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INTERVIEWER: Gloria Lopez

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PROJECT: Hitler's Europe to the Golden State

GL: This is Gloria Lopez conducting an interview with Rabbi Haim Asa at his home in Fullerton, California. This interview is being conducted for the California State University, Fullerton from Hitler's Europe to the Golden State: Europe's World War II Migrants to California Oral History Project on November 27, 2012 at 9:30 a.m. Rabbi, when and where were you born?

HA: I was born in a town called Bourgaz, B-o-u-r-g-a-z, which is on the Black Sea, and I was born on May 1, 1931. The town of Bourgaz became recently known because this is where Arab terrorists killed Israelis this past summer. If you remember, there was an incident where Israeli tourists were coming for vacation on the Black Sea. The terrorists got I believe four of them before they were contained, and they were killed or arrested or whatever it was. So, the town is a beautiful town, really very picturesque, a beautiful resort. The Communists made it into a great resting place, sort of like a R and R vacation resort for their citizens, the Russians. Bulgaria was always cheaper than everywhere else, so they would be coming with hoards of Eastern Europeans etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. But, it's one place that I always recommend that people visit if they can because it's such a, almost like Old World in spite of the industrial development and all that. But, the downtown Bourgaz where I still own a piece of property, a house and all that, is really like in the picture books.

GL: Okay, uh, what was your upbringing like?

HA: The most beautiful childhood one could ever imagine. My father, Abraham Assa, was a well-to-do merchant. He had like a mini department store in downtown Bourgaz. We never lacked anything, and it was like an idyllic upbringing. My father was the president of the Jewish community of Bourgaz during the war. My father was well respected, well loved, and well known in our town. He was the only merchant in the downtown area that extended credit to every peasant. The poor peasants most of the time had a good summer or good year, harvest and all that, but some years the harvest was poor and they could not pay. My father never, never

pressed anybody for their debts or money. He carried them on the books. As a matter of fact, the funny thing is that when I brought my wife and four children to Bourgaz in 1975, which was my first return to Bulgaria after we had escaped in 1944 before the end of the war for Palestine, for Israel, I could not find our store. [It] was a famous store called The Little Elephant because we had an elephant in the show window. I would wind the elephant every couple days with a spring and all, and the elephant would be moving its head and its neck sort of left, right, and center and all that. So, everybody knew the Little Elephant Department Store. When I couldn't find the store in 1975—and I knew the location, but it didn't make sense because the Communists took our store and three other stores and made it into a huge shoe store. The Communists were totally ignorant of the history of the building and history of the downtown. With the Communists, the idea was always to build something big or bigger, so they took our store and made it into a shoe store as part of a huge complex and all that. So, I asked an old man sitting there on the curb, I said, "Are you from here?" He said, "Yes, I am." I said, "Remember the store called *Malkota Slonche*, The Little Elephant?" He said, "Of course, I do. As a matter of a fact, I still owe money to Mr. Assa." He was one of the people that didn't pay their debt. I asked, "Well, where's the store?" He said, "Well, it's right there, but they made it into this and this and this." I found the store, I mean the location, but everything was gone, yeah.

GL: But, they still remembered it just as much?

HA: Yeah.

GL: Can you tell me about your childhood friends and what were your hobbies as a child? Spending time at the store?

HA: My childhood friends were both in the Jewish school, which I attended, and in the neighborhood, which was not Jewish. I mean, there were a thousand Jews in our town so we were spread all over the place. I had both many Jewish friends and many non-Jewish friends, and for the most part the non-Jewish friends stood by me or by us even after the beginning of the fascism and the laws against the Jews. So, I had both Jewish and non-Jewish friends.

My hobbies—uh, bicycles were very, very unique and expensive. I was probably the first kid in our town to have gotten a bicycle because my father could afford it. There was no problem with that. And, I was a member of the Bicycle Riding Club. We used to go on a half-a-day bike ride, just like you rode this morning to my house, but multiply this times ten. We'll go for beautiful bike rides out in the country and all that. I was only eight, nine, ten something like that, but I was very proud of the fact that I had a bicycle. Unfortunately, many of my friends could not afford to have a bicycle, so I would lend them my bicycle. But, this was my hobby the bike ride. The fact that I had a bike of my own allowed me to play soccer. I played soccer with a Jewish group. We used to sneak after lunch. My mother had just died, and my grandmother insisted that I should take a nap after lunch, especially during the summer. I would sneak out the house through the window and go to the

little park we had a couple of blocks away and play soccer with all my friends. And, when I came back I would sneak into my room and pretend that I just awakened from my siesta.

[00:10:36]

GL: Who were your role models growing up?

HA: Role models? Well unfortunately, I lost my mother when I was seven. She was a model, but I hardly remember her. Thank God my father remarried and his second wife is the mother that really raised me from age of nine to twenty-one. She died in Israel while I was serving in the Israeli Army. My father was also my model. My grandparents, my grandfather was a model. But, I didn't have any idols to emulate or to—you know, it's not like today where you become enamored in one singer or one public figure and all that. So basically, it was my family, yeah.

GL: What was your awareness of the rise of fascism as a child?

HA: Well, I didn't know too much about politics. I believed the propaganda that we saw in the movies. In Bulgaria before the movie would screen—and we were still getting Western movies from the United States or Russian movies from Russia and all that. Are you old enough to remember Laurel and Hardy?

GL: No, but I've seen it.

HA: You've seen it?

GL: Um-hm.

HA: Yeah. You know, like I used to go to the movies and watch some of the comical figures, Laurel and Hardy and all that. But anyway, before each movie there would be a newsreel of the news of the week and all that, and the Germans, of course, spread a lot of propaganda. So, before the publication of the Nuremberg Laws in Bulgaria, which was 1941, I was pretty enthusiastic about Germany. I thought that Germany was the future of Europe. I mean, they had such an incredible propaganda that unless you were personally affected by Nazi laws against you, against my people, which was not the case yet, I thought that Germany was a great country and that Hitler was the savior. He was portrayed as the person that took a county, which was going into total destruction, because Germany—after the First World War we demanded such heavy reparation money from Germany. The German economy and the German mark were worthless. You had to have a wheelbarrow of money to buy one loaf of bread. I mean, imagine? So, Hitler was the miracle man that put together a great army, which to a young child, this was miracle because everybody thought that he was the savior of Europe. [talks to his wife; recording paused] We were very fond of our King, King Boris III, and King Boris was very, very much loved, very, very benevolent, very good ruler, and he loved trains. His hobby was to get into a train and drive the

locomotive engine car. We thought that he was a great, great king. When his daughter was born in 1934, I was only three years old so I don't remember that. But, when his son was born in '37 I was like six, seven years old, and there was a national celebration because the king had his son. By the way, that son of the king who now lives in both Bulgaria and Madrid is a close friend of mine. We don't see each other as often as I would like because my travel days are over, but the days when I would travel I would visit him in Madrid. I would visit him in Sofia. I brought him to Los Angeles in 1994 to acknowledge the role of his father in the saving of the Bulgarian Jews. He has an older sister, Maria Louise, who lives in Madison, New Jersey. I used to bring her to the West Coast for public speaking and all that. She doesn't travel anymore, and neither do I, but the contact is still there with the royal family.

