A Veterans Oral History

Heritage Education Commission
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Slavko Vasiljevic
Narrator,
with comments by Frieda Vasiljevic

Stephanie Manesis
Interview

April 2008
Fargo, ND

Slavko Vasiljevic - SV
Frieda Vasiljevic - FV
Stephanie Manesis - SM

SM: Hi. This is an interview with Slavko Vasiljevic and his wife, Frieda Vasiljevic, is assisting with the interview in April 2008 in Fargo, North Dakota. This is regarding Slavko's experience as a Serbian during World War II. Frieda and Slavko are both now U. S. citizens.

SV: **[unclear]**

SM: N-i-s with an umlaut (Niš).

SV: **S, over the s.**

SM: How far is that from Belgrade?

SV: **That's 200 miles.**

SM: South?

SV: **Straight south of Belgrade.**

SM: How old were you when you joined the military?

SV: **I was 18.**

SM: And what year was that?

SV: Oh, 19 . . . I got to think. It was 1938 or 40.

SM: Nineteen thirty-eight or forty?

SV: Or forty.

SM: Nineteen-forty.

SV: Let's say 1938.

SM: Okay, nineteen thirty-eight.

SV: You weren't born in 1920?

SV: I was born in 1916.

SM: Are you 87, right now?

SV: No, yes. Oh, yes.

SM: Frieda, how old is your husband?

FV: Ninety-one.

SV: I'm 91, all right now.

SM: You were born in what year?

FV: Nineteen-sixteen.

SM: Nineteen-sixteen, so he was 18 when he joined the military?

FV: No.

SM: He was older?

FV: When did you join the military?

SV: I was eighteen.

FV: Oh, you went to military school then, right?

SV: Yes.

SM: In 1934 it would have been, that you joined military school?

SV: Yes, I was. Gee, I don't even remember anymore.

FV: Excuse me, where are the maps of Yugoslavia?

SM: Do you remember hearing anything about Hitler?

SV: Sure [unclear] Adolf. I personally remember the Nazis. In school we heard about dictator, Hitler, and the dangers he's creating all over Europe. And then it really happened. Then the Nazis occupied Yugoslavia in 1938. And then by two days there was – I think I was already prisoner-of-war in 19 – no, no, pardon me, let me straighten out.

FV: Forty-one, honey.

SV: Forty-one, yes.

SM: So from '38 to '41 you were fighting in the war.

SV: Fighting, yes, fighting in the war. Hitler was in Hungary, in Romania, Yugoslavia.

FV: The class of 1938-1940.

SM: Forty. Okay, thank you, '38 to '40. Now let me look at this map. You knew when you were in the military academy, it was not looking very good. You had a good idea that you would go to war?

SV: Yes. We have to go to [unclear] We go to wars … a hundred percent sure that we going to have a war with Hitler. Hitler occupy everything except Yugoslavia, which was still free. Then he marched in Yugoslavia and took it over in about one week. Oh my god, [unclear]

SM: Oh, it was beautiful.

SV: Oh, that's my hometown.

SM: No.

SV: [unclear] **near, very close.**

SM: But wait now, I thought you said you were raised in Niš.

SV: **In Niš.**

SM: But this is also your hometown?

SV: **Sure and I born in the area.**

SM: You were born by there?

SV: **Yes.**

SM: Where?

SV: **[unclear]**

SM: How do you spell it?

SV: **It's a big, big place.**

SM: How do you spell it?

SV: **[unclear]**

SM: Chopnia?

SV: **[unclear]**

SM: Choplina.

SV: **No, not here. I don't think they got . . .**

SM: That was beautiful place [unclear].

SV: **It was a great place.**

SM: So you were born there and how old when you moved to Niš?

SV: **Oh, I was already in elementary school. So I don't remember.**

FV: **Seven – six or seven?**

SM: You mean like six or seventh grade?

FV: **No, six or seven years old. Wasn't it when you . . .**

SV: **Something like that, yes.**

SM: Then the war started in '38, where were you fighting?

SV: **No, I was. No, the Eastern Front …I was close to the border, Vlasotince.**

SM: Vlasotince … So you were defending this border for how long?

SV: **Not too long, the Germans already were in Bulgaria with a full force … full force in Bulgaria; in full force on the north side.**

SM: So this side by Hungary and Romania and Bulgaria.

SV: **All Germans.**

SM: What year approximately?

SV: **Nineteen-forty.**

SM: Nineteen forty and then when did you get captured?

SV: **I was captured in April 8 of 1940.**

FV: **Forty-one.**

SV: **Forty-one.**

SM: April 8 of 1941?

SV: **[unclear] that way.**

SM: And did a lot of men in your regiment get killed?

SV: **Oh, no, no.**

SM: Or most of them captured? Did you surrender?

SV: **No, no, I was abandoned. I just walked. They left me to be prisoner.**

SM: Did the men in your regiment put up their flag and surrender or what did they do?

SV: No.

FV: It was the whole command [unclear].

SV: It's very hard to explain. This [unclear] fell apart. And then we saw the troops – the companies and [unclear]. I don't know how to pronounce – parts of the troops, then they left me into the German troop hands. Germans was all motorized. We didn't have a motor. We didn't have the trucks.

SM: No vehicles, nothing?

SV: No, none.

SM: So you guys just walked into the German's hands because you knew you were going to get killed?

