Italy. Even when we were still Polish, they arrested my husband not because Poland was at war, but because he was Jewish.

**Interviewer:** So, they caught you and how did they transfer you to the police station?

**Herta Gerber:** With trucks.

**Interviewer:** Did they not separate you from your mom and dad?

**Herta Gerber:** No, no, we stayed together at the police station. And that police station was a brick house, but there weren't... there were some showers but only for some hours during the day. There was not much water there to begin with. So, the rest... they gave us food there.

**Interviewer:** So, you were locked there like prisoners?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, and outside there wasn't anything. There was only sand. Where could I have gone? Once a week we could leave, I remember there were those trucks, and once in Benghazi, there were some Jews, poor ones, and they were all in line, one with a can of anchovies, one with some lemons or some other fruits, tuna, all stuff that they would give us. And then for Friday evening, they would invite us to their house to eat.

**Interviewer:** So, you could visit these families on Friday?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. We would all sit down on the floor like it was normal there. They gave us little chairs because they understood that it was hard for us; for them it wasn't. They were good people. Also, they would drink a type of liquor, you know, that was supposed to be good against mosquitos. And if you think that the smallest thing, they got trachoma. When we discovered that we started to worry because they were good people. And to live with this disease. They would give us that liquor, it was strong, and my sister, she had problems with strong things, and she started to cough. So, our friend told her, "So, Lili, turn around, put your hand back and throw it away, so they think you drank it." I still remember that. They would give us couscous, it was delicious. They would cook lamb, and when I was eating it, I had to close my nose because I did not like it. I didn't like either lamb or goat. I did not like that wild taste. Anyway, they were good people, very good people.

**Interviewer:** And then after dinner, you would go back to the police station?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, yes, to the police station. And we could not sleep anywhere else.

**Interviewer:** Was there a certain time you needed to go back or how did that work?

**Herta Gerber:** No, no. We were free at the police station. We would go around, we were free, and we did not even have a reason to leave. Also, we were in a country in which we didn't speak the language. Yes, they spoke Italian, but it was everything new for us.

**Interviewer:** Did anyone get beaten?

**Herta Gerber:** No, no. From the side of the Italians, I can say, there was a lot of humanity.

**Interviewer:** Did they interrogate you?

**Herta Gerber:** No, nothing. They told us that they would bring us back to Italy. They did not mention any prison or concentration camp. They told us that Mussolini wanted us back in Italy because where we were would become a battleground. Maybe he was right because they conquered it and lost it right after that like three times with the British. So, we left Benghazi...I think it was still 1940.

**Interviewer:** Where did you all go and when was it?

**Herta Gerber:** We arrived in Naples in September on a ship called *Esperia*. The *Esperia* wasn't a very big ship, and we went through much hardship on that ship. There were raids from the side of the British around Malta. So, I don't know which way we went through, but the sirens went off two or three times. We were without any light, standing still with people screaming, the children were screaming.

**Interviewer:** Was it a military ship?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, it became part of the navy. And we were staying at the bottom of the ship.

**Interviewer:** Were there children with you?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, there were also children with us... . When we arrived in Naples, they brought us in groups to the prison. Outside, some people were looking at us because we looked like we were all handcuffed. People started asking about us in Naples, and they said, "Jews, Jews!" But they did not know what we actually were. Then they throw us oranges, chocolate, some money.

**Interviewer:** How long was the journey?

**Herta Gerber:** It lasted a night. For us, it felt like a very long time, you can definitely believe that. Then, we arrived all dazed because the ship would stop once in a while. They did not want to go very fast. Anyway, it was a terrible journey!

**Interviewer:** So, you said that you were handcuffed when you were going to prison, right? They let you leave the ship and then they handcuffed you?



**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we were all tied up together. When we got off the ship, they brought us to Poggioreale.<sup>90</sup> They also told us that there were some of those trucks that they use still today to transport prisoners going to court, for instance. Those were pretty big busses, and they brought us slowly to the station.

