

KECK-011

SAMUEL ISAK

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ROUMANIA VIA ITALY, 1947

AGE 26

PASSAGE ON THE "SANTA MARIA DELACA"

SHIP NAME IS A PHONETIC SPELLING BY THE TRANSCRIBER

GUMB: This is Dana Gumb and I'm speaking with Mr. Sam Isak on the 19th day of July, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 10:30 in the morning. We are about to interview Mr. Sam Isak about his immigration experience from Roumania in the year 1947. Okay, Mr. Isak, we could first ask where and when you were born?

ISAK: I was born in Roumania in 1921, October the 20th.

GUMB: And where? Where in Roumania?

ISAK: It's, in Transylvania. Uh, it's a small town. There was people living just like sister, like, like neighbors all together. Jewish people, Gentile

people, everybody was together. In, I tell you, till the war, I felt very happy there, and everybody felt happy there. Then the war came, everybody was taken away to Germany. Unfortunately I lost my mother, my father, sisters, brothers, and uh, after the war I went back, I saw that there's, the city's different, the people changed. So I said to myself what I'm gonna do, stay there? The Russians were there, they took it over, occupied. So I was traveling around. I was running around where, I didn't know where I'm going.

GUMB: What was the name of this, uh, city in Roumania? The town?

ISAK: Uh, it's called Satu Mare, Satu Mare.

GUMB: Could you spell that?

ISAK: Uh, I don't know. I'm sorry. I was away, so long away from there, but I, I don't think so. Is it important?

GUMB: No, no. Just . . .

ISAK: In, I came back to that town, saw that the people changed, different ideas. There was, the home was

destroyed, you know. Why, so I said to myself I'm going. Where, I don't know. From there I went to Hungary, to the main city, Budapest. I stayed there for about a couple months, looked around, everybody's looking, asking where you're going. What you going to? Nobody knew that. From there I went to Austria.

In Austria I was sitting a couple months. The same thing. Finally I found a group. They said they would like to go to Italy. I asked them, what was in Italy?

Same as here. But let's go. What can we lose? We have nothing to lose. So, we went. Only we didn't have, most of them, papers, nothing. So we took a train, came to the border, they wouldn't let us through. Why? They need papers. We told them. All our papers are in Germany, destroyed. We don't have anything. So finally until somebody told us that they're going to try to put us through the border. So one night they picked us up, we were twenty-five young people, boys and girls, and they took us down to the border to Italy. In Italy we were also, didn't know where to go, what to do. We had traveled from one city to the other, town to town, we didn't know where to go. So we stopped there, and that's how I wind up there two-and-a-half years in Italy.

GUMB: Okay, maybe we can go back, uh, back to, how much time did you spend in Hungary?

ISAK: Uh, about five months. In Austria a couple months.

GUMB: You were born in Hungary?

ISAK: I was born in Roumania.

ISAK: Oh, yes, to Roumania, I'm sorry. Let's go back to Roumania, right. How long did you spend in Roumania?

ISAK: After the war?

GUMB: After being born, how long did, how long were you there?

ISAK: Till 19, till 1940.

GUMB: Right.

ISAK: Then the Germans came and they took everybody to Germany.

GUMB: I see. So, what was life like before the war, in Roumania?

ISAK: Beautiful, beautiful. People didn't, didn't care what's gonna be tomorrow, especially there they're

most of all farmers, the Jewish people and the Gentile people. So, we had a cow, we were nine children. In, you know what we had? Three rooms. One bed, two of them in that, two of them here, and the rest of them everywhere. But, we were happy. We were happy because we didn't know better. We had food, we had clothes because my mother used to make her own clothes for the children, too. We had a garden, all kind of fruits, vegetables, everything plants, was a nice life.

GUMB: What did your father do?

ISAK: My father farmer, farmers. We were all farmers. My sister in Israel is a farmer and she is farming. She, uh, she had, ten years ago, twelve hundred chickens. In Roumania was the same thing in that town.

GUMB: Did he own his land?

ISAK: Yeah, sure. Of course. After the war, what are we gonna do? The house was destroyed. It was bombed. To build it up, how I'm gonna do it? And besides, I didn't felt like I belonged any more in that place because I knew that even if I'm gonna stay there was no good because another thing, the Russians took over,

occupied, Russia, you know, that was, Transylvania it was called. Russia occupied, so even if I would build it back up, probably they wouldn't let me do what I want because a couple years later, a few Jewish people went back. We tried, and the Russians said so much is yours and so much is mine, I felt I don't belong to it. In, as a matter of fact, I have another problem.

When I came to United States, I lost all my papers. I didn't remember my birth certificate. My birth, I didn't remember, I didn't have papers. So I went to Washington, to the Roumanian consulate, I said, "Look, I would like to get, see if I could get a birth certificate." He, they sent away four or five times letters, came back, no papers for him. We don't know nothing. They didn't want to send us. So I said, the consulate supposed I would go back, he said we tell you one thing. You go back, but if you gonna have problems, if you gonna be locked up for any reason, it's gonna be very hard. We should protect you. There were people, they went back for papers, they were locked up. So I didn't go back. In, finally I, uh, they gave me idea to look for witnesses to, that they know me, there were people in Israel, they know me, so I got through them papers, for the retirement.