SV: That's right. No use to fight anymore because the cause is completely lost.

SM: Now did they have you in a camp, a military prison here, or they took you up to Austria right away?

FV: Oh, no. He was [unclear].

SV: No, they took me to from here in Pirot the first time. I was here. There was a military camp before in the prison time. We spent for about six days there. Then they took us by train into the Bulgaria. Then we spent in open grounds, open field, for about seven or eight days. [unclear] in the area, you know, and the rain. Usually it rains when the military goes someplace. The rain always, I remember. I knew it would rain every day. I [unclear] dry – completely dry. More in the rain – country was going to pot and even the clouds were crying. Then we were in this place for about three days and three nights. Mud up to here … you sink slowly foot marching – thousands of people around.

SM: Thousands of . . .

SV: Yes.

SM: . . . of Serbians, mostly.

SV: Yes.

SM: Prisoners.

SV: **Prisoners.**

SM: And then they moved you from there?

SV: **And from Bulgaria, they moved us closer to the Danube River.**

SM: By the Danube River.

SV: **And then one day they took us to Romania and almost by the Black Sea. And then we saw the German troops getting ready to go to Russia. We knew right away, they want to have a war in Russia. Not a couple days after that started, Hitler's invasion into Russia.**

SM: Now were you at a prison or just like a makeshift camp or in . . .

SV: **Oh yes, in prison.**

SM: In Romania there was a prison?

SV: **Prison, yes. There already was a camp. Oh, then the Germans were organized absolutely [unclear].**

SM: And do you remember the name of the prison?

SV: **Oh, I think, Turnu Măgurele.**

SM: In Romania?

SV: **In Romania.**

SM: And how long were you in that prison?

SV: **Oh, not too long. There was kind of like a camp established only for bringing down the prisoners together from different area. And then when they were enough, then they put you all in a train for Germany.**

FV: **Transport to Germany.**

SV: **Yes, transport to Germany.**

SM: So you think you were there for a month or two months or . . .

SV: **No, I think it was two weeks, two or three weeks at the most.**

SM: Two or three weeks and how did you feel about them going to war with Russia? Were you thinking the Russians were going to beat them or were you nervous?

SV: Oh yes. You know, in Russia, they were prepared already. And then this was our only hope – the Russians will do something.

SM: Did you think that the Americans were going to get into the war?

SV: **Oh, yes.**

SM: You did think they were going to?

SV: We were waiting for that.

SM: You were?

SV: Oh, yeah, absolutely. It was an open book for us that Americans will come into the war sooner or later.

SM: You thought if the Americans came there'd be some hope like World War I.

SV: Oh, absolutely. Oh, big, oh – biggest yes.

SM: Biggest yes … so first the Russians and then you were hoping the Americans?

SV: The Americans.

SM: And then how did the German's treat you here in these camps?

SV: In this camp, was pretty good because you can see this is not normal permanency in the camp.

SM: Okay.

SV: Pretty near every day they were bringing, I don't know if you like to listen to this? Horses, maybe 50 or 60 or so to feed us, and then they were butchering and burying – right in the middle of – with people watching in the . . .

SM: In front of you, they were butchering the horses to feed you.

SV: It was good, not bad. If you don't have anything to eat.

And then from Romania, we went on trains to Germany, of course.

SM: And then where in Germany did you go?

SV: First time was in Nürnberg and then the second two years in Hammelburg.

SM: Haminburg?

SV: Yes, sent down to Germany … two days.

SM: And it was a prison camp outside of Haminburg?

FV: Hammelburg.

SM: What is it?

FV: H-a-m-m-e-l-b-u-r-g.

SM: How did they treat you in those two prison camps?

SV: Oh, when in camp, we were having soup, soup, soup. It wasn't food, awful all day, every day.

SM: Were you starving all the time?

SV: No, not starving. I can't say that. No, you can have the soup. You can drink. You can eat. You can eat the soup, every day, every day.

SM: Soup every day. So were you hungry every day or not really?

SV: Not really hungry, but you can't eat anything solid. You like to have solid food, we did have a piece of bread. It was different, I don't know. There was German black bread in the form of a brick. Absolutely looked like a brick if you look at it from the side. In the beginning we were 16 guys and a loaf of bread. Sixteen people – ha, ha – how are you going to divide that? Boy there was hungry eyes watching you, you know.

SM: To make sure you didn't take too big of a piece?

SV: That's right.

FV: Yes.

SV: And that worked and then pretty soon, gee, ha, ha, ha, it annoyed you … Then you would scale it and pull off a piece of it.

SM: They wanted you to weigh the bread to make sure it's equal?

SV: Oh, yes. They didn't want you to eat too much. Not even [unclear]. Oh boy, it was a sickening, sickening thing. My god, it was sickening, oh, terrible. And when somebody's hungry, you know. Don't eat too much or too small to eat. And then there was first crumbs of those – the scale.

Then we got moved into barracks, another hundred people in your barrack. It was a little bit too much.

SM: A hundred people in one barrack. Did you sleep on like wood slats?

SV: Yes, I was sleeping up on the third floor.

FV: On the third level.

SV: Third level.

SM: Third level.

SV: One, two, three in each box.

SM: No mattress.