GL: Okay. Uh, what do you remember the coming of World War II as a child?

[00:18:35]

HA: There was no anti-Semitic news yet, so for all purposes we were looking upon Germany as a great force, great army, which was going to defeat communism, which I hated. I still hate what's left of it. We thought that the Germans were like liberators, like—to put it in theological terms, it's like Hitler was the Messiah. Hitler was going to be the solution to all of our ills. And, at that time the anti-Semitic rules started creeping in. I was not mature enough to understand what it means, but all of a sudden, some young Bulgarians who joined the equivalent of Hitler youth in Bulgaria would harass me on the street and call me *Chafut*, which means like a dirty Jew, and all that. I started realizing that Germany was not our liberator. Germany was going to be our oppressor or our murderer, and unfortunately, this was a great disappointment because I thought I had put so much faith into the German people.

So, my father was much more aware of it because he was—first of all, he was the president of the Jewish community of our town. Secondly, he understood politics, which I didn't. He never tried to tell me that the Germans are evil or bad, but he started realizing that we were doomed because wherever Germany had already had the freedom to conquer and to establish their rule the Jews were being already concentrated into ghettos or shipped into Poland. I didn't know anything about the gas chambers or the extermination centers, but I knew that Jews were suffering. This was the beginning or the end of the romantic view of the Germans. I remember vividly I was in first year of junior high school so it must have been like seventh grade, '41. We were in the junior high school. I was in Jewish day school until the sixth grade, and then I went into the public school. We were on the second floor of our school, a beautiful brand new school, and we were at the windows watching the Germany Army come to Bourgaz, to our town, not as the conquerors, but as an ally of Bulgaria on the way to Russia. Bulgaria was the jumping point. Bulgaria and Romania were like the entry of the German Army into Russia. I remember the town square was right in front of our eyes, in front of our school. On one side there was the big church, the Bulgarian National Church of Bourgaz, and on the other side was a complex of the cinema and a small mall. Our school faced the town square. We were watching the German tanks parked in the town square, and you could almost

draw a straight line. That's how precise it was, the alignment, and the German trucks with soldiers and armored cars with their soldiers. At that time my classmates were cheering and applauding because obviously we were an ally of the Germans. I remained passive and knew that I was different. That morning as we were standing at the window there watching the tanks come in, one of my classmates, whom I really didn't know well—I still remember the name of the son of a bitch, Petko Peetkov. He came to me, and he gave me a big, uh—he slapped my face in front of my classmates as we were at the window watching the Germans. I was so shocked because no one has ever slapped me. And, in Bulgaria the minute the teacher walks into the classroom you freeze. You don't move until he says, "Take your places." So, for all purposes, all of us were at the windows, and he timed it so that the teacher was just coming in. He slapped me, and all of us were frozen until the teacher said, "Take your places." Here I am hurting, not so much hurting physically but embarrassed, and I asked my bench mate—we used to be two students to a bench. I asked him, "What was this all about?" He said, "Don't worry about it. Last night there was the organizing meeting of the Bulgarian Nazi Youth," which was called *Brannik* or *Ratnik*. I think it was *Brannik*, which means defender or something like that. So, there was a meeting of the kids that wanted to become Nazi Youth, and the requirement for enrolling in the Nazi Youth Organization was to hurt a Jew or to cause an insult or damage to a Jewish person. He chose me as the victim, and he timed it in such a way that the minute he saw the teacher he hit me. Then there was no reaction on my part because the teacher had just walked in. So, I understood that my days in that school are numbered, and indeed by the end of that year we were told that Jewish students could no longer attend public school. So, my father and his board of directors of the community organized Jewish schools. I went back to a Jewish school because this was the place where we were allowed to be. But, this was the only incident I remember of that period where fascism showed its face, and I was the victim.

GL: Tell me about your experience leaving Bulgaria.

[00:30:00]

HA: All right, that's going to be a long story. My father had this department store. The law, for the protection of the nation, which was a copy of the Nuremberg Laws, was translated into Bulgarian from German, and it was passed in 1941. So, all of a sudden, there were restrictions on us. For example, we could not own businesses. We could not own property even though we had this huge house which was somehow, because of my father's contacts, not taken over. We could not have any jewelry. We could not have radios. We could not have any means of communicating with the outside. So, my father took his department store—as a matter of fact, yesterday I wrote a long letter to the granddaughter of the person who was my father's store manager. He was Bulgarian, not Jewish. Neicho Kolarov was his name. I got a letter from a young lady by the name of Margalita, saying, *I'm the granddaughter of Neicho Kolarov, and I want to know all about my grandfather and grandmother because I'm writing a book of memoirs* or a novel or whatever.

So, my father takes his dear friend Neicho and appoints him—not appoints him but literally signs over his store to him. He's non-Jewish. He could have the store. There was a deal under the table I'm sure that my father still was at the store, but he wasn't the owner. He was just around the store and because of his experience and knowledge he would order the merchandise and he would meet with the traveling salesmen and all that. But, Neicho was the owner. Of course, they would divide probably the profits or whatever arrangement they had. Neicho will get his share and my father would get—in other words, my father would divide the profits with his very trustworthy friends. The wife of Neicho, Marika, I used to call her Aunt Marika, they lived like a half a block from our big house. Marika was like my second or third mother. I felt very close to her, and I'd go there after school. They were very modest. They didn't have money. I mean, now they had money because Neicho was getting something from the store, but basically—originally, it was just store employee, store manager, not like the boss like my father. She would spoil me. She would take care of me. I was the only child. My father had arranged for her to take me as her child or her nephew or her whatever when my parents were supposed to be loaded on the trains which was March 9 and 10, 1943. Marika was going to take me to her house, which was only half a block from my house, the night they would get us out of the house, and I would be already across the street at their house. The next day she was going to—transportation was very difficult in those days—but she would take her little wagon with a donkey, believe it or not, rather than with a horse or a mule or whatever it is, and head to the mountains above Bourgaz where her family lived. She came from the farm where her family lived in the hills where no army or no police ever stepped there. I mean, this was like the boondocks. She would leave me there telling her family that I was an orphan from Bourgaz. I didn't look Jewish, so I didn't have to dye my hair or make myself look non-Jewish or Christian or Bulgarian.