**Interviewer:** Was there someone that was translating for you? How did you understand what they told you?

**Herta Gerber:** Some people spoke Italian and helped us understand. And that was easier for us, and also safer. You know, someone you don't know can translate what they want. But these people were also involved; they were also Jews. They escorted us to the station and then we got on the train, and we traveled for very long time. It was a long journey from Naples to Ferramonti di Tarsia.

**Interviewer:** Did you stay in Poggioreale before travelling to Ferramonti?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, and it was the pinnacle because it shocked me so much...today, I have asthma but there, even without asthma, just seeing those windows, so... it wasn't a window, it was a hole that went down and you had to look up through a slit, and that was the window.

**Interviewer:** Did they separate you? From your parents?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. But not from my parents. They separated me because of my age, I was underage. The women on one side, the men on another side. And that was terrible because my mom was used to being with my dad and there it was impossible. Then, the one who was translating for us, she was really sadistic. My mom wouldn't feel well during the night and to get anything like a tranquilizer we had to scream. I did not even know about this tranquilizer. I just saw my mom like that.

**Interviewer:** How many were in your cell? Did they put you in cells?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, in the cells. We were four to a cell. I was with the young people, my mom, my sister, and someone else but I don't remember who she was. So, I was with them, so three people. And my dad was on the other side.

**Interviewer:** Where were you?

**Herta Gerber:** I was upstairs with other children. Then I asked if I could rejoin my family and they were like, no, but if you do so, you will give up the food. They gave herrings to the children in the morning.

**Interviewer:** So, you were the oldest among those children?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. But there weren't only Jewish children, there were also other convicted children.

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<sup>90</sup> Poggio Reale is a neighborhood of Naples in southern Italy.

**Interviewer:** So, the Jewish children were together with the other children?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, and it wasn't a cell. It was a room because we were all underage.

**Interviewer:** So, it was like a nursery?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, like a nursery.

**Interviewer:** How many were there of you?

**Herta Gerber:** Twenty, maybe. But not all the children were from our group. There were young people too, some of them older, some of them underage, but there weren't many. And why were they keeping us there? Because Ferramonti's barracks weren't ready yet. They could not find another way to keep the people if not in that prison. For the air.

**Interviewer:** What did they tell all of you? Did they keep you there without saying anything?

**Herta Gerber:** They told us that we had to go back to Germany. They told us that. But they had another plan. One day they told us, "We are leaving today" and to where? To a concentration camp. Where? They said it was in Calabria. So, they loaded us on a track and brought us to the station.

**Interviewer:** Was that in the morning or the evening?

**Herta Gerber:** I think it was in the morning.

**Interviewer:** So, people could see you?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, of course, and they also asked why we were all handcuffed? And there too, some people brought oranges, I will always remember that. And from their faces you could see that they were afraid because they were seeing women and children. The journey took a while. It was a little train. And when we arrived at the camp, there wasn't a station in the Ferramonti concentration camp, the station was called "Ferramonti-Scalo," and the train stopped there. The director of the camp arrived in his car. I remember the car did not have a roof, and he would carry the women. The rest would go with the tracks. He was nice to us. He was an ex-superintendent from Salerno who became the director. I can't remember his name. He was nice, a good person. In general, everyone was good to us.

**Interviewer:** Was he from the military, from the carabinieri or the police?<sup>91</sup>

**Herta Gerber:** From the police. All of them. There was one among them, his name was Formica, this I remember. He went with my father-in-law. Back then he wasn't yet my father-in-law, to Milan by train because he had a 3-or-4-day permit to go visit.... the mother and the 3 sisters were free in Milan. They took only him and his dad, can you believe that? This man received presents from the family because my mother-in-law was trying to become a friend of him, but he was a good guy. He behaved himself humanly.

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<sup>91</sup> The Carabinieri are the national gendarmerie of Italy who carry out domestic policing duties.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember the date when you arrived in Ferramonti?