SV: No mattress, who's a mattress? Yes, yes. That big. Oh boy. First few days, you find your leg in your face, you know, … to find where you can put your arm up and the shoulder to sleep. Then as soon as they turn the lights off, listen to visitors coming into the place. They picking . . . (11 sec)

SM: So you didn't know what would happen to you if you went back to the communist regime.

SV: No, no, that's right.

SM: Okay.

SV: And then we stay in Austria.

FV: At the border?

SV: At the border for (4 sec) three weeks, four weeks – then they put us in more central Austria and . . .

SM: To St. John's?

FV: **You landed in Sankt Johann?**

SV: **Sankt Johann**

SM: Is Sankt Johann where he landed. But now, where on the border of Austria were you for three or four weeks?

SV: **It was at [unclear].**

SM: Cloriska (sp?) up here somewhere?

SV: **No, no, [unclear].**

SM: Over on this border … oh here. Klagenfurt?

SV: **Yes, yes, something like that.**

FV: **Klagenfurt.**

SM: Klagenfurt, so you were in that area, and then you "flew" to Sankt Johann?

SV: **Yes, some of it was pretty fair. Not bad, they don't have that much to do, you know.**

SM: Did they make you work?

SV: **Those who weren't officer, they can go to work if they wanted to.**

SM: What kind of work?

SV: **Oh, fieldwork.**

SM: Fieldwork?

SV: **Harvest.**

SM: Okay, harvest but you didn't have to work if you didn't want to?

SV: **No, officers don't have to work by the Convention.**

FV: **By the Geneva Convention.**

SM: Oh the Geneva Convention stated the officers do not need to work. And did they follow the Geneva Convention, for the most part?

SV: Oh, yes. That was really surprise for all of us.

SM: Wow, so then when did you go to Austria?

SV: After we liberated, we came to [unclear].

SV: Not right away, but they were having the same camp, of course, now it was liberated in another – I think was about, oh, three and three and a half months.

SM: Okay, now wait, so you were in Hammelburg when you were liberated?

SV: Yes.

SM: And when was that?

SV: It was in 1940. . .

FV: April '45.

SM: When Hitler died, you were liberated and then you stayed there for a while?

SV: Yes, we stayed. You know the railroads and the communication were absolutely destroyed. No movement. We needed a whole train and so we stayed another two, three months.

SM: Two, three months and then you went to Austria?

FV: They left like in July, I think.

SM: Of '47.

FV: Yes.

SV: And when did you get married?

FV: The next July.

SM: July of '48 and so then you were married for more than a year.

FV: Yes.

SM: And were you living in a camp or were you living . . .

FV: Youth camp, we had a room to ourselves.

SV: Oh, yes.

SV: She was a member of the camp.

SM: So they would allow husband and wives to live in the camp?

FV: Yes, they had lots of them there.

SM: Really?

SV: Um hum.

SM: And most of the women were Austrian?

FV: Austrians and weren't there some Germans, too?

SV: Some German, yes.

FV: And did some of the women come from Serbia, too?

SV: Some did, yes.

SM: When was your lowest point, when you thought it was not looking good? You were not sure you were going to make it? When was your lower low point?

SV: Nineteen forty-one, ha, ha, ha.

SM: When you got in there?

SV: Oh, sure. You know, Yugoslavia didn't prepare us for any war in the first place and Germany was just – Hitler was making Germany stronger and stronger, militarily. And he was already in Czechoslovakia and Poland and Austria and he was [unclear] in Russia. Only Yugoslavia was still free and Greece. Oh, in Europe at the time. Italia and Germany was allies and they were conquering them all over Europe.

Yugoslavia and Greece were the only remaining free country and Hitler would one day attack Yugoslavia. Not that we wanted that to happen. He took Yugoslavia overnight, as they say.

SM: Overnight, really?

SV: No, in a few days, but it looks like overnight and then in Greece in the same time, same move, because they are adjoining to each other. I was scared, too, that day the German soldier came after the war started … about eight days after war.

SM: Okay, wait a minute. So I didn't realize that you were captured eight days into the war?

SV: No, I was captured in the year 1941, I was captured on April 8, 1941. To [unclear] being eight or ten days.

SM: So I didn't understand that, you were fighting along the border, you're showing me?

SV: The German army was all motorized and they were moving like in – west. Yugoslavia was completely surprised and conquered in no time. And then we were under the rule of the Nazis for the duration of the rest of the war, until '45. I became captured or prisoner of war on about 8th of April or about eight days after the war started.

SM: So you were a prisoner of war the whole time?

SV: Whole time, yes.

SM: Didn't Yugoslavia think that Hitler – I mean, didn't they realize that all the other countries were taken and they were going to be invaded?

SV: Oh, Yugoslavia, we knew what would happen. We didn't have the forces ready for war, for this kind of war as Hitler was using it. And then his troops were going motorized and moving fast. Not sitting in one place for days and preparing something or planning war, I mean. They were like from, let's see, from Fargo to Jamestown, in a couple of hours was nothing. And then, oh naturally, they was coming into Yugoslavia with force and capturing Yugoslavia in – was it eight days? Whole country was under the rule of the Nazis, including Greece.

SM: So before Hitler invaded Yugoslavia, did the Yugoslavian government think that Hitler was going to invade and they just weren't prepared?