So, she would leave me there for the rest of the war and after the war reclaim me and bring me back into the Jewish community. Well, thank God this never happened, and it didn't happen because my father, just two weeks or so before the deportation of March 9 and 10—this is a very important date to remember. This was the time we were supposed to be loaded on the trains to leave for Poland for Treblinka. Treblinka, uh, just to tell you what Treblinka was, there were concentration camps like Auschwitz. And Auschwitz, when you were brought by the train to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mengele or one of his assistants, would look at the lineup and say, "You left, you right, left, right." Left meant life, work, uh, slave. Right means straight to the gas chambers. They would look at you and decide whether you are fit for labor or going to be exterminated instead of labor. So, in Auschwitz you had a 50/50 chance of surviving for at least three or four months until you became emaciated, and then you were probably sent to the gas chambers. Treblinka was a death camp. Treblinka, where I was twice—by the way, I have film called *The Empty Boxcars*. I could give you a copy. My wife knows where it is. *The Empty Boxcars*—let me backtrack for a second. Are you familiar with the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.?

GL: Know about it but haven't been to it.

HA: You've heard about it, yeah. All right, when the pre-museum—are you familiar with Elie Wiesel?

GL: Uh-huh.

[00:39:45]

HA: Okay. Twenty-two years ago Elie Wiesel was speaking at Claremont University at Pomona, and all the rabbis had a meeting with him prior to his speech. I was there, and anyways, Elie and I, he knows me and I know him. He said to me, "Haim, are you coming to Washington D.C.?" This was like April of 1989 I think. "Are you coming to Washington D.C. for the first event of the U.S. Holocaust Museum?" The museum was not in existence yet. President Reagan in the eighties appointed one of our rabbis, Rabbi Seymour Siegel, to be the director of the future museum of the Holocaust, and there was going to be a big event. I'm not sure about the date. I have a recording of it somewhere. The event in 1989 was full of Hollywood stars and big shots, really big shots, and it was at the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington D.C. This was going to be the first event of the future Holocaust Museum and, of course, it was a big fundraiser. So, there were millionaires and multi-millionaires there that pledged, you know, one million for this and one million for that. There was going to be also a symposium and a couple days of lectures and histories. So, Elie was always asking me, "Are you coming to Washington D. C.?" I said, "No, I'm not coming." He said, "Why not?" I answered, "Because I'm sick and tired of the Holocaust—" I don't want to call it Holocaust industry, but the Holocaust establishment, which always emphasizes Poland and Czechoslovakia and the atrocities and the camps and all that, but never speaks about the miracle of the saving of the Bulgarian Jews. He said, "Haim, if you promise me that you are going to come to Washington, in my keynote speech I am going to mention Bulgaria." So, a couple weeks later I get a phone call from a sister, Carol Ritter, R-i-t-t-e-r, who is one of the organizers of this event, and Carol Ritter told me, "We want you to come to Washington. The symposium is going to be dealing with Bulgaria, you'll be heading the section of Bulgaria, and you could invite scholars to speak about it." There was a professor at the University of Pittsburgh I think, Professor Cherry, who was at that time—he had studied in Bulgaria, and he had written a book about Bulgaria. So, here I am in Washington, in early May probably, organizing the Bulgarian section of the symposium of the three day gathering of Holocaust survivors and Holocaust scholars and Holocaust who is who. Carol Ritter interviewed me about my father, and she published a book a year later called *The Courage to Care.* One of the chapters in the book *The Courage to Care* is about my family and what my father did.

Well, what my father did was the following—now I'm going back to 1943. My father gets a telegram in the store—even though he was not the owner of the store anymore, all the mail came to the store for him. The telegram was from the Chief Commissar of Jewish Affairs in Sofia, the capital, the Jew hater called Belev, to all the little commissars in every little town or midsize town in Bulgaria where Jews lived. The telegram said, "You have so many days to prepare your Jewish population for *resettlement*." This is the key word. Nobody ever talked about death camps or

about labor camps, concentration camps. It was always resettlement in the east, resettlement in the east. So, "You have so many days to prepare your Jewish population for resettlement in the east." Each of us could have like thirty kilograms and all the other details. My father looks at the telegram, and it is from the Chief Commissar Belev who was Fascist second to none in Sofia. He was trained by Eichmann. He was trained in Berlin to be an anti-Semitic and was appointed chief commissar to be in charge of all the commissars in all the little and not so little towns. My father took the telegram, which was not for him, took it to the postmaster who was a dear friend of ours—as a matter of fact, the postmaster lived on the third floor of our house rent free so that we could listen every night at 9:00 p.m. to BBC in Bulgarian. BBC was the only source of true news about the war. In other words, all the Bulgarian stations were under Nazi influence, and they were spreading lies. Even when Stalingrad—does Stalingrad mean anything to you?

GL: Um-hm.

HA: Yeah, when the war turned around, the German propaganda declared that the German Armies were still marching around. BBC was the only true source for news. So, every night at 9:00 p.m. we'd go upstairs to the third floor, we lived on the second floor, and listen to BBC in Bulgarian. So, the postmaster was a very good friend of my father. My father gave him the telegram and said, "Listen, why don't you teach your mailmen how to read Bulgarian," because Commissar of Jewish Affairs and president of Jewish community sound similar in Bulgarian, and my father thought that this was delivered by mistake. I thought the same thing for many years. In the last few years I have doubts about the mistake. I think that the commissar got the telegram. He was a good friend of my father even though he was the commissar, which is supposed to be the enemy, right?

GL: Yeah.

[00:48:26]

HA: But, he was a good friend of my father. He wanted my father to know what's happening, and he channeled the telegraph to my father. Well, we'll never know the truth because the commissar was probably executed as a Fascist by the Communists in 1944. There were a lot of trials, and a lot of people were killed. My father is now deceased for over thirty years, so I will never know the truth. But, the point is that my father is now the only Jew that knows that in two to three weeks we are going to be put on the trains and resettled in the east. He picks up the phone—we still had a telephone in the store. He called up Sofia, which is the capital, and told the Central Federation of the Jewish Community—in other words, the power structure of the Jewish Community still existed. He told them, "I'm taking the train tonight for Sofia. I'll be there at 6:00 a.m. tomorrow morning, and I will be coming to an 8:00 a.m. meeting which you are going to call. I hope that every person who is in the Jewish Federation leadership will be there." So, my father appears before the power structure of the Jewish community the next morning, and he told them, "I saw with

my own eyes our death sentence. We're going to be deported. The trains are going to arrive on such a day, and we will be loaded and taken to the east. Let us mobilize." There were two choices. One was to go into the forest and become Partisans, become Freedom Fighters. But, with all the elderly and all the children and all the women that could not do that this was not a good choice for the majority of us. However, many young men and women went into the forest. As a matter of fact, the Communists, after the end of the war, claimed that the Partisans were the people that saved us from the Nazis which is nonsense. The Partisans could not save us from the Nazis. They weakened the German Army by bombing trains and by doing all kinds of things, but this could have not saved us.