Five years ago I went back to the Roumanian Consulate and asked them, can I go for a visit? They said no, that country's under the Russians. Even you're American citizen, won't do you, won't, if they're gonna lock you up, we can't do nothing. So that's, I never went back there. Now, I'm gonna tell you something else. I came to this country, I was a young man, I did nothing, no trade at all. What can I do? You see, I'm a religious person, I don't work on Saturdays, on holidays, I don't drive a car. This country was for, in those years it was very hard to get a job like that. So I met a fellow, he said to me, "Look, maybe you could become a baker." He says there's a big bakery but that is operated around the clock, day and night, day and night, no holidays, no Jewish holidays, no Gentile holidays, it's all, what can I do. I said, "I'm gonna try." I went down there and the people said, "Well, all right." I did, there was two hundred and fifty employees, Jewish and Gentile, colored people. I was the only one who took off all the holidays, the Jewish holidays. Do you know that I work for this company up till now? The company was changed in three hands, it was sold out, and I'm still with the company. It's a, it's a, they

had a company that there was fifty years in business, they went bankruptcy. Three hundred people lost their jobs. I came home, my wife says now what we gonna do now? Three days later a company came down from Chicago, they bought it. They called me up. "Isak, wanna come work for us?" "Sure." Ten years later they went bankruptcy, another company bought it, and I still work for them, the same name, same company, three hands.

GUMB: Back in Roumania did you have any kind of training, or any kind of schooling there while you were growing up?

ISAK: Schooling? They had schooling, of course, but I was too young. I mean, I went to school too but, uh, colleges, there was no such colleges. You went to public school and then in the big cities was colleges, in the small towns, eh, what can you expect? The fathers were farmers and the children were farmers. There was no business people there. The bakery, the father was a baker, his children were bakers. Grocery, the same things, supermarkets same things. That's why.

GUMB: You went to a public school and not a . . .

ISAK: Public school.

GUMB: . . . religious, you know, Jewish school?

ISAK: Religious, yeah, both, both. Sure. Both, of course.

Because they had half a day religious, Jewish, and half a day public school. Of course, half and half. Yeah, sure, oh, yeah.

GUMB: And Jews and Gentiles lived together with . . .

ISAK: Yes, yes, next door, oh, yeah, sure. Very friendly, very nicely. They tell you, but after the war, during the war, they changed. Because between the Germans and the Russians, what they did to them, the Germans told them that the Jewish people were no good, and after the war the Russians told them that, so they believed it. Now a lot of them would love to go away from there and they can't. My sister went back to Roumania because she was engaged to a boy and she find out that he's, he came back from somewhere. She was locked up two-and-a-half years. Two-and-a-half years they locked her up because they told her that she's a spy. Finally there was those years Israeli underground, and they took her out. They took her out. So as I'm saying, of the same people, they

changed over the time. But here in the United States thank God I didn't have no problems. I have Gentile people friends, I have colored people friends, I go with them fishing, with the Gentile, with every colors. I, I get along with everybody. I don't have no problems. Thank God. I go along, everything, everything.

GUMB: So, 1940, the Germans arrived, what do you remember about that?

ISAK: I remember they put us on trucks and wagons and they took us. Where, nobody knew. When they arrived in Germany they put them in barracks and they kept them there in, I hadn't seen my parents since then. I seen my parents the first day when they took them away in May 1940, and I saw them then and that's it, never saw them.

GUMB: So you stayed in the village, you stayed in Roumania?

ISAK: No. I was, I was, I went with them, but I escaped. I escaped, and I was running around from country to country in, I don't know if you remember when the Russia pushed back the Germans, I was in that group, and it just happened that I went by a small town near

us and somebody recognized me, and he grabbed me out, he took me to the mountains, and I was in the mountains for three weeks. I didn't know when the war was over. That's how I survived.

GUMB: What, let's go to the escape. How did you escape?

ISAK: When the Germans pushed back, when the Russians pushed back the Germans, you know, everybody was running, they were all . . .

GUMB: Oh, I see. Right. The, so, uh, you were in this group . . .

ISAK: Yes. In a group, in a German group.

GUMB: With the Germans guarding you . . .

ISAK: Laborers, laborers, laborers.

GUMB: Laborers. What were you laboring on?

ISAK: Well, fixing streets, uh, carrying supplies, all kind of stuff. They had a lot of, like me, they had a couple thousand like me.

GUMB: You were not with your parents at this time?

ISAK: No, my parents were already, I didn't know it. I

didn't know it. So then, when I, when this man grabbed me he says I shouldn't say nothing. So they took me away. I didn't know where. In a mountain. And I was there, three-and-a-half months.

GUMB: How did you get away from the guards? How did you . . .

ISAK: Well, just accidentally. It's hard to explain. Accidentally, accidentally. There were a few people that, young boys, they said, what can I lose? I'm gonna die anyhow. So, I'm gonna die, I'm gonna escape. At least I'm gonna try it. So after the war, like I said, I didn't know when the war was over till that man came. I sent them stuff from here for years and years for that guy, for that fella, till he passed away.

GUMB: Did, when he, you were in this labor group working in the streets. When this guy approached you did you know who he was?

ISAK: No, no. But he recognized me, because he recognized my family. After a while he told me who he is and it was very nice of him.

GUMB: He was a Roumanian fellow?

ISAK: A Roumanian, yes. As a matter of fact, he did a few more, five or six of them. But he put them different places. They shouldn't be together.

GUMB: Was he a Jewish fellow?

ISAK: No, Gentile fellow, Gentile fellow. Jewish fellows were . . .

GUMB: They were gone, they were long gone.

ISAK: They were all gone. Gentile fellows. A lot of them did it, a lot of them. The, was very nice and that's how I survived. Now, my sister, she was in Hungary, Budapest, hiding all the time as a Gentile woman. She had there groups. My brother, he was in Germany, in Auschwitz, in Germany. So that's how, as a matter of fact, that when I was in Italy, I didn't know if my sister and brothers were living. Five years after I came back, when I was in this country two years then somebody told me that my sister and brother are living in Israel. In, I couldn't afford to go to visit them till ten years after I was in this country. So it's, it wasn't such easy life.

GUMB: So where was this labor group, what country was this in?