SV: Oh, yes. I think that not only the government, but people knew twhen Hitler conquered all of Europe, except Yugoslavia and Greece was still free. We knew right away that he's not going to stop that. He is going to conquer Yugoslavia and come in Greece. And finish with Europe because he wanted to go to North Africa. The shortest way from Europe to Africa is from Greece to Egypt and he finished that. Then he turned one of his forces to Stalingrad, there in south Russia. And we were under the rule of Nazis for the duration of the world war until 1945. But I was captured in 1941 and brought in Germany.

Yep I was sitting, literally, and then I become a prisoner and they took me to Bulgaria and Romania, and then to Hungary or Austria and then to Germany, we were in permanent camp, Nürnberg and then two years in Hammelburg, which is from Nürnberg, maybe about 300 miles northwest.

And then we were another two years up in that Hammelburg, when we were liberated by the United States Army. And I stay in the camp for almost a another year because railroad and communication were broken during the war. And we were really staying in camp. I mean, we were free to go, to walk around barrack, whatever, but no transportation. And we can use no train, no car, no truck … just destroyed.

FV: Yes, did you tell Stephanie that General Patton is the one that . . .

SV: General Patton's son-in-law was in the same POW camp with me –almost in the same barrack.

SM: And what was he like?

SV: He was young.

FV: Well he was in the American camp. You were in the Serbian camp.

SV: In the American part of . . . young man, like officers … officer, lieutenant. He looks like – to me, everybody looked the same.

SM: All the Americans look the same.

FV: Patton came with his tanks to the camp.

SV: One day coming to the prison camp, one detail of Americans. They show up on the horizon. We're thinking, my gosh, how could, really, everybody knew where the front was.

Oh, this is impossible. For about nine months to travel through hundreds and hundreds of mines to come to our camp, and that was a detail of cowboys, – we called them cowboys – came down in the camp. Look at those [unclear] around the camp, come in and took all America's prisoners with them out… five-six men, you know, can sit on top the tank and then go back.

SM: Now this is after the camp had already been freed you're saying?

SV: No.

SM: This is the first time it had been freed.

SV: No, during the war.

SM: During the war?

SV: Oh yes.

FV: No, toward the end of the war.

SM: Toward the end of the war, so an American, so this was Patton . . .

SV: Toward the end, yes, Americans came.

SM: This was Patton.

FV: Patton's group.

SM: Came to the camp and took five or six Americans?

FV: Oh, no, more than that.

SV: No, Americans were in the rain and then they broke through pretty fast. And after they marched through the – if I looked on map I can do it better – they broke about 300 miles into Germany and came to our camp on, I think, it was 8th of February.

SM: Of 1945.

SV: And then we was all liberated in our camp and they then go further east in Austria and Vienna and Berlin and so forth. And then we were able to be liberated but we stayed in the camp for another year in Germany. We can't go anyplace else because the railroad and communication were broken so badly nobody can move anyplace.

SM: Okay.

SV: **Our camp was about 3,000 men.**

SM: Wow.

SV: All officers.

SM: Wow.

SV: [unclear] absolutely unbelievable.

SM: Three thousand of Europeans and Americans?

SV: Yugoslavs.

SM: Yugoslavs, so they kept them all by country together?

SV: Oh, yes.

FV: Well, you had all kinds there. You had Serbs, Americans, Turks.

SV: Oh, yes, in the beginning were Turks and Belgian and Hollander and Norwegian and Greeks and Egyptian. I knew every nation up there.

FV: And lots of Americans.

SV: Only a few Americans.

FV: Well, you were liberated, then you stayed one more year in Germany.

SV: We stayed one more year in the same camp and the same location, except kitchen was much better.

SM: I'm sure it was.

SV: We were going into town.

SM: How far was town from the camp?

SV: Only about three miles.

SM: So you'd have a long walk.

SV: Yes, down the hill and coming back had to walk up steep hill. And then we [unclear] all places where they were selling meat and other products. And now kitchen was much better with our cooks.

SM: And you had your freedom?

SV: Yes, oh, yes, freedom and we was walking around. Anyway, I stay another year up there because of communication was broken. And then after we first went from camp to ship, [unclear] I've forgotten. Man, oh man.

SM: After a year, you went to Austria or another place in Germany?

SV: Then we went to Austria with the train and then we went in through the tunnel, Mallnitz, and then we're stayed overnight in the open sky. I was sleeping on the grass and [unclear]

FV: Honey, slow down.

SV: [unclear]

FV: Oh, hay.

SV: Oh hay, yeah. We were sleeping in hay or on the grass or [unclear] whatever we have and then in the morning, we were on the English zone because Austria was separating four zones.

FV: Yes, we had Americans, English and French and the Russians occupying.

SM: Oh, four separate zones?

SV: Yes and we were in the American zones. That was luck. Soon we were back in the train and came to Salzburg. And that's where we stayed ... central part.

FV: Well, the reason you went to Mallnitz, that was before you moved into Yugoslavia. You got to tell Stephanie that. Why you didn't go further?

SV: Yes, we stop in Mallnitz – that town before Yugoslavia – and we decided not to go back.

FV: The whole train was just Serbian officers.

SV: Just full train of officers.

SM: So you worried about your safety?

SV: Not only that, we was thinking politically. If we do that – it was to deny going back to our country, which is under communistic rule. And that was the main reason, really. Not politically, but really. Nobody wanted to go back to a communistic country.