The other choice was to mobilize and to organize lobby groups to every who-is-who or every important person. People that don't know politics always demean the role of the lobby program or the lobby forces. But, in this case, delegations went to the king, delegations went to the church, delegations went to the chamber of commerce, delegations went to the agricultural union, delegations went to the labor union, to the teachers union, to the lawyers association. Those were people who had IOUs. In other words, I did a favor for you ten years ago. Now I want *you* to listen to the fact that we're going to be in two weeks put on the trains and all that. This started a big, big movement. Enough pressure was built, especially by the church, and there is—I have a book about it, *The Decisions of the Synod*, S-y-n-o-d, *of the Bulgarian National Church*. All those resolutions objecting to the anti-Jewish laws and about our expulsion bore fruit. Without boring you with details, let's say Plovdiv, which is the second largest community in Jewish community in Bulgaria, P-l-o-v-d-i-v—Plovdiv had five thousand Jews compared to Bourgaz, which had one thousand. Sofia, which was the largest, had twenty-five thousand. The numbers are just to give you some kind of a scale. The Jews of Plovdiv were already gathered in the courtyard of the Jewish community ready to be loaded on the trains on March ninth. The local commissar was very anxious to get started, and the police rounded up the Jews. The Bishop of Plovdiv—it will be more than the bishop. It will be more like the cardinal in terms of the Catholic Church.

GL: Yeah.

HA: I would imagine you were brought up in the church. The Cardinal of Plovdiv came to the gathering of the Jews in the courtyard and said, "My brothers and sisters, if they load you on the trains I personally would lie on the railroad tracks before the train and not allow it to depart from this town." I mean, stuff like that which is unheard of because in every country—whether it's in Poland or Russia, the church was anti-Semitic. Of course, in Germany the church was both. The Lutheran and the Catholic were anti-Semitic. Everywhere. But, in Bulgaria the Bulgarian National Church was very much in favor of our survival and they pulled some miracles.

Anyway, when my father announced the bad news to the assembly of delegates or of the power structure of the Jewish community some of them said, "Assa, you are talking nonsense. This is not Poland. This is not Germany. This is Bulgaria. We love this country, and this country loves us." Thank God the vice president of the Federation, Buko Levy, B-u-k-o L-e-v-y, who was a prominent

attorney—and he was also a decorated hero of the First World War. He was a decorated officer in the Bulgarian Army. Buko Levy got up and said, "Listen to this guy from Bourgaz," referring to my father. "He knows what he's talking about because I know from an independent source that what he's saying is true. I don't know details, but he saw details in writing. I only heard about it last night. Whatever he is saying is true. Listen to him, what he is saying." Well, because of him and because he was a very respected person in the community they took my father's word seriously. Now his source of information, Buko Levy, he had a lady friend, and she was the secretary of the Chief Commissar of Jewish Affairs Belev, B-e-l-e-v. Her name was Liliana, like Liliana Panitza, P-a-n-i-t-z-a. Liliana Panitza was very close to her boss who was the Commissar of Jewish Affairs, and she was in love with him. She had her sugar daddy who was Buko Levy. She was very secretive about it because she was Bulgarian, and he was Jewish. This wasn't kosher. Anyway, she had told Buko Levy that, "Very bad news went out from my office yesterday." She didn't give him any details because she didn't know details, but she knew it was bad news for the Jews and that Buko should be aware. So, because of Buko Levy's words and testimony they believed my father, and they mobilized to organize the lobby groups et cetera, et cetera. You could read more about it in *The Courage to Care*. There is a chapter there that I wrote about my father.

By the way, Liliana Panitza, when the war ended, was considered to be Fascist because she worked for the Chief Commissar of Jewish Affairs. The Jewish community after the war saved her from death and gave her some monthly stipend. I never met Liliana. I met her sister in Sofia oh, twenty-five years ago, and she told me all about her sister. She apparently was quite a lady and very courageous even though she was shacking up with the Chief Commissar Belev, her boss. She was not a Fascist at all, and Belev couldn't care less for her as a person. He just wanted probably the sex or the physical satisfaction. But, she was quite the lady. The Jewish community tried to protect her after the war from the Communist military courts that sentenced her to death, and the Jews saved her.

Anyway, March ninth and tenth came and went. The trains were sitting in the train stations. *Empty Boxcars*, okay? My wife will probably lend you the movie. Oh, thirteen years ago I got a phone call from a Professor Gaffney, G-a-f-f-n-e-y, not Jewish, Professor of Constitutional Law at Valparaiso University, Indiana. He happens to be a local boy, Los Angeles boy, who was a priest. He left the priesthood, married, and has two or three children. As a matter of fact, one of his daughters just got engaged. He called me up from somewhere to tell me that she was very happily engaged, and they were having a big party and all that. Anyway, Ed calls me up. I did not know Ed from Adam, and he told me, "I read the book *The Courage to Care*, especially the chapter that you wrote about your father, and I'd like to make a movie out of it." I said, "Well, who are you?" He said, "I'm so and so. I'm not a movie maker. I'm professor of constitutional law, but I'm interested in the subject of righteous gentiles. So, I want to write a script and a movie about the subject matter." We got together, and I realized that he was a serious guy, not just some fly by night guy that wants to make a movie. We left for Macedonia. Macedonia—do you know the map or Europe more or less?

[01:03:31]

GL: Uh-huh.

HA: All right, Macedonia was part of Bulgaria.

GL: Oh, yeah.

HA: It was given to Yugoslavia and lost to Bulgaria after the First World War. So, Bulgaria always lamented the fact that it lost part of its territory to Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was on the winning side of the First World War. Bulgaria was on the losing side with Germany, and when you lose you lose land or territory. Thrace, T-h-r-a-c-e, was also part of Bulgaria, which became part of Greece. So, Macedonia and Thrace were taken away from Bulgaria and given to the Greeks and the Yugoslavs. Well now, Greece is conquered by Hitler. Yugoslavia is conquered by Hitler. And, Hitler promised Bulgaria that as soon as he conquers those territories he's going to give Macedonia and Thrace back to Bulgaria, which he did with one exception. The Jews of Thrace remain Greek citizens, and the Jews of Macedonia remain Yugoslav citizens. Both of those categories were under German control rather than Bulgarian control. So, Thrace was Bulgarian, but the Jews were not Bulgarian. And, that's the reason that on March ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth those Jews were loaded on the trains and taken straight to Treblinka and immediately gassed. In Treblinka you had about seven to ten hours between the train unloading you and the gas chamber. There was no labor camp. There was no left for labor and right for extermination. It was just straight death camp, extermination camp. And, those 11,300 Jews of Thrace and Macedonia were killed, let's say the week of probably March 12-15 of 1943. So, Ed Gaffney made a small mistake. In his movie he put too much emphasis upon the destruction of the eleven thousand Jews of Thrace and Macedonia and not enough about the saving of the Bulgarian Jews, which really upset me, but I had no choice. I was not the writer of the script. I was not the editor of the movie. I was not the director of the project. I just played in it. So, he's got about a hundred hours filming of me personally in Macedonia, which was our first visit. In Treblinka where we went to the camp, to what remains of the camp, to film the—Treblinka has no monument. It's just got big stones planted in this huge ravine, and here it says France. Here it says Bulgaria. Here it says Greece. Here it says Yugoslavia. Whatever it is. So, a professional crew filmed me there. Then I had many hours of film in Sofia and also many hours in Israel. The movie ends up with—I gathered a hundred of my family members in Tel Aviv, Jaffa for dinner in an open air restaurant. There were no walls or roof and all that, just one hundred of us raising our cups screaming, "*L'Chaim*," which means to life. My name means life, so To Life to celebrate our survival. So, he ends the movie with this scene of us celebrating our survival and all that. Anyway, the movie's pretty good except for the fact that he put too much emphasis upon the destruction rather than the saving, and it's worthwhile seeing it. Now I have a Bulgarian friend who wrote a five hundred page novel. Give me one second.