ISAK: That was, a German group that was driving around, whatever they occupied our country, this group was behind the Germans and they did all kind of stuff. Like, uh, if they needed telephone wires for, uh, anything, anything. I was doing, I was doing the labor on the street.

GUMB: How old were you at this time?

ISAK: Twenty. And I was doing a lot of work.

GUMB: And where did you live? Where, where would they put you?

ISAK: Outside, on the grass, on the street. Wherever. Sleep. Sometimes I walked around in closed eyes, that's how tired I was. I came to this country, I saw bread, I said I don't need nothing else, only bread. That's all. Of course, for months and months we didn't see no bread. They gave us a loaf of bread for a week.

GUMB: Oh. They gave you one loaf of bread . . .

ISAK: One loaf of bread for a week, for a whole week. So, uh . . .

GUMB: So, do you remember what place it was that you made your escape, what country it was?

ISAK: Czechoslovakia, Czechoslovakia. Yeah, of course, it was not part from Roumania. It was about the border. In that border was not too far. I knew where I was after a while. But right then, I didn't know. And the men grabbed me, I didn't, no idea who he is, what's he gonna do to me. I didn't care. I mean, life was nothing. Who cares . . .

GUMB: It didn't matter that you didn't have any trust with him.

ISAK: I was looking for no trust. I didn't care. I said to myself, what difference does it make, the Germans gonna kill me or who's gonna kill me. It doesn't matter. Life was nothing, absolutely nothing. Nobody had any, any, uh, any, should say, oh, because I was walking here, people were shot down, killed, and all kind of everything. It was no big deal to us.

GUMB: So this man took you up into the mountains.

ISAK: Right.

GUMB: And how long did you stay there?

ISAK: Three-and-a-half months, and he gave me their food and everything. See, he was, he was a farmer, so he had a little piece of land there, little house there, a shack, and I was there sitting there, and he used to come up once a week and tell me what was going on. And then, when the war was over, he came up and he says now, he says, "Good luck. I take you down to the, to your town and there you do whatever you want."

GUMB: So what did you do during that period, those three-and-a-half months?

ISAK: Isn't there nothing? What can you do? No radio. No television. (he laughs)

GUMB: You couldn't walk out, you . . .

ISAK: Yes, you could walk out, you could walk not for too far because he told me that how far they have Germans also around that area, but those mountains were so deep and so high that you could get lost. So he told me how far you could go.

GUMB: In Czechoslovakia.

ISAK: Yes.

GUMB: So then the war ended and he, where did he take you?

ISAK: He took me back to my town, because I was so weak that I couldn't even walk. So he took me back, put horse and wagon, to make my town he said now, I know where you live in here and see the house, it was all nothing because the bombs were bombing. So he asked me what I'm gonna do. I said I don't know. So he said, he asked me, he says, if you need any help let me know and I will do it. But I find there are a few people from the time I came home, so we stayed together and that's all, so, we went away together.

GUMB: Do you remember the man's name that took you?

ISAK: Jacob, Jacob, the other name I don't remember, only it's Jacob. Very nice fellow, very nice. He passed away.

GUMB: He didn't get anything out of it, he just . . .

ISAK: No, no, no, he just felt bad that, that, he sees young people, because doing that, that when the Russians

pushed back the Germans, a lot of people were killed.

Not to the Germans, just bombing everywhere, so naturally, so he felt guilty that, why should, so he took a couple of them that he recognized, he wouldn't pick up anybody. But, it just happened that he recognized me. Picked them up, put them, he was hiding them.

GUMB: Had you known this person in your village?

ISAK: No, but my parents knew him in the, he knew my parents and they knew him, so that's why he did it.

GUMB: Right.

ISAK: Like I said.

GUMB: So, you came back to your town, and how long did you stay there?

ISAK: About, maybe three months, maybe. And then I went away people, anybody came in, they said what I'm gonna do here, the house is damaged, nobody here, and besides that the Russians took everybody to do labor, to fix up things, do the roads and everything. So why should we stay and do more labor for nothing. So you figured, might as well we go.

GUMB: Were the Russians any different from the Nazis,
or . . .

ISAK: No, no. They were forced, for them it didn't matter.
If you didn't do the labor they, they shoot you down
too, same thing. If you told them you're sick, then
you not, they don't allow you to live, same thing,
they were not better.

GUMB: So, uh, that time that you were back in your village
you worked under the Russians?

ISAK: Yeah, sure, of course. They were in charge of
everybody. And they said that everybody got to work
no matter how, who you are, what you are. If you were
sick then they said we can't do nothing for you.

GUMB: The Russian Army was there at that time?

ISAK: Yeah, of course. The Russian Army. They still have
them there. As a matter of fact, I spoke to a man
from New York City last year, he says he went to the
cemetery because some, his sisters and brothers passed
away there before the war, so went to cemetery. They
were staying in the hotel. In, next day, find a note
under the door, in the hotel, "You got twenty-four

hours to leave Roumania. If not you won't see any more your country, United States." Just like that. He picked up stuff, he went. He says, "I didn't want to take any chances, for no reason at all." Because, because the Russians did not like, if anybody came back from United States or from any other country. Right away, from Israel, too. Man comes back from Israel they said right away you're a spy. You come here to spy.

GUMB: So after a few, several months, back in your village, you finally decided to go with a group of people . . .

ISAK: Keep on moving. Where, nobody knew where. We just said we are going. Wherever we're gonna stop, we're gonna stop as long as we can. In Budapest there were a couple thousand people, you could ask anybody, nobody knew where they want to go, what they wanna do. So, uh . . .

GUMB: How old were you at this time?

ISAK: Twenty. And there was a, people in the forties and the fifties and the sixties, same thing, they didn't know. And in Italy was also very hard because it's a poor country and food was very, very, it was

incredible. Fortunately, I wind up to live in Milan which, near the ocean. And there, I find it comfortable. I used to sleep outside, and there was a lot of fishermen, so why not with them to stay there, they, they brought in fish, they give a little bit of food, and this and that, but I was staying in there till 1947.