**Herta Gerber:** It must have been in September or October, around that time.

**Interviewer:** So, it was around your birthday, you were turning 17 years old?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, my birthday was on September 23rd, but it wasn't an important thing back then. It was more important to know what was about to happen to us. When we arrived in Ferramonti a new world opened to us, you know? Of course, with some limitations.

**Interviewer:** Could you describe it to me? Describe Ferramonti, how was it? What did you think when you arrived? What did you see?

**Herta Gerber:** A stretch of land and behind it there were some hills. It was so quiet, and coming from a place such as a prison, full of people. It was also relaxing for your nerves. When they assigned us our little apartment, there were two little rooms, one for my parents, a little kitchen, and outside there were the shared toilets.

**Interviewer:** So, you were able to be reunited with your family, right? With your dad and your sister.

**Herta Gerber:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Did other people also get these family apartments?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, all the families did.

**Interviewer:** Was the apartment made with brick walls or with wood? You called them barracks.

**Herta Gerber:** No, they weren't made with brick walls. They were made of concrete. They were white and [we thought them] clean. Because after what we went through in prison, with lice and bedbugs, it was brutal.

**Interviewer:** Did you arrive with your clothes? Did you still have your dress?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we had our stuff or what was remaining because the train, departing from Warsaw, we had 18 bags. We had all that stuff. When we arrived at the border with the Netherlands, they refused us, the Dutch people. But those were people at the border, so they were more German than Dutch. That is why it was written as "nicht zulassen," "don't trespass." And we had the tickets until London, we bought them, and it was supposed to be only a transit. Anyway, these bags were also sent to Rotterdam, and they stayed there together. We paid so much for the storage space, so many pounds, for 4 years. Schenker is not a joke.<sup>92</sup> Anyway, even from the affectional value, we had some important things.

**Interviewer:** So, you lost all your 17 bags?

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<sup>92</sup> Schenker is a division of German rail operator Deutsche Bahn AG that provides shipping and logistics services.

**Herta Gerber:** No, no. Those were sent away. They left us on the train. I remember what happened to my cousin before crossing the border between Germany and the Netherlands. They told him “jump you bastard Jew so that we can find gold coins.” But, you can imagine, we did not have anything with us. The Germans even took my mom’s wedding ring away from her hand. You mentioned our bags, we had the necessities for every day.

**Interviewer:** Did they give you some clothes there? How did they welcome you? Did they give you this family barracks, did they also give you some clothes, some blankets?

**Herta Gerber:** Oh well, we had some clothes with us because in Benghazi we bought some stuff before getting arrested. We had the money. We did not have much but to get changed, it was enough.

**Interviewer:** What did they do in Ferramonti? Did they register your names? Did they interrogate you?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, there were all our papers, our vaccines record against malaria, that did not work very well. We had a salary of 3 lire per day, and the men 5, the wives 2. Look, so much money.<sup>93</sup> It was enough to do grocery shopping, to buy food.

**Interviewer:** Tell me how it was organized. You had your own kitchen then?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, each one of us had our own.

**Interviewer:** And your mom did the cooking?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, she did. She would go grocery shopping to buy food in a shop there. I remember that there was an engineer working there that was in charge of accounting as well. He told me, “If you (formal)” I mean “you” (informal) because I was still a child, “if you need anything.” I remember, his name was Tassani, the director there, “I will get you what you need.”<sup>94</sup> He was very nice.

**Interviewer:** And this shop, did you work there?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, I did, at the register.

**Interviewer:** Who decided which jobs would one do in the camp?

**Herta Gerber:** You would ask for it. We were the first to arrive, you know. So, we had more possibilities. We were almost 2,000 or 3,000 people, 2,500 you know? The shop had a great selection of food. My sister worked at the tobacco shop, and her partner... So, she worked in the part that did

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<sup>93</sup> She is being sarcastic here.