[01:10:30]

GL: Okay.

[recording paused]

HA: My friend is a novelist, and he created some fictional people. He's raising some money to make a movie out of it, and I'm the central character of this movie which is basically historical. He calls me Rico. My name was Henri. In Bulgaria the Jews took French names because this was prestigious and all that. So, Haim Rico Asa. My name was Enrico, but the writer shortened it to Rico.

GL: Rico?

HA: And basically, he took many incidents in my life and made it into a novel, and this is not published yet. This was pre-publication. He printed like three copies, five copies, but the idea was to try it out and then go into press. He added some more stuff here, and he basically follows historical data. And, I'm the only Bulgarian Rabbi in the world. There isn't another Bulgarian Rabbi so far. Anyway so far the only movie I am in is the movie that I told you about, *Empty Boxcars* and this one. Uh, okay, go ahead with your questions.

GL: Uh, when do you leave Bulgaria for Israel or Palestine?

HA: I left—okay, after we were saved from the Holocaust, which was March of 1943, the Bulgarian king did something very clever. If you are trying to kill people you would concentrate them, like in Warsaw ghetto. So, the Germans brought all the Jews from the little villages into one big ghetto, and from there you could easily transport them to the death camps or whatever it is or labor camps. In Bulgaria, the king did the opposite.

GL: Spread them out?

HA: He took the Jews of Sofia, which was twenty-five thousand, the Jews of Plovdiv, which is five thousand, and et cetera, and he sent us to the little towns all over Bulgaria, which is, of course, contrary to a plan of extermination. So, instead of concentrating us, he decentralized us, and—okay, I have to go back. My father at the age of seventeen joined the Bulgarian Army. Before World War I there were the Balkan Wars.

GL: Yeah.

HA: And Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey and Yugoslavia, they were all fighting each other. My father volunteered when he was only seventeen, but he was very inspired by the Bulgarian heroism and all that. He wanted to be a hero. He joined the Bulgarian Army, and he was stuck somewhere in the swamps of Macedonia in a place where

malaria—if you know what malaria is, malaria kills. And, the captain of his unit came to him and said, "Assa, you are Jewish?" He said, "Yes, I am." "You know how to trade?" In other words Jews are good merchants or traders or negotiators. He said to him, "I want you to feed my soldiers. My soldiers are dying, starving." He said, "Okay, what do you want me to do?" He said, "I don't care. Find out what we have in the store rooms and trade with the peasants." So, my father goes to the peasants and says, "What do you need?" "We need Quinine." Do you know what Quinine is? Quinine is a pill that fights malaria. It's called Quinine. In other words, it's anti-malaria, and there was no antibiotics at that time, only anti-malaria drugs. And, they had ten million pills in the infirmary in the Army Depot because Bulgaria had a good pharmaceutical industry and all that. So, the peasant said, "We need Quinine to fight malaria." My father asked, "Okay, I'll give you a thousand pills for six cows. I'll give you, uh, ten thousand pills for a hundred bushels of wheat." All of a sudden, my father's regiment was eating better than anybody else in the Bulgarian Army, and they survived the war and the starvation. Their captain, twenty years later, became a general. He remained a lifelong friend of my father. And luckily enough, he was the general in charge of the military district of my city. The country was divided into military districts. That general was in charge of Bourgaz, of my town, and the entire Black Sea region, the sea. In the spring of 1943, after the postponement of our deportation, the general told my father, "I'm being moved to Shumen, to another location, another county, and I want you to be close to me. Otherwise, I cannot protect you." So, my father, mother, and I leave Bourgaz and our beautiful apartment and all the furniture locked, secured everything, and moved to a small town like twenty kilometers from Shumen where the general is sitting in his headquarters. He said, "I don't want you in my town, but I want you nearby." So, it was like a half an hour ride on the train from Shumen to Targovishte. In the summer of 1943 we, the Jews, were displaced and our town Targovishte, which had one Jewish family before the war, all of a sudden has one thousand Jews coming from Sofia, from Plovdiv, from this and this and this. And, my father became the president of the Jewish community of Targovishte. Why? Because he already had experience as a president of the Jewish community of Bourgaz, and he immediately organized everything including soup kitchens, including housing, including subsidy for this, and for whatever. My father would have a weekly board meeting at a small coffee shop in downtown Targovishte facing the police station of the downtown Targovishte. Around a week before Christmas 1943, so we're talking about December, 1943, my father was conducting his weekly board meeting at this little coffee shop. [They were at] the coffee shop because the community center in Targovishte—because there was no infrastructure we didn't have a Jewish Synagogue, Jewish school, Jewish everything. I mean, my father organized a school for the children, but it was all temporary until the war ends.

[01:22:13]

GL: Yeah.

HA: The Secret Police arrived that Sunday morning, the infamous police, in mid-December 1943 and arrested my father from the middle of the meeting. They took him away without a word. They didn't have to. They are the power. Fortunately, in every police station in Bulgaria there is always a policeman patrolling the front of the police station. The guy that was in charge of that particular day of patrolling the front knew my father, and he knew that he was related to the general who was in charge of the military district. So, when he saw the Secret Police come and take my father away, he went inside and told the officer of the day, "Please call up the German—not the German, the Bulgarian Army Headquarters in Shumen and tell them—" He didn't know my father's name, but, "Tell them that the general's Jew, the Jew that the general protected was just arrested by the Secret Police." This is Sunday morning, and luckily, the general was at this desk because the night before there were all kind of Partisan activities in the mountains. The general was like on an extended emergency to be at his office to direct the activities against the Partisans. The general immediately issues an order to the local Army garrison, to the local army unit of Targovishte, and says, "A Jew by the name of Assa, bah, bah, bah was arrested by the Secret Police. I want you to find him alive and immediately liberate him or set him free." The Army knew exactly where the Secret Police would take their prisoners and shoot them. It was a little forest next to Targovishte. They'd torture them and then was a bullet. My father had his bones broken. Every part of his body was beaten up terribly, and just before they were ready to shoot him the Army comes in and says, This is our case. We take over. Release him immediately, orders of the general. They bring him back to our apartment in Targovishte, half dead, beaten up, and in terrible shape. It took him about three months to put himself together, recover, and then when he did he said, "This is the end of us in Bulgaria. We are leaving for Palestine," which was a miracle in itself because it's now 1944. The war is still on. Hitler is retreating on all fronts, but still, the war is on. The only person that did not know or refused to acknowledge the fact that the war was lost for Germany was Hitler. Every general, every private, everybody knew that after December '42, January and February of '43 that the war for Germany was lost. It was Stalingrad.