GUMB: Well, uh, where was the first place you went to after leaving your village?

ISAK: Oh, yeah, that was Hungary, Budapest.

GUMB: And how long did you stay there?

ISAK: A couple months, I don't know exactly, four, five months. From there, we said why gonna stay here? We went to Austria. In Austria we met another group. Where are you going? I don't know. So till, in 1946 there was Italy, at least twenty-five or thirty thousand people that, because, see in Italy it was no problem as far as hating anybody, they didn't know. In Italy they know only one, one, they know one name: sir. Everybody was "sir," no matter who you are, what you are. And, uh, there, ah, then the UNRA, United States Red Cross was sending there a little bit food

and that's how we, uh, stopped.

GUMB: So, uh, how did these groups get established, I mean, this group that you had in your village that you traveled with, or . . .

ISAK: We just met, we just met, we didn't know each other. We met, "Where are you going?" "I don't know." "Come with us." We took trains, we took, as a matter of fact, that, uh, one day we went in a train where it was cows and horses, all kind, we went in the dirt, anything. We were stopped by the Italian border, so they put us in jail. So we said fine, we get to sleep under a roof. No problem. Food? Well, it was good, there was no, uh, there was no, no, no nothing. I mean, we didn't complain or anything. We said it's still better than where we were before.

GUMB: So, in, in, how did you travel from your village to Hungary the first place?

ISAK: By train, buses, walking, all kinds of stuff. We used to walk in the daytime, in the nighttime, anything we could.

GUMB: But you had no money.

ISAK: No money, no money, no money, no money. Where? Where you had money? I came, I was in Italy, they didn't have money either. Where you gonna get money? We couldn't get no jobs because we didn't have no papers, and besides there were so many people without jobs, there were, in Hungary, in Budapest, in one time, thirty, forty thousand people, and everybody looking for jobs, so where you gonna get em? Couldn't get it. Later, in the, in the, I think in 1950, then already start establishing for people to give them jobs there.

GUMB: This is the end of side one.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

GUMB: This is the start of side two. Okay, Mr. Isak. We were talking about your time in Italy.

ISAK: Right.

GUMB: And where did you come from to get to Italy?

ISAK: From Austria direct to Italy. Because we didn't know where we were going so we, nor in the borders, we figured we gonna go to Italy. People, some people told us that there is a little bit life more quiet,

which was true. The people treat us very nicely, but they didn't have what to eat. So what could we do. We stayed there till we, uh, had a chance to get somewhere. Now, from there, a lot of people went to all kind of countries. Some people went to Israel, some people went to Yugoslavia, to Bulgaria, they didn't know where. I didn't know myself either because, what kind of plans could I have. I knew I got relatives in the United States but I didn't no idea their exact names. I know they're in New York City. About this one here, I did not know. Of course, we were not . . .

GUMB: Here in Baltimore.

ISAK: So, anyhow, so what I did, people told me to put an ad in a certain paper which was coming to United States, that paper I put down my name is so-and-so, I come from that and that city, and looking for the people on that name, Davidovitz. So I think it was four, five months, getting a letter that my name is Ignas Davidovitz, I am your mother's brother, and I live in Baltimore, Maryland. And he said, "Wait for the next letter." Naturally he, uh, wrote me that was the story and asked me, sent me money to get food and

things, but he, he knew, more than I knew, that from Italy they are taking people to Israel. All these people, because they needed, they wanted that people should be in Israel. So he wrote to me don't sign up to Israel, because I'm gonna bring you up to United States. So he wrote to me don't sign up to Israel, because I'm gonna bring you up to United States. But they, they went by quota. Each country had their own quotas. So it just happened, in my case, it took a long time. It took over two years. Uh, the beginning, no, the end of 1947, I received papers that they (?) through the consulate and they will see how soon I will be able to get to the United States. In, it went by I think about four, five weeks, they called the consulate, they told me that I should prepare myself to take, to go to the United States. I, I told them I don't have no money. So they said your money is paid, you're gonna go by boat because plane was very, very expensive in '47. I tell you, a boat like that, believe me I'm gonna remember it if I'm gonna live another hundred years I'm gonna remember it. It was an old boat, very, very old. A step to take, like a regular boat, from Italy, it takes now, uh, seven, eight days. It took fifteen days. For three, four

days I could eat nothing. I was sick completely.
That's how the boat went.

GUMB: Seasick?

ISAK: Seasick. And the boat was an old boat, and it just happened that they came, they came and took me in October, and somehow they told me that the waters are very, very strong in that time of the year, coming from Italy. So, uh, my uncle here in the United States knew more than I knew that when we will arrive. So we arrived to New York City on a Wednesday, the 20th of October.

GUMB: In 1947?

ISAK: 1947. I, when I went off the boat I didn't know where I am, what's gonna happen to me, I haven't the slightest idea.

GUMB: Why not? You didn't know where you were?

ISAK: I, I was in the United States for a long time, and my mind was still occupied with Germany. I was still, a lot of people were still scared to walk in the streets. But when they put us down on the ship, they spoke to us, they had, people that spoke to us, some

in Jewish, some in English, some in all kind of languages. There are people, special people, so that all those countries, and we are afraid for anything, we're gonna take you in here, in this place, until we're gonna examine you, we're gonna see what's wrong, what, because a lot of people are very sick, a lot of people are very weak, sickness. Like I said, I never knew, my life, I mean, I was say things, I came from Germany, until I came to the United States I hadn't seen a doctor because I wasn't interested. In when I came to, off of the boat, they took us in, went through, and each one was examined by the doctors. So they find out, with my case, I had, I don't know why, thin blood. My blood was so thin that they said that they haven't had a case like this for a long time. So, thank God, they give medication, and they kept me there for three days in Ellis Island and, uh, then they let me go.