SM: You didn't want to go back to the communistic world?

SV: That's right.

SM: So all of the officers got off the train?

SV: Oh, yes, every one come back into Salzburg.

SM: What was it called – Machrichts, the town?

FV: Mallnitz.

SM: Mallnitz, was it close to where you lived?

FV: No, Mallnitz is just before the border from Austria into Yugoslavia. And then they went back and – you arrived in Salzburg? [unclear]

SV: No, we were in Salzburg. From Salzburg we went back in Sankt Johann. And then that's the town . . .

FV: St. John, it's called Sankt Johann, which means St. John. During the war, when Hitler overran Austria, he had that changed – he didn't like religious names, so it was called Markt Pongau.

SM: You arrived in Sankt Johann?

FV: In Sankt Johann, what day, do you remember?

SV: Forty-six.

FV: Must have been '46.

SM: Okay.

SV: In the spring of '46. Then we came to Sankt Johann and everybody went out of the train. We left the train empty, still on the tracks, and then we moved. You know, in Sankt Johann was a camp. [unclear]

FV: A garrison. Right, Army there?

SV: We moved in that garrison. The old barracks were ready for us.

SM: And they were empty, you're saying?

SV: Empty, absolutely.

FV: Yes, because the Austrian army was dissolved. You know, in the war.

SV: Then we moved in the quarters up there and we stay for a long time.

FV: Well until 1949.

SM: That's a long time. Now were you – was it frustrating or angry that you were in the camps for so long or were you just so relieved to no longer a prisoner?

SV: No. Of course, we liked it. There is the [unclear] line we tried to cross, like you say, [unclear] – and then do you want to go home? Because Yugoslavia was under communism – Hitler, you know. We didn't want to throw out one dictatorship and go into another one. We protested and every class was all talking about a bunch of Yugoslavian officers who refused to go in Yugoslavia, because Yugoslavia was under communism. They wanted to be living in a democratic country and in a democratic government. Well, now our [unclear] was four years old. Communism was so strong in Yugoslavia at the time and nobody can remove it – untouchable.

SM: When you said that General Patton came to your camp in Germany, what timeframe was that …in '44?

FV: Forty five.

SV: His son was a prisoner in the same camp.

FV: Son-in-law, Slavko.

SV: He was a prisoner in there. And one sunset –I remember pretty good – the detail of Americans, I think it was 12 or 14 guys in uniform came down this hill through the wire.

SM: They just drove over it with their tanks or . . .

SV: Oh, no, they cut open. Those tanks were staying [unclear] way, way up on the hills. And they came in and the horrible [unclear] was waiting. And we were celebrating. Those guys came over the [unclear] and the guards around the camps left. They were scared. They just left.

SM: So all the Americans left out of the camp at that time or just some of them?

SV: No, just some.

FV: Well, did he take his son-in-law?

SV: Oh, yes, sure.

FV: He took him, but he was recaptured later, wasn't he?

SV: Yes, later on.

FV: A lot of them were recaptured.

SM: They were recaptured later.

SV: And they was pulling through the...

FV: The German lines.

SV: They had to walk. The major was captured again and brought back again. Boy, there was no [unclear] beaten up and tired and . . .

FV: But then it didn't take long before the Americans came through completely.

SM: Okay when General Patton came and took the Americans, was that a couple of months before April of '45?

FV: Oh, no, that wasn't that long ... wasn't it just before the rest of them came?

SM: Like maybe just in March or a few weeks before it was . . .

SV: It was just an episode, a little episode in the prison camp.

FV: Well you know, Patton was kind of a daredevil.

SV: But that was one unit of Patton's own men came to that camp to get Patton's son-in-law. And then the next day they came back, the Germans brought them back in.

FV: How long before the rest of the Americans came, do you remember?

SV: Oh, that was . . .

FV: Wasn't that long really?

SV: You mean the liberation?

FV: Yes.

SV: Oh, yes, then [unclear] that was on April 8.

FV: Yes, but Patton must have come a couple of days before.

SM: Was it a couple of days or a couple of weeks or. . .

SV: They came four days after they [Patton's men] left. They were close – back to freedom.

SM: But four days after Patton came, then the liberators came to get you guys liberated?

SV: Yes.

SM: So you knew when you saw them, obviously, that the prospects were very good.

SV: Oh, sure. The [unclear] in years, someone wanted all the news of what's going on. You know what … in the camp under the floor of our barrack, there was a little radio station.

SM: And you guys had it hidden under there?

SV: Oh, sure.

SM: So you heard things.

SV: Guys were sitting down there listening all the time. Well we usually got a [unclear] and listening in the barracks. Six days was is it? He runs out and tells a couple of guys and in about 15-20 minutes the whole camp knows.

SM: Everybody knows, so in the camp, you guys knew when things were starting to look much better for the allies?

SV: Oh, sure, yes.

SM: You knew that.

SV: Yes, sure.

SM: So that must have been very encouraging?

SV: Oh, yes, oh absolutely.

SM: Because the first couple of years, you probably didn't think that Hitler was going to lose, did you?

SV: Oh, no, no, no. The first couple of years there was just no hope … just terrible. Just terrible in food and everything else, especially bug [unclear] bed bugs.

SM: Oh, you told me about the bed bugs were terrible.