GL: Yeah.

HA: Okay, so this was the turning point. Hitler refused to acknowledge. Hitler could have made a deal with the British and the Americans and saved millions of lives. The Russians were more difficult to deal with because the Russians wanted total destruction of the German nation and Army. But, the British and the English were more, uh, pliable, and Hitler could have surrendered and saved many lives. He believed in the German cause and also the ultimate cause was the destruction of the Jews. So basically, he continued the death factories until the very end. The Jews of Hungary, who were intact until 1944 because Hungary was an ally of Hitler like Bulgaria—Hungary was an ally of Hitler. The local Fascist government did not believe in surrendering the Jews just like Bulgaria did not. And then, the Fascist regime of Hungary was overthrown by a more Fascist regime, and that new government shipped four hundred thousand out of the eight hundred thousand Jews in Hungary to be killed in the last six months of the war. So, this was horrible.

Anyway, my father decided we're leaving Bulgaria, and that's it. He went to Sofia. Money was no issue. He had lots of money. He had hidden money. He spent a fortune bribing and getting an exit visa from Bulgaria to Turkey, which he did. And, in Turkey we had a visa waiting for us to go to Palestine to go to Israel, which was waiting for him in Istanbul in Turkey. So, in June of 1944, four months, June, July, August, September, yeah, four months before liberation—Bulgaria was liberated from the Nazi in September of 1944. Four months before liberation we left Bulgaria for Istanbul. Have you heard of the Orient Express?

[01:30:34]

GL: Uh-huh.

HA: Orient Express was the railroad, built by a Jew by the way, Russian Jew, that went from Vienna to Baghdad. We took the Orient Express through Turkey, Syria. We stopped in Syria. We went to Beirut, which is Lebanon. In Lebanon we took a little, little bus that drove us into Haifa, Palestine, which is now Haifa, Israel. So, that's how we arrived to our new country to Palestine or to Israel in June of 1944.

GL: Before I ask you about leaving Europe and coming to Southern California, tell me a little bit about your experiences in Israel because you spent some time—

HA: Well, in Israel I was educated in the, uh—let's see, I was thirteen, so I was educated in agricultural high school because at that time everybody was supposed to be trained to make the desert bloom. So, it was like a—I mean, engineering didn't matter. Sciences didn't matter. Humanities didn't matter. What mattered was that you knew how to work the land and make it blossom, prosperous. So, I was educated in a very fine junior high school and high school. As a matter of fact, when I came to this country to study, I came to study agriculture, subtropical agriculture, because avocado, citrus, and would make the country prosper and green and all that. Well, after a couple of years in this country I discovered that there is history, there is anthropology, there is sociology, that there are humanities. I decided to switch majors and finally ended up as a rabbi. But, when I first came to the U.S.A. I studied agriculture because we thought this was the future. I still feel that agriculture is important, but obviously, it's not like in the old days when this was the only choice that you had left. So, I came to the United States. Oh, in Israel I fought in the War of Independence in 1948 as a seventeen-year-old. We were kicked out of the Army the day Israel was declared to be a state because you had to be eighteen to serve, and we were underage. So, we could fight before there was a state. The minute it was a state we were out.

GL: Too young.

HA: And, I enrolled in the Army a year later when I was eighteen. I went off to officer's school, and I became a paratrooper. Unfortunately, my mother died while I was in paratrooper school. So, there was a rule in Israel [and] still is today that if you are an

only child—and I was an only child—and if there is a tragedy in the family—like my mother was a double amputee, and we took her home. According to the law I cannot be in the fighting unit anywhere on the borders because I have to be close to home. So, they want to give me some paper pushing job which I didn't want to do. I had a contract with the Army that I wanted to fulfill. So, I joined the Israeli Secret Service, Shin Bet, for a year to finish my—

GL: Contract?

HA: —my service, term of contract or service contract. And then, when I was discharged I decided that I want to come and study in America. I told my father that unless he remarries I'm not going to leave him alone. Sure enough, he met a wonderful—all three of my mothers were wonderful women. How lucky that he married three times, and three times it was a wonderful marriage. I left Israel in August of 1954, arrived to America Labor Day weekend 1954, studied in New York for one quarter. [I] realized that agriculture in New York was different than agriculture in Israel and California was the closest climate to Israel. I transferred to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. I didn't like UCLA. It was too big. I went to Cal Poly Pomona, which was great, and graduated from the University of Arizona in 1958 with a BS in Agriculture Economics or whatever it is. And then, I enrolled in Rabbinical School. When I was ordained in 1963 in Cincinnati, my wife and I and the baby, our oldest, went to Argentina for three years. I speak Spanish. Spanish was my native language because of my grandmother. In other words, we, the Jews of Spain and Portugal who were exiled by the church, by the Inquisition in 1492, the year that Columbus came to America, we were kicked out. (phone rings) We were kicked out of Spain and Portugal. We were given three choices. Stay in Spain and convert to Christianity. Stay and not convert but burn at the stake, and some of my family burnt at the stake. Or leave the country. We left for Turkey. The Turkish Empire opened up their gates, and we settled in the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Bulgaria eventually was our home because it was a part of the Ottoman Empire. I was sent to Argentina because of my Spanish. After my three years in Argentina was over, we came back to California. We've been in this community for forty-seven years, in this house for forty-four years.

GL: What was the adjustment like to California?

HA: It was very easy. We love California. I hated New York. I mean, in the winter it just comes—I came here like December. I left December fifteenth on a Greyhound bus four nights and three days or three nights and four days, whatever it is. I arrived to California, and I was, like, back home immediately. The weather and everything else. Lannie?

EA: [Elaine Asa, wife of Haim Asa] Just a minute.

GL: Do you want to stop for a second?

[01:40:34]

HA: Yeah, you could stop it for a second. [recording paused] You want to know about, uh—

GL: Your time at Temple Beth Tikvah.

HA: Temple Beth Tikvah. We came here in the summer in July of 1966. I was the first rabbi, ordained rabbi. They had a couple of student rabbis before me. The congregation was started in 1964. We're going to have our fiftieth anniversary in a year-and-a-half, in 2014. And, it was a very small congregation. I must have done well because after five years, which is unheard of, the congregation gave me a life contract which means age of sixty-five. They were very happy with me, and I was very happy with them. Recently, we dedicated a building. Were you at our campus at all?