GUMB: Uh, to go back for a second, um, uh, when you said you came from, uh, Austria, uh, to Italy, how did you get across the border? What were there, were there any problems getting across the border?

ISAK: Sure, sure. Twice they caught us and they put us back

to Austria. So I said why? We don't have no money, we don't have no papers, what, what can you do to us?

One guy, one young fellow said, "Shoot us. We don't have no home. We have nobody. So what's the difference?" A second time, the same thing. The third time they didn't know what to do so they said, "Go ahead."

GUMB: Right. How big a group were you in at this time?

ISAK: We were twenty-five people at one time. But later we got bigger. Now, I'm gonna tell you the story, what happened to us in Italy. We took a train from Milan to Rome. We had no money, no nothing.

GUMB: You just hopped on the train.

ISAK: We hopped on the train . . .

GUMB: Freight train?

ISAK: Freight train, and when that freight train was between Rome and Milan it stopped, they took us all off, and put us in jail, right in jail. We couldn't speak Italian so, twenty-five people. So they brought somebody who spoke the language and they said, "What are you doing?" We said, "We don't have no home, what

you gonna do us? Shoot us? Shoot us. We have no home. This is nice. We'll stay here in jail as long as you want to." They said, "No. In that case, then go, go." Fortunately nobody gave us real trouble because they saw that we are not people to make trouble and we didn't care for nothing.

GUMB: Was this is group of Roumanians?

ISAK: Yeah, yeah. All in the same, in the different cities, but all Roumanians.

GUMB: Were they any young people?

ISAK: Young people. All young people, yeah. Young boys and girls. As a matter of fact, there will be two of them. I'm still in contact. They're in New York City, two of them. And the rest are in Brazil, some of them to Buenos Aires, some of them are in Israel, we're all over.

GUMB: In Italy, day to day, how did you survive?

ISAK: We went, planned, to the doors, knocked on the doors, to give us something to eat. If anybody was a nice man, he said, "I'm gonna give you figs, I'm gonna give you a little milk, give you a little bit of wine, what

you want. What we have gonna give you." That's all.

GUMB: Did they know who you were, you were refugees?

ISAK: Yeah, sure, sure, they knew. But they were poor because they had four, five, as a matter of fact, one fella took me and he said, "Look, I got seven children. I got three rooms. Now, where should I put you to sleep?" I said, "I don't care where you put me. I'm gonna sleep anywhere. I'm gonna sleep on the floor, too. I don't care." He says, "All right." So, two nights, but I saw what it is, and I didn't care for it. I mean, I didn't want to put him inconvenience. But they were very nice, very nice to us.

GUMB: Oh, sometimes people would take you in, and give you a place to stay.

ISAK: Yeah, sure, sure. Because they knew that we have nothing, and we can't do anything. I mean, we couldn't get no jobs because the people said, "We don't have no jobs either. We are willing to do anything."

GUMB: Were you able to work at all, was there, did you have

any income, any money?

ISAK: Absolutely nothing. Nothing. Nowhere. Except whatever the Red Cross brought in once in a while they gave us. As a matter of fact, when I came to the United States, this country here, they saw me, the way I was dressed, she almost fainted. My pants had more holes than I got hair on my head. Shoes? I didn't have no shoes. I took cardboards and made shoes. I couldn't get them. Couldn't get it.

GUMB: So, how long were you in Italy?

ISAK: Two-and-a-half years.

GUMB: Two-and-a-half years. And did times get better at all, or was it the same?

ISAK: Same, same. Because, see, more people came in all the time, more and more, more and more, that looks like that a lot of people liked the country, because there was no winter time, no winter, the summer time was not hot, so they liked it there. And they figure, other countries, they wouldn't get better conveniences anyhow. If they would stay anywhere they would stay. So they stayed there because from there a lot of

people decided to go to other countries on their own, to Brazil, to, uh, Puerto Rico, to, I don't know where, different countries.

GUMB: So finally you found out about, uh, putting an ad in, in the newspaper. What newspaper did you put an ad in?

ISAK: In those days was a, two Jewish papers. They ran all over, everywhere, all over the world. All over the United States, every city had them. That paper doesn't exist any more. In, I knew that any Jewish man is reading that paper. So it just happened that, no my uncle read that ad, but a friend of his, and he showed it to him, and he says, "Yeah, I know, I know who it is." That's how it happened.

GUMB: How did you get the money to put the ad in?

ISAK: That was from the Red Cross. That was supplied because the United States said that this is something that we must give the people. If they have any idea they have somebody somewhere, we got to have that. In each city any idea they have somebody somewhere, we got to have that. In each city was a big, a whole room, and everybody put in there whatever he got, he's

got somebody somewhere. As a matter of fact, I had another uncle in Buenos Aires, but I didn't put an ad, I didn't, because, I don't know, I just figured New York City.

GUMB: Okay, so then you said that your uncle contacted you and said to wait.

ISAK: Yes.

GUMB: What did he want to wait for? What was it?

ISAK: Because he was afraid that I might go to another country. I, he was afraid I might get panicky and I go to another country. And he didn't want me to go to another country, that's all. He, because I, a lot of people didn't want to wait. I know another friend of mine had an uncle in New York and he told him wait. He was there a year-and-a-half. He says, "I'm gonna go." He went to Brazil, or went to Cuba. He later, ten years later he came to the United States from there.

GUMB: Did you know your uncle at all?

ISAK: I just had, my mother used to show me pictures of him. But naturally that was many, many years ago in the

forties, before they went to Germany. But I didn't recognize him because they aged, and they changed. But they recognized me somehow.

GUMB: So, uh, the, what was your port, what port did you leave from, from Italy?