SV: You especially did not like – my gosh – as soon as the Germans came in and turned lights off. It's time to [unclear] and the whole night you can hear . . . *(slapping noises).*

SM: They would bite you or they would just bug you?

FV: They bite.

SV: Bite you – oh sure. Biting, they were full of blood. [unclear] all night you would hear this . . . *(slapping noises).* **And they bite – somebody'd say something. Bad bugs, you know – swearing and [unclear].**

SM: Did the bed bugs survive in the winter, too?

SV: Same thing, you sleep with your knee in a [unclear]. You can put a finger through the wall of the barrack.

SM: You put your finger through the wall?

SV: Um hum.

SM: Because it was so cold.

SV: Cold, yes.

SM: Did you have a blanket?

SV: Blanket, if you want to cover to the top, then the legs are out.

SM: So it was a small, little blanket.

SV: Yes, it won't cover the legs. She knows at night and I slept with my knees [unclear].

FV: When we first were married, Slavko slept in the fetal position. I either had his legs in my stomach or the back, because you know he slept like this. And it took him a while before he . . .

SM: A couple of years before he was . . .

FV: No, I don't think a couple of years, but I bet you it took a year before he was comfortable in bed sleeping.

SM: Wow.

SV: [unclear] really, really bad. Oh, jeez, in the barrack they were giving us one pail of coals every 24 hours.

SM: For the what?

SV: For heating.

SM: One pail of coals?

SV: Coals for the heating a day. You feel that cold; I feel that on my back now when I breathe and talk about that. Uff, plus those guys pick a [unclear] of bugs, big bed bugs. And then after a while, the old bugs stink on the bunk.

FV: Yes, they stink those bed bugs.

SM: Do they?

FV: **Yes, they have a certain smell.**

SM: And now you can't take showers at all or did you get a shower?

SV: **Oh, shower once in a while, maybe one in three months. And the shower was way out of camps. They'd round the group of maybe 50 guys and then they walked them up there and we shower.**

SM: So everybody smelled?

SV: **And that's every three months.**

SM: Wow and were there any women in the camp at all?

SV: **No.**

SM: No women at all?

SV: **No, the women would go by, you know, once in a while, right by our camp. They had another camp for women. I don't know how far it was from us.**

FV: **I think at that time they didn't have many women in the service.**

SM: In the military, no, not at all?

FV: **None at all.**

SV: **No, I mean in Tunis.**

SM: What's that?

FV: **They were interned places like Jews and . . .**

FV: **Other nationalities.**

SV: **Enemy of the Nazi state, Nazi state . . .**

FV: **An enemy of the system.**

SM: Did you have a favorite guard that was really nice?

SV: No, the guards were [unclear]. What was the name of?

FV: "Hogan's Heroes."

SV: "Hogan's Heroes."

SV: Von Schultz …We did have a guard like him in our camp ... exactly [unclear] of the Schultz.

SM: So the guard was like him?

SV: That guy – our Mr. Schultz – he was just great. He wanted a cigarette, he sat with us and spoke German – he was a [unclear] guy – fat, and we joke with him and hee-hee-hee-hee – he was happy guy.

SM: So he was nice.

SV: He was nice, absolutely nice.

SM: And what was his name, do you remember?

SV: No.

SM: And the rest of them were they okay or did you have a few mean ones?

SV: Umm – One man who was in from Bosnia. He was Muslim and spoke in Serbian, pretty good. He was not on the strong side.

SM: He was a guard you mean or . . .

SV: Oh, guard, yes. In the German army at this time everybody was serving.

SM: They were?

SV: Yeah, they were – practically everybody.

SM: Wait a minute they had Serbians that were in the German army?

SV: No Serbs.

FV: They were serving in the army.

SM: Oh, got it, okay.

SV: Yes and he was not bad. What can I say? He was doing what he has to do. And we understand that. Except one was a mean, mean creature, the one first lieutenant. He came in the camp for three hours over midnight and woke up everybody – no shoes, no nothing, and a bell.

FV: They had to go outside without shoes on.

SM: He did this every night or . . .

SV: No, not every night but once in a while he really was mean, mean, mean creature.

SM: And he made you stand out in the snow with no shoes?

SV: No shoes and you don't dare to move. They shoot right away.

SM: Did they really?

SV: Oh sure.

SM: Oh-h-h, so they just shot somebody for moving?

SV: Oh, I remember seeing the prisoners – as soon as you hear the sirens, you better be in the barracks right now. I mean nobody on the street in the camp … everything is hidden in the barrack. A guy was having problems with ears and didn't hear, you know, and just was a step before he went in the barrack. Guard from the outside shot him…drop him dead.

SM: Oh, how horrible for you to all experience that. Were there a lot of prisoners that were killed while you were there?

SV: Um-m-m, under the circumstances, yes, otherwise, no. Depending on situation, they shoot to kill, but all that is orders, I suppose.

SM: So were there a couple a week that were killed or a couple a month or . . .

SV: Um-m-m, I don't know; the camp was huge, I tell you. We were having eight blocks and each block was about 50 barracks.

SM: Wow.

SV: Then there was a place where people were having his congress.

FV: His what?

SM: Congress?

SV: Party round up.

SM: Party meeting or . . .

SV: In Nürnberg.

FV: In Nürnberg.

SM: Okay.