<sup>94</sup> Italian distinguishes between an informal you (tu), usually used among friends and family, and a formal you (Lei), used in formal contexts.

not sell food. So, in a haberdashery. They sold soap and stuff like that. He was a doctor, and he would sell tobacco, the shop was divided into two parts.

**Interviewer:** So, you were also in charge of selling stuff.

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, that is correct.

**Interviewer:** Where did the stuff to sell come from?

**Herta Gerber:** It arrived from the towns that were close to the camp. The dealers would come in, we got bread every day.

**Interviewer:** Did you buy the stuff with the money you got daily?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, with that money.

**Interviewer:** Was that enough?

**Herta Gerber:** Oh well, not always. It depended on what you ate. If you had bread and onions, yes. But we had some money on the side. And I worked, so I had a salary. I don't remember anymore how much it was.

**Interviewer:** The jobs were all paid?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, they were.

**Interviewer:** Was your sister at the haberdashery paid too?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, my sister too.

**Interviewer:** Who was in charge of paying the salaries?

**Herta Gerber:** The administration. There were administration offices in the camp. There was a secretary, a director, and an engineer... what was his name? He was a good person. He was the one who designed the camp, he built it, and then he controlled the camp overall.

**Interviewer:** So, you said that there were barracks for families and then barracks for men only, right?

**Herta Gerber:** For men only, yes.

**Interviewer:** And the toilettes were outside?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, for everybody. Some barracks had one toilet. And for us that lived in the family area, there were some houses with the toilets.

**Interviewer:** Was there water?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, there was water, but we had water in the house too to shower.

**Interviewer:** And power?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we had power too.

**Interviewer:** Was the camp surrounded by barbed wire?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, there was a fence, but it wasn't an electric fence. There were some guards that would call out our names, they would come to the barracks, so we did not have to go out. They would count us to see if everybody was there.

**Interviewer:** And this would happen every morning?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, they did it in the morning, and they would also come inside our house. We would leave the door open. It was a friendly relationship. The people from the black market would come too, they would bring eggs inside the camp through the fence. And I remember that my father-in-law would go with a little trolley to bring watermelons. He got diarrhea once because of all that watermelon. And sometimes we went bathing because there was a river there.

**Interviewer:** Could you go outside?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we could go outside with an administrator. They would come with the people that wanted to swim in the river too. We could hear the bombing sometimes. We were at the opposite side of Crotone, and Crotone was bombed all the time because it had a port. The sky would turn red in Ferramonti and you could see it on the other side.

**Interviewer:** Could you move freely inside the camp?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we could. They even built a soccer field, and they would play some matches. So, the Polish Jews would play against the German Jews. My husband was one of the few who had football shoes because he used to play soccer in Budapest as a reserve for the national team.

**Interviewer:** Tell me when you met him because you are already talking about your husband, but I did not hear that story about when you met this beautiful guy. You met him in Ferramonti, right?

**Herta Gerber:** Oh yes, I met him in Ferramonti. As soon as we came in, on the first day, he was playing table tennis. They had put a table between two trees, and he was playing table tennis.

**Interviewer:** He was in the camp already for a couple of days, right?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. So, he was there... he was a month in San Vittore. He was already there, he had been already in another "confine," in Campagna di Eboli, and from there, he was sent to Ferramonti.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> "Confino" was the confinement on a small island or in a small village usually in southern Italy that the fascist regime used as a punishment for the opponents of the regime, Jews, and homosexuals.

**Interviewer:** So, you met him on your first day at the camp?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, on the first day. His uncle, who was in our group, was saying that he was sent to a camp and if he was in this camp, he had to see him. So, he introduced me to him.

**Interviewer:** So, there were Jews from different parts?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, Polish, Germans, some French, but not many. The majority were Polish and Czechoslovaks, and Hungarian Jews. In the transport that got my husband there, there were people who recently graduated from medical school. They all got there, and my brother-in-law was there too. He is not with us anymore. He wasn't able to take the state exam while he was there; he took it after the war.