ISAK: Milan. Milan. Milan. Yeah.

GUMB: Do you remember how much the ticket was?

ISAK: The ticket was, those days, a hundred and seventy or a hundred and eighty dollars. Because for us it was a special price. For other people it was more, but the Red Cross set up, in our case, they must give us, the company must give us a certain price. A, it was a little discussion that the people who bring us to the United States they should, they should pay more money. They said, "No. If he's willing to bring him to the United States, we got to compromise."

GUMB: Right, right. So you had to go to the American consulate.

ISAK: In Milan.

GUMB: Where?

ISAK: In Milan.

GUMB: In Milan.

ISAK: No, in Naples. Naples. That was the, that was the main, the main office, and they already put us in, everything fixed up, and then when we were ready we went to Milan.

GUMB: How did they treat you at the consulate?

ISAK: Very nice, very nice. Well, it was two reasons, one reason, there was a lot of politic.

GUMB: What was that?

ISAK: Politic.

GUMB: Right.

ISAK: In a country, thirty, forth thousand people and they have nothing to do, nothing to eat, they figure better we send them out, the better it'll be for us. So that's why the American Consulate was working with the Italian government as much as possible to put the people wherever they're gonna go. But it was nice.

GUMB: How long did you have to wait before your number came

up in the quota?

ISAK: Oh, about, over a year. Some people had to wait two years. I was lucky.

GUMB: Okay. Do you remember your feelings once you got the word that you could come?

ISAK: Oh, sure, sure. Who didn't have, who would dream that I'm gonna go to the United States? United States is everybody, whenever somebody said in Roumania, hey, that fella's gonna go to United States, oh, he must be a rich man, he must be, he must be very, very rich to go to the United States. Sure. I'm grateful because I worked very, very hard in the bakery business. When I was single I used to put in seventy, eighty hours a week. How many times my wife had to bring me my meal to the bakery because I was putting like, certain holidays, Thanksgiving or Christmas or Labor Day, 15, 16 hours, but thank God.

GUMB: Back in Roumania, were there other things that you had heard about America, other impressions that you had about America?

ISAK: Oh, everybody said, "America, America is the easiest

country in the whole world. Over there you don't have to work hard. Anything, everybody's rich there." Very, very wrong. Very, very wrong. I had an uncle, he came to the United States in 1932. And he came back in 1935 and he said that the biggest slavery in the whole world is the United States. He was a presser, and he said that when he went in the shop he said he never saw in his life such slavery. I'll tell you, in a way, in a way I must agree with him. United States is a slavery country. Business people want to make more money. A working man tries to better himself. No matter how you do it, it's keep it up, keep on going, keep on going.

GUMB: Do you remember why he went in the first place?

ISAK: Because, because he want to find that, everybody said that this is a very great country, you get rich fast. That's why he came. But it didn't work that way. It didn't work that way.

GUMB: So getting back to your story, the voyage was horrible.

ISAK: Very horrible, very horrible. Very, very, if I would have to go through again, I'd rather stay in Italy

than come to the United States on a boat like that,
and I mean it.

GUMB: But besides your sickness, your seasickness, what were
the other problems?

ISAK: The boat was a wreck. The cheapest boat they gave us,
we slept in bunks, bunks. The food was incredible.

GUMB: What did they give you?

ISAK: They gave us beans, they gave us bananas, they gave us
a soup, they made a soup once in three days. But,
like I said, a lot of people didn't even care for
food. But, but when I came out of the boat I was so
tired that I, if I would work now seventy hours I
wouldn't be that tired. Because you couldn't sleep in
the bunks. Small boat, and it had bunks four levels.
Each level had over two people.

GUMB: Was it dirty?

ISAK: Dirty, sure, of course. Of course it was dirty. Now
I came here, what could you do? People were glad to
get anything just to get out.

GUMB: You said people didn't care for food?

ISAK: No, because they were sick. Because they told us a couple weeks later that if you would take a regular, a better boat, the boat was going like this (he gestures) you take a better boat, after the two days, the sickness goes away, you could eat. But over there was every day, every day, every day. Even in the evening, the boat was such a bad boat that you couldn't stay still all the fourteen days.

GUMB: Did you meet anybody on the boat? Did you talk to people on the boat?

ISAK: Yes, we met. People came to New York, a lot of people, a lot of people from there. All, all came to relatives.

GUMB: Oh, they were all refugees?

ISAK: All refugees, all refugees. The whole boat.

GUMB: Jewish refugees?

ISAK: Jewish refugees. Yeah, all. That was the whole idea to, to the whole thing, to come, that boat, to New York. There was, they must be there, when the boat came in, people were staying in the line, wait for the relatives.

GUMB: Oh, it wasn't a regular service, it was a special boat for refugees, for war refugees?

ISAK: Yeah, yeah. That's what it was, yeah, yeah. That's why it was like that, because they figured they don't pay much money, so for that money they give them anything.

GUMB: Do you remember what line it was, what shipping line, or anything about that?

ISAK: I don't remember it. I don't know.

GUMB: Oh, okay. Do you remember, uh, what you first saw of this country, you know, as you were approaching the harbor, going into the harbor, do you remember what you first saw, your first impressions?

ISAK: We didn't, we didn't have, our mind was not even thinking what we, what to see. We didn't know what to see, what? We knew one thing, coming into the United States. In fact, the joke is still, it's still in my, I hear it, hey, let's look for some money in the, on the ground, when we get off the boat. So one man says to his nephew, there's no such a thing. If you don't work you can't find no money. You got to work for it.

GUMB: Oh, the guy actually believed.

ISAK: Yeah, yeah, he believed it sure. But it was a good feeling because, uh, at least we knew we are going to somebody, we are going to somebody and we're gonna have somebody to talk to. And it was a good feeling, that we have somebody and we are gonna be somewhere. We're gonna have a home.

GUMB: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

ISAK: Yeah, sure, but I didn't know what it was. They said, "A lady." I said, "A lady? Where's a lady?" Everybody said, "A lady." "Where's the lady?" They told us, they said, "The liberty, the lady liberty," they told us. "The lady liberty."

GUMB: Who told you?

ISAK: The people there when we came down from the boat.

GUMB: Oh, the other refugees.

ISAK: Yeah, yeah. We didn't know what it was. Sure.

GUMB: So it didn't make any impression.

ISAK: Of course not, because . . .

GUMB: You didn't know . . .

ISAK: We didn't know, and the truth is that I would say eighty percent of the people, their mind was not about thinking anything. Just to get somewhere and to have something to think about for the future. That was the main thing for everybody. I was there in New York three days and I was afraid to go out from the house.

GUMB: Why?

ISAK: Why? Because I didn't know where I am in such a big city. I never saw a city like that. It wasn't so easy. In that, in those days, my other uncle was living in Delancey Street, and people were all over everywhere, so it was no, still a lot of people were afraid.

GUMB: Do you remember where the boat docked, where this oceanliner docked?

ISAK: I wouldn't remember that. I have no idea. I can't remember that. Santa Maria Delaca [PH] was the boat, the boat of, the name of the boat was Santa Maria Delaca [PH]. I think I have somewhere a paper, but I don't know.

GUMB: Okay. So, um, you were taken to Ellis, Ellis Island, do you remember how you, how you got there, was it by ferry or something?

ISAK: By ferry, by ferry. And they told our relatives that we must stay there at least twenty hours because we had to be examined, everybody, because unfortunately a lot of people who were not clean at all, they didn't take care of themselves. And they were afraid not to bring in anything in United States. They, a lot of people had diseases, real diseases, so they had to check them out there.

GUMB: What kind of place was Ellis at that time, what do you remember?

ISAK: That, that in those days, they took us in a dormitory, like a colleges, and they put down beds on the floor, that's how we slept. There were army beds, you know the army beds. That's how they put us down to sleep. And covers, the blankets were absolute nothing, blankets, absolute nothing. But you, who was interested to sleep. We weren't interested to sleep there because everybody was saying, oh, my God, where are we, what's happening?

GUMB: What was that?

ISAK: Where are we? What's happening? What's going on now?

A lot of people were scared when they took them into the doctor to examine them, they were scared for certain things, so the doctor told them we are doing for you everything we can to help you. We are not trying to hurt you.

GUMB: Did they send anyone back? Did they . . .

ISAK: Yes, yes.

GUMB: They did. Do you know what kind of cases were sent back?

ISAK: Uh, I think one man had tuberculosis. In those days, it was very, very, they sent him back to Italy. See, but in Italy, they did not examine us too good. But here they did.

GUMB: Well, what do you remember about the examinations? What kind, what kind of tests did they give you?

ISAK: Well, they, they took the blood, and they took the water, the urine, they took eye tests and all kinds of tests. In certain people they find out that they have

sickness that's contagious. So, some people they just put there in the hospital, and some of them they had to send back.

GUMB: Do you where, where do you remember where these tests took place, where on the island they took place?

ISAK: I don't remember, really.

GUMB: Was it in a hospital?

ISAK: No, inside there, inside. They had a, a certain big room where they took us in, in the, in the, in the big room there.

GUMB: With a big ceiling?

ISAK: Yeah. The doctors came in there, nurses, everything, yeah.

GUMB: What sort of officials were there?

ISAK: American.

GUMB: Well, I mean, were they, did they have uniforms?

ISAK: Yeah, yeah.

GUMB: Do you know what they . . .

ISAK: Red Cross.

GUMB: Oh, Red Cross.

ISAK: Red Cross, yeah. That was the main, yeah.

GUMB: Red Cross, they were the officials . . .

ISAK: They were the officials, they took care of us the minute we went off the boat, and they, if they, if they said that he's okay or she's okay, then they told them, oh, go ahead. If they said no, then they told them what's wrong and they have to go. Yeah, Red Cross, everything.

GUMB: Did an immigration/naturalization service officer look at you too, or . . .

ISAK: Oh, sure. Asked questions, sure.

GUMB: Do you remember what kind of questions?

ISAK: Eh, why didn't you go back to your country, first thing. Eh, uh, what would you like better to be, a Communist or a Socialist? I told one, I says, "I don't know what's a Communist, what a Socialist, I don't know. What is it?" Go back to my country, for what? I have nobody there, I have nothing there. And

I became a citizen, they asked me if I ever want to go back to that country? Then I knew already, I says no. I told them no. My citizen papers are put in. No. Unless for a visit.

GUMB: What do you mean, your citizen, your, uh, citizen's papers, your Roumanian citizenship papers . . .

ISAK: No, no, American citizen, American citizen. After five years you get examined, and if you pass it then you're an American citizen.

GUMB: Oh, and they asked you if you want to do that . . .

ISAK: Oh, sure, a lot of questions. Otherwise a lot of people could not pass it. Once you have those papers then they ask you, before they give you the papers, if you have an intention to go, to move back to your country. Visit is something else. Sure. Oh, yeah.

GUMB: How were they, what was their attitude, do you remember, the officials that asked these questions, how did they, do you have any impression of how they treated you, or . . .

ISAK: Oh, they were just, they wanted to find out if you know what you're getting into. They said you're

coming to our country where you have freedom, you could choose, you have your choice, what you wanna be, what you gonna do, but we want to know how you feel about a democratic country. Of course, some people, there were some people that had papers, some people from Roumania, some people didn't have that. So those people, they checked them out. They find that some people were, during the war, communists. They were trying to, eh, escape, and they figured if they're gonna be communists, they're gonna treat them easier, the Germans, during the war.