SV: And then that's what we moved the prisoners in that place. At least, for the time you were sitting, the bed bugs; and then two years it was a bad, bad, bad day.

SM: So Nürnberg was your first two years and that was much worse . . .

SV: Much worse.

SM: than Hamburg?

FV: Hammelburg.

SM: And Hammelburg was it was better circumstances or was it because you had more hope?

SV: Oh, the barracks were better.

SM: Were they warmer?

SV: Oh, no. Barracks material was . . .

FV: Wood, cement?

SV: No, plaster.

SV: Barracks were okay and for wooden barracks, they was a newer.

SM: Okay.

SV: Better, newest.

FV: And then you also got the Red Cross food.

SV: And the better food.

SM: Okay.

SV: I don't know, supplies were much better from Nürnberg. This was in Nürnberg, the big city, probably all food goes to city and all the junk food goes to camp. Anyway, it's the second two years was much better in Hammelburg.

SM: Did you have bed bugs in Hammelburg?

SV: Oh yes.

SM: But it was warmer inside?

SV: Warmer inside Hammelburg camp was [unclear].

SM: Okay.

SV: [unclear] buildings.

SM: And were the guards nicer or not necessarily?

SV: Oh, no, same ones.

SM: Same ones, but you had better food?

SV: Better food? Oh, a little bit better.

SM: And the Red Cross brought it every day or once a week or . . .

FV: Not Red Cross ... the packages.

SV: Packages, yes, we received the small packages for each prisoner and you have a pack of cigarettes and then a package of [unclear].

FV: Cookies?

SV: Cookies.

FV: Or crackers?

SV: No, no, [unclear]. Like a tablet.

SM: Crackers?

SV: Yes, hard [unclear]. You got to put it in the water, you know, to be able to bite.

FV: Oh, it's like crackers?

SM: Like a hard cracker?

SV: Hard crackers, very hard, you can take a hammer.

SM: Take a hammer?

SV: And then, it was . . .

SM: So cigarettes and crackers?

SV: Cigarettes, crackers and . . .

FV: Didn't you get some chocolate, too?

SV: Chocolate, some more chocolate, about this wide, and then that's it.

SM: Did everybody smoke there?

SV: Not everybody, but everybody did lots of walking.

SM: Because what else do you do? You were going to say something.

SV: Oh, yes, during the day, I was doing that. I get out of my barrack. And then I walk and walk. I walk, I walk through the camp; six lanes of barracks and lots of room for walking. Then that's what I do all days, practically every day.

SM: In Hammelburg?

SV: In both camps.

SM: Really, now you had the choice to work, if you wanted to?

SV: Yes, if you wanted.

SM: But you preferred to just walk all day long.

SV: The officers don't have . . .

SM: Don't have to work per the Geneva Convention.

SV: Don't have to work, yes..

SM: So that was a good stress release for you, wasn't it?

SV: Most absolutely.

SM: And you stayed in good shape.

SV: Some of the guys, they had to work. I don't blame anybody, but when they ask, "Did you work for German army?" you know.

SM: What kind of work did they do for the German army? They went to the munitions plants or where?

SV: No, they were working inside in the … what's the name of town? Why am I asking you? I'm sorry.

SM: That's okay.

SV: They were working in private house, private business, private . . .

FV: Private businesses.

SV: Private businesses for local people up there, with no chance to escape.

SM: There was no chance?

SV: No.

SM: They kept a close eye on that.

SV: No, they keep an eye on you. Oh, man.

SM: Now let's say a prisoner went to go work at a local business, would they stay in that town?

SV: **No.**

SM: Or they went back every day, back and forth from camp?

SV: If I have a business and I have two or three prisoners. I got to watch them all day.

SM: You had to watch them?

SV: Yes, you are responsible for them. If the German officers came in to pick you up, you better be on the wall.

SM: Or the business owner gets in trouble?

SV: Um hum.

SM: Now when you were at the Nürnberg camp and the Hammelburg camp, did anybody every successfully escape?

SV: Yes.

SM: Tell me about that.

SV: Oh, I know when the lieutenant colonel escaped from Hammelburg. He was preparing himself for over six months. For these six months, he was saving sugar for the time when he's out. Because . . .

SM: He was saving sugar?

SV: Oh, yes, saving sugar and saving a little bit of the [unclear].

SM: Of the crackers?

SV: Um hum, that was easy to put in the pocket. And then he was training in the camp, running and training, and running and training. And we were supporting him with our food. Every day one or two spoons – every guy in the barrack was putting on his plate.

SM: Okay, so everybody knew that he was trying to escape?

SV: Yes, we did.

SM: In just the one barrack or in all the barracks?

SV: No, I didn't know what was happening in the other barracks.

SM: But in your barrack, you all knew?

SV: But I'm sure from the other barrack the same thing happened.

SM: Now he was in your barracks and the people would give him food to help him?

SV: Sure, to have a snack.

SM: So he'd be strong.

SV: To get stronger, otherwise, he had no chance to get out. And that was not a regular diet. No chance to go. I remember I walked, maybe 50 feet, I had to stop because I couldn't move, too tired.

SM: Not enough food, not enough sustenance?

SV: No power, I don't have enough strength.

SM: So for six months he was getting ready and then what did he do to escape, how did he escape?