GL: Not yet. I didn't come that day.

HA: If you have a chance—uh, don't bicycle. It's very steep.

GL: Okay, thanks.

HA: It's 1600 North Acacia. By the way, I'll give you my business card.

GL: Okay.

HA: Not business card, but my card with the address and all the phone numbers. Anyway, so recently we dedicated the Asa Learning Center, lifelong learning center, a beautiful school, beautiful building. You will enjoy a visit to our campus. Also, we have a Holocaust Memorial over there, beautiful little park, and we're going to have quite a few lectures on the issue, on the Holocaust, in the near future.

Life has been very good in my congregation. I retired in 1996, sixteen years ago. And, everything was beautiful for about four or five years. We ran out of money, and I went back to work for the State of California. I was a chaplain—well, I was a volunteer chaplain. After I retired I became a chaplain for the prisons. I was going to the women's prison in Chino/Corona California Institute for Women, CIW. And then, I kept getting phone calls from the Department of Mental Health. They needed a chaplain at Norwalk, so I volunteered at Norwalk. Finally, they told me, Why don't you just apply for the job, which I did, and I got it. So, I just retired from the Department of Mental Health last May, six months ago, after ten years of working for the department. My health became compromised because I am on daily dialysis which is not the worst thing because my wife happens to be—became an expert dialyzer so we have everything at home. But, I have other problems. Thank God I'm alive, but it's a struggle. And, the temple is very close to me and to my wife. We're there all the time, of course. I still hope to write my memoirs. I've got a lot of material in my head that I have to—

GL: Write down?

HA: —sit down and put on paper.

GL: Just because I'm thinking, when you got to the temple it had only started up, so tell me a little bit about your role of helping build that congregation to get a little bit bigger?

HA: Well basically, I'm the senior rabbi of Orange County. I've been here longer than any other rabbi. With my arrival we purchased a little property in Brea, which was only for five years. We outgrew it. Then I purchased the location at 1600 North Acacia from the church, from the Congregational Church, which went belly up. I picked up five acres and a building for $150,000. This was in 1970-71. And then, it was a struggle—I mean, building up a congregation. But, by the time I left in '96, we were almost 385 families, meaning to say almost 400. Now it's down to 250.

GL: Um, you've told me a couple, but other than Temple Beth Tikvah, what other kinds of clubs, cultural groups, or organizations have you been involved with here in Southern California?

HA: Yeah well, I was involved in every Jewish organization in Orange County from Federation, to the Bureau of Jewish Education, to Jewish Family Service, to Jewish National Fund, to everything, and I've been honored by all of them at some point or another as one of the rabbis that built this community. Unfortunately, the Jewish community about twenty years ago started moving south. So, a lot of Jews left northern and central Orange County for south county. All of a sudden, there is a reversal, and the south is too expensive and too crowded and too congested and all that. So, there is now young couples are coming back to us. Yeah, great. We hope so. [doorbell rings; recording paused] Uh, well, okay, for its paradise and the climate is, I don't have to tell you, second to none. I mean, I'm a great, great lover of California. It's becoming crowded, so thank God we live outside of the city of Los Angeles.

[01:50:00]

GL: (laughs) Yeah.

HA: Because the city is very congested, but my children live in the city. They are very happy and my grandchildren too. And I think it's a—I mean, California is not what it used to be. Our educational system has gone down, but hopefully we'll make a comeback. And California will always be California. Um, I mean, you cannot go back to what it used to be, but I think the quality of life is still good here. And, I know that people are running to Arizona to Montana and all that, but I'm a Californian who is going to stay here.

GL: It's hard to give up this weather.

HA: Yeah, yeah.

GL: What were your perceptions of the United States before you came and then after you arrived?

HA: Uh, well the United States was always a dream and the kind of almost messianic, uh, myth or expectation. But basically, I believed that the country is the best country in the world. The freedom that we have in America is second to none. I know that we are fighting as cats and dogs on every issue including the fiscal cliff and all that, but still it's a good country. And, I don't believe that we're in the decline. They say that every country has got its peak and then starts declining. I know that we have problems, but I don't think that we are on the permanent decline. We'll overcome our problems hopefully.

GL: You mentioned that your adjustment to California was relatively smooth. Did you have experiences with anti-Semitism in the United States during the time you came?

HA: Very little. Very, very little. Almost none. I mean, I know it's there, and I know that some people don't like us. Some people don't like Jews. Some people don't like Mexican Americans. They don't like blacks. They don't like Asians. We just got a new neighbor as of Saturday, officially, a Korean family, wonderful family, and we welcomed them, the first Asian on our block by the way. And, our neighborhood doesn't change. Whoever lives here stays here for—our neighbors were here for forty-five years, retired to a senior community about six months ago, and they sold the house. The new Korean neighbors took the original house and made it into a jewel. So, they improved it and all that. To me, color or race, is irrelevant. I was sorry to hear that last week, or something like that, a black family in Yorba Linda had to sell their house and leave because the neighborhood hated blacks and did not make them welcome as a part of the community. I think that's stupid, totally, totally stupid. You judge a person by their character. You judge a person by the nature of their behavior but not by their color or their race or their religion. But, some Americans are dumb, unfortunately, and prejudiced.

GL: In what ways have your experiences in Europe, do you think, have shaped your life here in California?

HA: Well, the fact that I was saved by a small country which was part of the fascist alliance tells me that there is hope and that—unfortunately, six million did go up in smoke. But, we're still here. And, as regrettable as it is that so many of us died at the hand of the Nazis, the Nazis are gone, for the most part, and we're still here surviving.

GL: In what ways do you think Southern California has been influenced by European migrants and Jewish survivors of the war like yourself?

HA: Well, California was always a melting pot and whether it was European or Latino Americanos or Central America or Asians in the last thirty, forty years, uh, each group brings their own sort of character or customs to the new land or to the new country. I think that that's what makes us so strong and even welcoming and excited about immigration. I believe in immigration. Everybody wants to come to America for good reason and wherever to not only survive but to welcome new communities or new ethnic groups and make them part of America. Uh, the old idea of America being a white, Protestant country is no longer true. We are a mixed lot. That makes us unique and strong, and I don't believe that we'll ever go back to the time when America was sort of like small exclusive club. It's now open society, and you being the second generation American, your parents being first generation immigrant Mexicans or from San Salvador is an example of that. I am first generation American, not born here but raised here. Not raised but I've been here for sixty years. My children, as you will see from the letter I gave you, and my grandchildren are 100 percent American, and hopefully, this will be a good country for them to grow up and to have their own children and grandchildren.

[02:02:34]

GL: You told me a little bit about this, but if you settled in another part of the United States, how might your experiences have been different? You mentioned New York, that's why I'm saying that.