GUMB: They found out that some people had been Communists.

ISAK: Yes, yes.

GUMB: And what did they do to those people?

ISAK: Well, they had them under surveillance, because they, see, when they checked out the papers, after a while they checked where they're coming from and everything and they find out that certain people were Communists, and they told them, we knew, and watch it, because we're gonna keep our eyes on you.

GUMB: But they still let them in?

ISAK: Oh, yeah, sure.

GUMB: This is the end of side two.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

GUMB: This is the beginning of side three. Did you have any possessions with you?

ISAK: Nothing, nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just my clothes, and that's it. No possessions. What kind of possessions? What? From where? I couldn't do no business in Italy or, to work or anything. I came here, no wallet, no keys, no nothing. No, just the clothes on.

GUMB: Do you remember what they fed you on Ellis Island?

ISAK: Well, it was like potatoes, it was like vegetables, a lot of fruits, they gave us, because they said that you're not supposed to eat too much meat in the beginning, because a lot of people, their stomachs were not in order, so they figured give them light food, milk, things like that.

GUMB: Was it kosher?

ISAK: Oh, yeah. Kosher, yeah, of course. Otherwise they knew ahead of time that those people got to have kosher. Even, they brought especially from New York City, from the city, yeah.

GUMB: So, um, where did you meet your uncle? Where did you finally meet your uncle?

ISAK: At the boat, at the boat, but I did not recognize him. He recognized me. And he told me, he says you have to stay there (?) until they're gonna let you go. I can't do, we can't do nothing about it because that is the law, that is the rules. So after, after they released me, so he brought me here to Baltimore.

GUMB: Were you ever scared that you weren't going to be allowed in, did that ever occur to you?

ISAK: No, no, I had nothing to lose. Nothing to lose. Everything was, whatever I had I said what can I lose. I mean, I didn't have nothing to lose. My, my life? I didn't care much. When he brought me home here to the city, he took all my clothes, he threwed away, bought everything new. In they, they didn't have no children, so he took me in and I was there until I got married. I got married 1950. But he enjoyed to see

how I was eating, after about four, five months, I came to myself, he couldn't believe it because I was a very, I could eat up four hot dogs and half a loaf of bread like nothing, like nothing. I, uh, in, there were people that they didn't, they didn't see anything, they couldn't understand, so I told them, I said look, I haven't eaten things, regular food, for so many years, and they were very nice, very nice to me. And . . .

GUMB: Could you speak any English?

ISAK: No, no. I went to school. I went here to school, nighttime. I worked, those days I had a job in the morning, at night I went to school. I wanted to go to become a citizen, too. You had to be here five years to become a citizen. So later I learned, that's all.

GUMB: Did, did, uh, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society assist you at all in any way during, any time during your . . .

ISAK: In certain, in certain things they did, certain things. But I could take care of myself also. I got my job. I didn't, I used to work in three or four jobs. I used to work, so I didn't care. Wherever they called me I was there.

GUMB: Did HIAS assist you at all in Italy?

ISAK: No, no.

GUMB: Only in this country.

ISAK: In this country, yes.

GUMB: So what was your first job?

ISAK: Baker. 1947, two weeks later I became, I went already to work. I was here two weeks, I went to work. And since then I retired, two years ago I retired. When I became sixty-two I said to myself I got enough. I got enough because I worked very hard, and the children are married so I'm gonna take it easy so I work a couple of hours a day and thank God, that's all, I don't, and now, at the end of this month, I'm going to Israel for a trip to see my sister, my family, in Israel.

GUMB: So how did you get into baking?

ISAK: A friend of mine had a, a big bakery and, uh, he says to me, "Look, it's a very hard life, you've got to work day, night, all kind of hours, you're gonna like it? I says why not? Why not? What do I have? I

used to go daytime, nighttime, night and day time, didn't matter to me. And they were very happy with me because I was a very hardworking person and that's all. They, one, there was a union shop. They didn't want to take me into the union because I was a refugee. The owner said to me, "Look, Isak, I am with you. The union is holding me tight. I got a little secret for you. If you want to show them that you're a good mechanic, a good baker, don't tell nobody, go to Washington, I'll tell you where. You want to travel?" I said, "Yeah." I used to take the train, every night, by five o'clock in the evening, go to Washington, work there all night, come home. One year. After one year, the union said, "All right. Come back to Baltimore and that's it. I got, I got a small union pension, a small union pension, but, eh, I'm satisfied because the union did a lot for me. Fifteen years ago I had a car accident, another car accident. A car came from the race track, I was staying on the corner, hit me, threw me five feet away. Three-and-a-half months I couldn't work and I couldn't walk. It cost the union ten thousand dollars, but thank God, I'm all right.

GUMB: Um, so, um, not a question exactly appropriate for you, but how did your expectations of America or, if you had any expectations of America, compare to what you actually found here?

ISAK: It's a wonderful country. It's a wonderful country. Every person has the right to do what he feels like, what he wants to do. Somebody wants to go in business. If he's lucky, he's a very, if not, it's a wonderful country, you can live for yourself any way you want, nobody bothers you, in spite what the Russian people are coming and they're saying that it's no good. I say they're wrong. I say they're wrong. If some people are not lucky, they got to work all their life hard, that's not the country's problem, that's your own problem. So, compare it to other countries, of course, of course it is. One of the greatest.

GUMB: In what year did you become a citizen?

ISAK: Uh, '47? '48, '49, '50, '55. I was even drafted here two years in the United States. I was drafted. The Korean War was on, and I had a small, my daughter was a baby so they said, "Okay, you don't have to go."

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But I went to, every three months I had to go for, in the camp here in Baltimore, but they didn't took me.

GUMB: This is the end of our interview with Mr. Isak.