**Interviewer:** So, what were you supposed to do all day?

**Herta Gerber:** We were free to do whatever. There were schools, kindergartens, there was an infirmary, there was a theater; they had concerts. We lived a life that was very culturally active.

**Interviewer:** I heard there was a temple there too.

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, there was. My sister got married there.

**Interviewer:** Oh, there was a rabbi there?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, there was, Rabbi Adler. But the strange thing was that this rabbi, after marrying my sister, after a while he said, "I'm not authorized, maybe your marriage is not valid because I'm not fully authorized." My sister was so sad, she said to me, "What should I do now?" and I said to her, "You will just get married again with another rabbi." She had all the papers anyway.

**Interviewer:** And this fist wedding, did your sister get a family barrack or what happened with her and her husband?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, yes. He came to stay with us. They put him with us.

**Interviewer:** I see. Is there anything else you remember that you would like to tell me about?

**Herta Gerber:** Oh, well. Life there became slowly normal. We were sort of ok with that, we didn't feel like prisoners anymore. We didn't stay that much there to begin with, a total of 18 months. We also asked to be moved up north to stay in confino.

**Interviewer:** Alright, could you explain this to me? So, you asked to be transferred to where?

**Herta Gerber:** Only married people. That means people that had family members. And this included my husband because he had his father with him. He wasn't alone. Since he wanted to go north to stay close to his mother, we asked to be transferred close to Bergamo.

**Interviewer:** So, you chose Bergamo?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we did. Also, the family of my husband was there, in Milan. And Milan and Bergamo aren't very far. So, we moved north

**Interviewer:** When did you leave Ferramonti?

**Herta Gerber:** In the spring.

**Interviewer:** Was it hard to get permission to be transferred?

**Herta Gerber:** Not at all, it was something fairly common. They proposed it, so, I think they needed to have fewer people in there too since we were constantly getting new people. And so, we arrived at Bergamo. He had to go around a little bit.

**Interviewer:** Which restrictions did you have? Did you have to stay in a particular place?

**Herta Gerber:** No, you had to rent a place and once a week, on Sunday, you had to go and show up at the carabinieri station. This was the only obligation that we had. They would give us money there too. And that was it. We couldn't go far without permission, outside of Bergamo.

**Interviewer:** Did you have your ids?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we did. We had our ids. We were living well.

**Interviewer:** How did you settle in Bergamo? Did you find a place?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we did. We found a place. We couldn't work though. My brother-in-law was working illegally as a veterinarian. He would go to the farmers, he was very friendly, and a lot of farmers got to know him. So, they asked him "why don't you come to check on our animals?" They paid him with eggs, milk, a chicken sometimes.

**Interviewer:** Did you listen to the radio? Did you get any news about the war?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes. While there, we managed to have a very nice group of friends, because the people there were curious about us and wanted to get to know us. And we ended up meeting a lot of families that were on our side, that means against our oppressors. We would listen to "London Radio." The priest was a very good person, you know? That priest, Giuseppe Bravi, he was a very... a real priest from the farmland, not like a priest from a big city that wants luxury. This priest had very old shoes on. Back then, they didn't get any stipend. His sister would provide for him. He would preach in the morning to a big group of very conservative women who were all about the church and he would say to them, "It doesn't make any sense that you come here to pray if you don't do any good deeds. I have to feed five people. Don't ask me who they are, but if you can bring something, I would really appreciate that." For instance, for Pesah... he knew when we had Pesah because of his books... he told us, "Look, now you can't eat bread anymore." It was very moving. He remained our friend even during the raids, he helped us go hide in the mountains, in the barns. And then, when we came back, we would give him something. When my brother-in-law would come, he would bring him stuff, he would buy stuff for him to help him out. But all the people from there helped us. That is the reason why we decided to stay in Italy. My husband, with his job, he



could have gone everywhere. But money isn't everything. To have nice and caring people around that are willing to help you is also important. I think things have changed though today.

**Interviewer:** Where did you live in Bergamo?

**Herta Gerber:** In Crusone.<sup>96</sup> It is a very beautiful town. Then my husband got transferred to Gandino.<sup>97</sup> And that was even better because the people there were even more helpful. We still have a very good relationship with the people that are still there. A lot of them have passed away.

**Interviewer:** What happened in July with the fall of the fascist regime?

**Herta Gerber:** Oh well, when that happened... so, you are talking about the time before? You are talking about Badoglio,<sup>98</sup> right?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Herta Gerber:** People started saying that the war had ended. My dad kept saying that he wouldn't leave his hiding place because he was scared. Then a very sad period started. They told us to get all our money.

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah, because you were still getting the money, right?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we were. So, he told us, "Take your money now because I don't know if you will be able to pick it up later. It is better that you leave and go hide in the mountains. They have already asked to see the list of all the Jews." Then, we went to our friends, yeah, in the meanwhile, we became very close friends. We went to Rovetta, where there was that priest, and we lived in a storage room with furniture in it, left by an emigrant that left for Switzerland. This was in the middle of the town, on a hard floor. And we lived there until 1945 because it was hard to go up in the mountains with our parents that couldn't speak Italian. We younger people could have done that. That situation was very sad. My dad never went out, my mom too. I would go around in the evening. I had a bike, it was a present from my husband a "Bianchi"<sup>99</sup> bike, it was heavy, but it was a good one. I would ride back to Crusone, to our former landlord, who was the president of the society of San Vincent,<sup>100</sup> and she would receive the ration cards because we didn't have them anymore. And with these cards, we were able to go grocery shopping. I would give the list to someone and they would buy the stuff. Once, when I was going there, the carabinieri stopped me. I had a backpack with me. So, one of them could write, the other could read...<sup>101</sup> In the end, one was carrying my bike, and the other was talking to me. Then I told them, "Now I have to go because my boyfriend is waiting for me." Then they looked at me and said, "Your boyfriend is very young then,"

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<sup>96</sup> Crusone is a town in the province of Bergamo.

<sup>97</sup> Gandino is a town in the province of Bergamo.

<sup>98</sup> Marshal Pietro Badoglio was an Italian general during both World Wars and the first viceroy of Italian East Africa. With the fall of the Fascist regime in Italy, he became prime minister of Italy.

<sup>99</sup> "Bianchi" is an Italian bicycle company and the world's oldest bicycle manufacturing company.

<sup>100</sup> The Society of St Vincent de Paul is an international voluntary organization in the Catholic Church, founded in 1833 for the sanctification of its members by personal service of the poor.

<sup>101</sup> She is trying here to tell a joke about the Carabinieri.

and I replied, “Oh yes,” and I left. They wouldn’t do me any harm because there were good people but that was during the curfew. But I went out anyway. I wore a black shawl like the farmers. I had a fake ID with a fake name “Baradelli.” “Giulia Baradelli.” I was able to give a fake ID to my husband too. A friend of my brother-in-law was a partisan, and they were able to get fake documents. Giovanni Battista Nodari, who was way older than my husband.

**Interviewer:** And what happened after September 8, 1943<sup>102</sup>?

**Herta Gerber:** After September 8, 1943, things went bad because they did raids more often. The SS were all around.

**Interviewer:** Who gave you the information? The priest?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, the priest. And there were also some farmers with the radio that tried to get the news. It was bad because we knew that the people could turn us in... people were also instructed to hand over every Jew for 10,000 liras, and that was a lot back then. Once a marshal came with a pickup truck to get us, but they did not find us. Then, he went to the priest asking, “You don’t know where these people are?” and the priest replied, “Oh, they left, they went to Switzerland, they crossed the border and left.” We were able to escape, and that happened on other occasions too. We had to change locations multiple times because the raids in the mountains were awful. My mom wasn’t feeling well in the hay, and there were rats, there weren’t that bad, but those were rats anyway.

**Interviewer:** So, you changed locations often?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we did. In the morning, we ate chestnuts. My dad would cut and cook them. It looked like... I wouldn’t say a picnic, but more like military training. The time wouldn’t go fast enough. And the war came closer and closer. It was getting more and more dangerous because there were so many fascists close to where we were hiding. We also feared that people would report us. Not everyone is a good person. But on liberation day...

**Interviewer:** Oh, tell me about it...

**Herta Gerber:** That morning, I was going to the mountains to buy milk with a friend who knew the way there. When I came back, they said, “The war has ended!” We ran home and my dad refused to go out for two days until the priest arrived and told him. “Look, it has ended, let’s go and see Mussolini hanging!” and he told us “Come with me!” He was a captain of the Bersaglieri.<sup>103</sup> He took a cart with a horse and we went to Milan— my sister, the priest, and myself. When we arrived at Loreto Square,<sup>104</sup> it was incredible. I saw a woman spitting on him, she had lost two sons. There were people screaming. It was terrible, I was disgusted in the sense that it wasn’t humane anymore.

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<sup>102</sup> On 8 September 1943, the Badoglio Proclamation by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, Italian head of government, announced that the Cassibile armistice between Italy and the Allies signed on September 3 had come into force.

<sup>103</sup> The Bersaglieri are a special unit of the Italian Army infantry corps.

<sup>104</sup> Piazzale Loreto is a major town square in Milan, Italy. The body of Mussolini was taken to Milan and left in the Piazzale Loreto for a large angry crowd to insult and physically abuse.

But those people suffered terrible things and I don't know how they managed to survive. It was raining that day. We went back and the priest said, "I'm happy. I saw the end of that criminal." He wasn't a communist or a partisan, but he led a patrol that killed sixteen members from the Muti group.<sup>105</sup> Those were fascist, very young boys, fifteen, sixteen years old. They killed them in the cemetery in Rovetta, we could hear the shots from our place. And the priest said that it was the right thing to do because they hanged so many people in the square. They would leave the bodies hanging for three days so that people could watch. They committed relentless slaughter, burned down entire towns, they cut the hair of those women who collaborated with the Germans. My husband sold two wigs to two women that got their hair cut. They asked him because he had relatives in Milan. He didn't know it was for that. They asked him to bring wigs used in the theater and he had some with curls. So, stuff like that, and when you talk about them, it seems like you are telling jokes.

**Interviewer:** After the liberation, did you still stay in the little town, or what did you do?

**Herta Gerber:** Well, after the liberation, we tried to go to Milan. My fiancé and I wanted to see if we could get married and if he could start working. And we wanted to have a home, that was a big deal. Where else could I have gone? There was an office in the square... what was its name? Do you know where Case Rotte street is at? In the city center, Scala Square. There is also the native home of ... oh, he was a writer... there is a restaurant there.

**Interviewer:** Manzoni?<sup>106</sup>

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, exactly! In that house, there was the office for those houses that had been seized. We went there. Those houses were now free, so we could have one of them. There was an accountant, Basola, he was also from the community, he said to us, "Wait, I will try to help you and give you an address." Close to the main station, in Vivaldi Street... we were always among musicians, there was a little villa of an ex-fascist... of a fascist, he was in a concentration camp. The accountant told us, "I could give you that one." And we said, "Ok, but if there is stuff inside?" And he replied, "You take the stuff down in the basement, and you put your stuff there." I didn't have any furniture, so I said "ok." We did that. Until we get a new house, we can use the bedroom. I gathered some Jews to get a full house. I went on Unione Street.

**Interviewer:** What was there on Unione Street?

**Herta Gerber:** I got married there. There was the Scalchi building, back then it was not really like a police station, but the temple was there, where I got married. There was a nurse and the infirmary. Some years ago, the nurse who was in charge of everything died. There were also a lot of people that had news, you could get there to get information. There was a tobacco market, the black market. Then I gathered a group of people. There was this family, the Weiss family, they had two children. I asked them, "Do you want to come and live with us?" It was for free. It was just to fill the house. But then, how did they pay me back... but this is another story. There was also a boy who was able to survive Auschwitz with his brother. He saved his brother and did all he could to keep him alive.

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<sup>105</sup> The autonomous Legion Ettore Muti was a fascist military group which was active in the area of Milan and Cuneo.

<sup>106</sup> Alessandro Manzoni is one of the most famous Italian writers of the 19th century.

He died here because of the after-effects. His name was Bernhard, I don't remember his last name anymore.

**Interviewer:** What about your parents? Where were they?

**Herta Gerber:** They were still in Crusone. We were in Milan without a house, and I would go back and forth. When I gathered enough people for the house because I didn't want to have a villa and live like a princess in there. The house had a beautiful garden with a lot of fruit. In the nights, people would come inside and steal the persimmons, and I had to pay the owners. We became friends with them, they were fascists. I explained to them that we didn't take anything, we went in because we didn't have a house. We became friends.

**Interviewer:** You got married in December, right?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, yes, I did. And in the meantime, I would go back and forth to Crusone to see my parents.

**Interviewer:** Who married you?

**Herta Gerber:** Friedenthal. My sister left, and my parents did Aliyah too. They went first to Cinecittà,<sup>107</sup> because from there, there were also the transportations to Israel. They lived for one year in a place made of tin until the stuff from London arrived. The furniture and money. Then they bought a little villa, and they started living like they were used to.

**Interviewer:** And you decided to stay in Milan with your husband?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, I stayed in Milan with my husband. He is a fur trader. It was hard at the beginning because there wasn't any material, so he had to work with very low-quality items. The goats were in terrible condition because of the war. They were barely standing. We bought a car and I learned how to sew. We had to start our life again. Before the war, he imported the goods. He was a supplier and fur trader. It was a tradition in his family, his dad, his granddad. He started to go back to London and in the meanwhile, we rented a house in Piave Avenue, because the fascists came back and wanted their houses back. I wasn't happy about it because of the area. It was the area of the railway workers. They got together and built houses. And I wanted to be able to go to the city center. So, we first rented an apartment on Piave Avenue where my husband kept the goods.

**Interviewer:** What else would you like to talk about from that time?

**Herta Gerber:** When our daughter was born, life was good again. They say that every child brings luck. I regret the fact that I did not have any other children after that. Those were hard times when the war ended, there wasn't much of anything and you could not do much, you are limited. Italy was ruined. Anyway, I'm happy and my daughter did better than me, she had two children.

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<sup>107</sup> Cinecittà Studios is a large film studio in Rome. With an area of 400,000 square meters, it is the largest film studio in Europe, and is considered the hub of Italian cinema. The studios were constructed during the Fascist era as part of a plan to revive the Italian film industry

**Interviewer:** What is the name of your daughter?

**Herta Gerber:** Barbara.

**Interviewer:** After the war, did you join the Jewish community again, did you go to the temple?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, we did.

**Interviewer:** Did your daughter go the Jewish school?

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, until graduation. She also kept out Jewish traditions in her family.

**Interviewer:** When did your daughter get married?

**Herta Gerber:** I don't remember. So, Isabel was born in 1974, so she got married in 1970... 1971, I don't remember. She married a very good man. We love him like he would be our son. Steven Sassoon, he comes from a good Jewish family.

**Interviewer:** Then the grandchildren were born...

**Herta Gerber:** Yes, the grandchildren were born. Isabel in 1974, and Paul in 1976. Isabel is in Israel. She came to visit for Easter, to spend time with us. She went to school, she is a good girl, she has already graduated. Paul studies in London. He is also a good man. They mean so much to us. I hope God will keep them safe and spare them any difficulties, not even mentioning what we have gone through. I would like to give them... not a warning, but a piece of advice. To try to stay close to the Jewish people and to not trust much the events that *could* happen because what happened to us was completely unexpected. We did not see any signs. I hope they will have a happy life without these difficulties.

**Interviewer:** Thank you.