SV: That was with all of people in the barrack supporting him. Every one of us was giving one spoon for our [unclear] to his [unclear]. But he's going to put this into his pockets in a plastic bag. And every day then he was training to see how the guards outside the fence walks.

SM: Watching them.

SV: Yeah, [unclear] the second. And the guys would go with him to cut the wire, too. They said that it was a one, two, three, four, five, six wires ... six rows.

SM: They cut them?

SV: Yes.

SM: So how wide was this about?

SV: Oh, little bit, you know. You cut it in one place, on the top, on the bottom, and on the side. And the hole is already there and you go in and cut it again.

SM: Did they cut it the night before he escaped or many days before he escaped?

SV: **No, same day.**

SM: Same day.

SV: **Same night.**

SM: So you mean six guys went out there to help him?

SV: **Yep.**

SM: But they did not escape?

SV: **No.**

SM: And they cut the wire…he ran out.

SV: **Um hum.**

SM: And did the guards see him?

SV: **No, oh, no, if the guards see him, he's done.**

FV: **They'd shoot him.**

SM: He would have been shot. So the six men made it back to the barracks, they didn't get killed?

SV: **No.**

SM: And when did the guards find out that he was missing?

SV: **The next day or few days afterward. They count every day on the bell. And they know, of course, one is missing in the barrack. You know the guy who is missing – empty spot. We move and the officer count.**

SM: They did it so that he didn't know right away?

SV: **No and then the guards get mad. I tell you.**

SM: So you guys really worked as a team?

SV: **Oh, sure, that's the only way.**

SM: And you weren't afraid. You were just wanted to give this man a gift and try to get away with something, obviously?

SV: Sure, he would – we were saving from the first day, every day some, everybody gave a spoon of food or sugar in the little plastic bag.

SM: Oh, my god.

SV: Then he can have his sugar when he's out.

SM: So did you ever find out if he made it to safety?

SV: Most made it.

SM: You think he made it?

SV: Those who didn't make it came back to the camp, and back in the [unclear].

FV: Yes, in the lock up.

SV: **In lock up, in the [unclear] prison, prisoner in prison.**

SM: So he never came back, so you think he made it okay?

SV: Oh, yes. I say six of them, I know, they made it in Switzerland.

SM: So he wasn't the only one you're saying?

SV: No.

SM: After he escaped, did other people go out the same exit?

SV: Oh, yes, you cut that wire and then you put it in the place.

SM: Put it back?

SV: Then where the cut was, you can see that only when close to you.

SM: So he escaped and then how long before the next person escaped out of there … was it a long time?

SV: Long time.

SM: A long time, so they spread them out.

SV: Because the next day when they count and find out maybe they go [unclear] right away and there was . . .

FV: They were watching you much closer.

SV: Putting guards all over.

SM: They didn't know how he got out, though, you're saying?

SV: No, they don't know.

SM: They didn't find the cutting in the wire?

SV: There is a lot of wire in our camp and would take a long time to look that close to find it.

SM: And the six other men that got out, were they the same men that went and helped him that night to cut the wire, or not necessarily?

SV: Oh, no, don't have to be bunch of the same men.

SM: And there were others one that tried that got caught?

SV: Well, some might [unclear]. So some made it, you know luck, luck.

SM: Did you think about escaping?

SV: Oh, sure.

SM: Everybody did?

SV: Everybody did.

SM: And you just thought it was too foolish?

SV: I think I was, I was on the right side.

FV: Well, plus he had his uncle who was in prison with him, and he wouldn't leave his uncle alone.

SM: I forgot your uncle was with you and he was older than you?

SV: Oh, yes, quite a bit.

SM: I forgot did you say you had any brothers or sisters or were you the only child?

SV: Sister.

FV: Sister, one sister.

SM: And what happened to her?

FV: She died four years ago.

SV: Is it four years now?

SM: But was she in Yugoslavia during the whole time?

FV: Yes with the mother.

SM: And could you have any communications with them after you were freed?

SV: Just write letter.

FV: Writing a letter.

SM: So after you were freed, after '45, you could send them letters?

SV: Yes.

SM: You could?

FV: Well, did you send any letters during the war? Yes.

SV: Even during the war, during the prison camp.

SM: Oh, you could send them letters.

SV: Oh, yes, I can send. They didn't arrive.

FV: He couldn't write anything important.

SV: Nothing, practically nothing, they checked every letter.

SM: And were you able to receive letters from your mother and your sister?

SV: Yes, one letter. That's all.

SM: So they probably kept some letters and didn't let them get through.

SV: Oh, I suppose and then there was the letter which was half blacked out with a pen.

FV: Oh, that you got from your mother?

SV: Yes.

FV: Really? It was blacked out?

SM: Interesting.

FV: I suppose anything that mother wanted to report on what's going on there.

SM: They took it out.

SV: Yes.

FV: Isn't that sad?

SM: Very sad, so your sister was younger than you?

SV: Oh, yes.

SM: How much younger?

FV: Six years, wasn't it?

SV: Six years, I think.

FV: Something like that.

SM: So wasn't that hard for you to be separated from her?

SV: Oh, yes, it was tough. Oh, yes, she was a pretty, little girl, good girl.

FV: And his mother was a lovely person.

SM: And your dad died when you were young or . . .

SV: I guess, I hardly remember him.

SM: How old were you when your dad died?

SV: I think I was three.