HA: Well, I visited many parts of the U.S.A. including the south because my son and daughter-in-law lived in Savannah, Georgia, for five years and have been now in Atlanta, Georgia, for almost twenty years. You know, I love the south. I was a student rabbi in Blytheville, Arkansas, fifty years ago. It was different. Discrimination or the Jim Crow Laws were still there. I remember downtown Memphis—when I flew into Memphis and went into the downtown to take the bus to go to Blytheville, Arkansas, I remember that the bathrooms were separate. The water fountain was separate, blacks and whites, like blacks would contaminate the water I guess. And, I fought against it. I didn't march with Martin Luther King because I couldn't make it that particular week when our seminary closed down and went to the south to march. But, whether it is the blacks or the Mexican Americans or the Asians, it never made a difference to me since I was part of a minority myself. I feel very comfortable. The customs are different sometimes. We were in Cincinnati fifty years ago, and the neighborhood changed from white to black over a two or three years period. I was not comfortable necessarily in—and we stayed in the same apartment. We didn't move. Everybody else moved. And, I felt that there were moments when I was not in my own environment, but that's life I guess. We were living in a fourplex, two apartments downstairs and two apartments upstairs. I remember that the family that lived above us—by that time everybody was black but us. They used to have parties every Saturday night with their friends. And, the parties went on for—noisy parties—one o'clock, two o'clock in the morning, and this was not our style. If we had a party it was a quiet party, nice party, no interruption of neighbors, but this was their way. If I had stayed in Cincinnati longer I would have

moved, but not because I don't like black people. Simply, their lifestyle was different than mine and I didn't—[that's] probably the mailman.

GL: (laughs) Um, how would you define yourself?

HA: Well—hello!

LZA: [Liel Sahiva-Asa, granddaughter of Haim Asa] Hi Sabah!

HA: Oh, hi! Come here and meet somebody. [recording paused] So, how do I define myself? I used to be much more liberal in my younger days. I was against the Vietnam War. I've become more conservative recently. The first time I voted Republican was in the last elections. I felt that Obama was not doing the job that he had promised us. All the hope and all the changes that he was going to institute have not, uh, materialized yet. But, democracy is democracy, and I believe in the rule of law. Hopefully, we'll have a better second term than the first term. I know that unemployment is a heavy burden for many people. As far as myself goes, I'm trying to survive my health problems and hope to be around for a while, at least to finish my memoirs or to see my children and grandchildren be well and prosper.

[02:10:14]

GL: What is the achievement that you're most proud of? If you can pick one! I'm not sure you can.

HA: I think that building the Asa Center for Jewish or Lifelong Learning, the beautiful school that we just completed, has probably been my greatest achievement. The fact that I survived alive when I was twelve, I know that God chose me for a mission, which has been my life within the congregation, within the mental health system. I did a lot of good. Hopefully never harm. But, whatever time God has given me I have to continue doing His will.

GL: How would you like World War II to be remembered?

HA: How do I like what?

GL: World War II to be remembered?

HA: World War II? Well, World War II, thank God, turned against the evil forces of fascism. I'd like to think that the Second World War was new hope for Europe and also for Japan. Uh, we made a big mistake after the First World War. We took the conquered or the losers of the war and made them into slaves, economic slaves. In the Second World War we had the brains of having the Marshall Plan, which was how to rebuild Europe, how to make each European country, even though they were enemies, or some of them were enemies, to become strong, independent. Germany is a good example. Germany is the leading economic and political force of Europe.

We sometimes don't appreciate our allies such as Britain, such as Canada, but basically the Second World War proved that fascism and communism are evil. That democracy is good. Well, Hitler came to be in power democratically, meaning to say he was appointed chancellor of the German state because his party was so strong, and he was appointed to be the leader. But, communism and fascism are not the answer. Democracy and the love of freedom are the answer. So, I'm sorry that we are always the victims of dictators and people's aggression. Such as Iran, for example, today, which is becoming as bad as Hitler was seventy years ago. And hopefully, we'll never allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

GL: And, the last question I have for you, is how would you like the Jewish experience in the twentieth century Europe to be remembered? And, more than that, how would you like the Bulgarian experience to be remembered?

HA: Well, there were six million—no, excuse me, there were seven million Jews in Europe seventy years ago. Six million were exterminated. No, I go back, there were like ten million Jews in Europe before the war. Six were exterminated, and the remnants, the surviving—like in Russia, there were like two million Jews that survived out of five, whatever it is, six. And England, uh, half a million Jews survived and, of course, fought with England, with their English brothers and sisters, against fascism. They survived. But basically, when you destroy such a high percentage of the community, of a community that's 80 percent, 90 percent, uh, this is not a good memory for either the country or the continent. But, we're rebuilding it. All of a sudden, German has two hundred thousand Jews, most of them from Eastern Europe who became liberated from communism and moved to Germany. In many, many places Judaism is gone, forgotten. I was in Berlin. I was in Vienna during communist times and after liberation, and they were struggling. They are trying to survive, and they will. But, the numbers are against us. In the world there were eighteen million Jews before the Second World War. We're now barely, barely getting to thirteen million, and we are way below what we were seventy years ago. So, that's not a good number, not a good survival, but we're here. Uh, there was a second part to your question?

[01:20:41]

GL: The second part to that question was, uh, how would you like the Bulgarian experience to be remembered?

HA: I want the Bulgarian experience to be a paradigm, an example of how a small country, unknown country—because nobody knows Bulgaria or cares. It's not a famous country. But, how a small country could fight the forces of evil and protect its minority citizens, the Jews, compared to all the other great societies of Europe of the 1920s and 1930s who not only did not save, but could not care less about saving their Jews. So, in a sense a small country with values, with some kind of guiding principles is able to do what powerful countries did not make or strive to become: more benevolent or more giving. So, the Bulgarian experience is a great, great

history lesson of the goodness of the true compassion for fellow man or woman, person, than the hatred that surrounded Europe at that time. And, for this I'm very proud to call myself a Bulgarian Jew, and hopefully, my legacy would remain in favor of countries like Bulgaria or societies like the Bulgarian people. Thank you.

GL: Are there any additional comments you'd like to add?

HA: No, except that I'm very happy that Professor Granata is doing what she's doing with you, the students, and give her my best and wish her well. And, congratulations to you for having chosen to study the history and the past, and hopefully, you will have a good report about your interview. If you need another Holocaust survivor I'll be happy to give you a name or give your professor a name.

GL: Okay, all right.

HA: He's truly a survivor in the sense that I survived, but I was not really at a great danger to myself. I was destined to be killed, but it wasn't a struggle for me personally to survive. I have a person in Orange County, with years younger than I am, who was four years old when the Nazis came to Poland, and his story is incredible. So, tell your professor that if she needs more names I got a great name for her.

GL: Okay.

HA: Okay?

GL: All right, thank you.

HA: Thank you for coming.

GL: Thank you very much, Rabbi Asa.

HA: My pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW