

INTERVIEW WITH MIRA PRICE

MIRA PRICE:

-- participated in resistance [SIGH], it was one solution to many other horrible things.

Because it wasn't easiest thing to do, to kind of leave all the comforts of life and get into the [STAMMERS], alternative was also not really attractive. I was lucky because I was younger, it was more of an adventure, you know, almost a play.

QUESTION:

How old were you?

MIRA PRICE:

Eleven. And it was, uh although, [CLEARS THROAT] I remember quite a bit of it, but it was more of a [SIGH]

unreal thing. I would see my mom cry and then would go off and play, you know. It wasn't, I was lucky in that respect because it did not hit me as deeply as it did her. We lived in Ossik is a small town, at that time, now it's a large town, but at that time it was a small town in Croatia. It's close to Hungarian border. My father is medical doctor, my mother was studying in Vienna interior decorating, but then when she got married to my father she decided that they will open a private hospital and she was running it and then she was the administrator, she was everything and, um, so we lived very well. We lived, we had apartment downstairs and upstairs was the hospital. So it was a large place and, uh, for American way of thinking, we lived somewhat, um, luxurious, but in Europe

everybody who had some money lived luxurious, uh, because when you would household help, you have cook and you have, you know all the, uh, things that didn't cost as much as they would cost here. So it was, uh, nice life, my father was leaning to the left always in his political vision. My mother was leaning, leaning to the right and she was holding the purse [LAUGHTER]. And so when the war came she wanted to leave Yugoslavia. My father didn't want to leave Yugoslavia.

QUESTION:

Why did she want to leave?

MIRA PRICE:

Because she realized that [SOUNDS LIKE: the persecution] is coming, that he had clearly was already in Poland, it was, uh, obvious what was going to happen. I remember her saying to my dad let's go, let's go to Switzerland. And he would say no way, who is going to do anything to me, I'm helping people. And it was, uh, it was a strange situation, how- - what did they think or knew before the war, I don't know, but when the war came, first thing that

the Germans did was arrest my dad and father and mother because they were very prominent people in town, the town was then very small and if something would happen to the German parade, they would have killed all the people that they arrested.

So nobody did anything. And so soon, first my mother came out of jail and then she made all the arrangements when my father came out of jail and they, she knew that it was a very short-lived freedom. Um, we run away to Bosnia. She had still some money and she paid people to just dance with us on the New Year's night when everybody was young.

QUESTION:

What year was this?

MIRA PRICE:

It was 1942- -

They went to the partisans. She was, she never had any low heel shoes or anything like that, I mean she went to the partisans high heels. And I think seven suitcases . So it was a real kind of comical picture, but, um, she became a nurse under the circumstances. My sister became a nurse and I became a courier because as a child I could go from one place to the other in the, uh-

There was nothing to compare with when I would think back, it was like a strange dream. Uh, in today's reality it has so little sense what was happening that, uh, even when somebody would ask me to tell them the story they would look at me and say, huh, nice story but how much of it is true? Or how much is imagination of child and how much is reality? You know, it is, uh the stories were crazy. For example, there were two factions, the partisans [SOUNDS the partisans. And uh,

Mihalovic Checmitz who collaborated with the Germans after, uh, they realized, in the beginning they

were fighting Germans, but then they thought the Germans would win so they switched sides and went to fight in the partisans, what was very nice for the Germans, so they didn't have to do it to their hands. And I was caught by them,

I was with my mother and I was having typhus one of the, uh war things that was happening, we had lice, so we get this, uh, strange illnesses and, uh, she stayed behind to take care of me and the Germans were having uh, one of their offenses and we the peasants of the villages were digging holes in the ground to put the patients who came to move in the ground and then covering with shrubbery and so on to camouflage so nobody would know that they are there, but somebody was telling the Germans and the uh Checmix found us.

They killed my mother on the spot. They were going to kill me, they was a friend of my father who

and he saved my life. He said don't shoot her, we need a nurse. And they didn't shoot

me. So, I mean crazy things happened

QUESTION:

Eleven or twelve at that point?

MIRA PRICE:

Yeah, I was twelve at that point.

QUESTION:

How long had you been in the partisans?

MIRA PRICE:

Let's see, it was '42 when we left to the partisans and
'44 [SOUNDS LIKE: when we got out].

QUESTION:

So you were in for two years.

MIRA PRICE:

Two and a half years.

QUESTION:

When that happened with your mother, how long were you in there for?

MIRA PRICE:

She was, it happened 1944, it was getting to the end of the war because I slipped out-

You mentioned that you would like to know the Jewish resistance. It was a resistance, it wasn't necessary Jewish resistance. Jews participated mainly, Jewish intellectuals participated because in Yugoslavia there was, between Jewish intellectuals, we were not religious, we were, we had the Jewish bond. But it wasn't a uh, religious bond, it was, I don't know what you] call it.

QUESTION:

Cultural?

MIRA PRICE:

Yeah, a cultural togetherness. My mother was always raising money for both children to send them to camps during the summer and, and doing things for, it was a cultural bond between, um, the Jews. There were few of the religious Jews- -

Uh understand it was very strong in Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia had, well in that part that I was growing up.

QUESTION:

Even before the war.

MIRA PRICE:

Oh, before the war because I remember going to the Jewish school and there was, there was a Catholic school close by and the Catholic kids would make different anti Semitic rhymes that kids kind of re- - repeat like parrots, you know uh, not quite knowing what they say, but they heard something from the parents so they taunt, taunt the kids going to the Jewish school. It was the part that I, the town where I was brought up, was predominately Catholic and most of the Catholic countries like France or Italy, were predominately anti Semitic. And so it is, uh, something that the kid only periodically feels and it's not, uh, doesn't understand the depth of it.

QUESTION:

When did the Germans come in to Yugoslavia?

MIRA PRICE:

May, '41.

QUESTION:

The war started in '39.

MIRA PRICE:

Yeah, but not for Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia had a king Peter who was very young king so his uncle was representing him and he had German connections. I don't know whether family connections or politic- - just political connections and he sold out. When the Yugoslavs wanted to fight, they can stay, not shoot. It was totally sabotaged.

QUESTION:

Do you remember your parents being worried in 1939 to the invasion?

MIRA PRICE:

I was a little too young to understand the conversations. I remember there were some conversations, but I was too young to understand fully the meaning of these conversations when they, uh, I would pick up the word here and there about the Germans, but I never quite connected this.

QUESTION:

So your life was not so impacted before --

MIRA PRICE:

My life was not impacted before the ideality were there] and my father and mother were put in jail. It was getting to the winter, I know it was very cold and we still had our coats and clothes, so we had our coats and, and it was, um, just a other move, moving from our house to a friend's house to the Bosnia to that house and, and so it was just other move and um- -

QUESTION:

Where did the partisans come from and where were you going?

MIRA PRICE:

Into the mountains.

QUESTION:

They were living in the mountains.

MIRA PRICE:

They were always living in the mountains and, and we were always living in the mountains once we joined them.

Sometimes it was okay to, uh, some villages were generous enough to take us in to the hou--

QUESTION:

Before the Germans came and they took your parents away, do you remember that actually?

MIRA PRICE:

Oh, yeah, I actually remember that.

QUESTION:

Were you there when that happened?

MIRA PRICE:

They came very late at night so I was already in bed, but I

got up and, and they said go back to bed and, um, my parents left and then the man, he was there and she said everything would be okay, don't worry. So I guess I went back to sleep, I did not quite get the point what was going on. And, uh --

QUESTION:

How long were they in jail for?

MIRA PRICE:

About three weeks, about two weeks my mother and another week I saw my father and then they were let go and my mother when she came out heard about the Germans organizing this [SOUNDS LIKE: anti syphilitic] action in Bosnia and right away asked some doctors that she knew if they can recommend my father to join there. And, uh, so when my father came out of jail, like next day what was New Year's we packed some bags and went.

Well, when my, the Jewish doctors were kind of mobilized from going through that anti syphilitic action, but they

were sent to different towns. They were not together and this little town where we, where my father was sent to, we were the only Jews and the rest was most of them are Muslims. Bosnia was very much Muslims and most of them were the ones who had syphilis and who were kind of totally illiterate and, and poor and so when they heard that the doctor would come to town, they were all very excited.

They knew that we are Jewish but, but they needed a doctor, they were so happy to have a medical doctor that, that he didn't pay attention to the religion and, and this doctor is going magically to heal them all I mean, that is what they thought. And then the next town was a little bigger town where the farmers, they had a pharmacy and my father connected with the pharmacy and heard about partisans being close by so he started to collect certain medications to send to the partisans and then he was caught again [LAUGH] and sent to the jail.

MIRA PRICE:

In the crazy times, everybody wanted to ingratiate themselves to whoever was in power. And being primitive, they did not think much further than their noses. They were concerned about their livelihoods and, um, so I guess somebody snitched on him so he was put in jail and my mother bailed him out again and the same night disappeared, the partisans came to get us, they came with oxen wagons [LAUGHTER].

Oxen wagons, you know, these poor towns did not have many horses, but they did have oxens, they used it to carry the plow in the fields. So they put some oxens into the wagon and my mother packed her several suitcases and [LAUGH], high heels, and then we went with the wagon to join the partisans. And just as we were, and it's hard for me to know exactly how far we were, but again somebody snitched

that we are leaving and they, we heard tremendous amount of gunfire, obviously some partisans stayed behind to back us up. They, I don't know if they survived, any survived, what happened.

QUESTION:

Where did you go?

MIRA PRICE:

Into the mountains.

QUESTION:

They were living in the mountains.

MIRA PRICE:

They were always living in the mountains and, and we were always living in the mountains once we joined them.

Sometimes it was okay to, uh, some villages were generous enough to take us in to their houses, so we could sleep there and be kind of protected from the weather, but it was, uh, always in the mountains.

It depends when you ask [LAUGH].

QUESTION:

When you first left --

MIRA PRICE:

When we first left we came to some kind of peasant house
in the mountains and sat around the fire.

QUESTION:

Inside or outside?

MIRA PRICE:

Inside.

QUESTION:

Do you remember who was there, how many people?

MIRA PRICE:

It was jammed, I mean, the, the fire inside, the houses had floors, ground uh clay it was, and middle in the room was fire and the fire would go up the ceiling and there the ham and sausages or whatever meat was drying in the, uh, smoke of the fire and, uh, if they have any. And so it was, the housing was different, there were [SOUNDS LIKE: two things] of the house.

QUESTION:

Imagine.

MIRA PRICE:

And, uh, it, uh --

QUESTION:

It must have been surprising for you too since you came from a more affluent --

MIRA PRICE:

It was surprising, but it wasn't shocking. Um --

QUESTION:

Does that surprise you now looking back that you weren't shocked?

MIRA PRICE:

Human nature adapts extremely well and extremely easy when necessary. And when now you would see a child going through these circumstances, I think you would do anything to change the situation. At that time, even at that time under horrible situation, I felt more privileged than most

people around me. And you kind of always measure where you are at with your surrounding. It's nothing bad to be hungry or poor if everybody else is hungry and poor.

When the difference appears when somebody has, you see the food that people are eating and you are hungry. Then it is a horrible situation, but when everybody is in the same boat, human nature adjusts. It is, you cannot, I mean when you talk in normal circumstances about all the things that were happening, you are totally blown away because it's hard to imagine in normal circumstances what it was.

But somebody who knows me today know how I'm clean freak and they can [UNINTELLIGIBLE] and scrub myself, cannot imagine that I was filled with lice and, and, and dirt and that you didn't bathe or brush your teeth for weeks at a time. And if you did, you didn't have the soap to wash yourself, you had only some stream that was cold. I mean, all of this is kind of incomprehensive today because the uh, in normal circumstance you cannot imagine what human can tolerate, what courage, hardships, what, um, and it's

not so bad if everybody is in the same boat.

My father felt first of all guilty that he did not listen to my mother when she said to leave the country and I understand that he cannot. He was an idealist and he thought he, he was needed and if we like it or not, we want to be needed. [LAUGH] And I never told him.

QUESTION:

You wanted to tell him.

MIRA PRICE:

I told him [SOUNDS LIKE: there was war], I was in partisans, but I never wanted to talk about. It was, what is there to talk about. It, you know, it is like I can never go home. You don't go, you don't do it when it's unpleasant memories, you don't want to remember. If it, if you have pleasant memories, you don't go home because you don't want to spoil it. [LAUGH] It is, was always my feeling [STAMMERS] it just, it's too complicated in a normal situation to understand any of it, doesn't make

sense.

It totally is weird. And so you kind of shut up and just try to forget. Pretty much, no, you don't forget, but you pretty much push it to the background. It's not, right after the war it was in very much in focus, it was right there. When I had to go back to school, I would say to my father, why do I need school, I have my horse and I have a gun, so I don't need to go to school [LAUGHTER].

QUESTION:

When you were --

MIRA PRICE:

I was in Belgrade. Uh, my father start with the Russians right after uh, they liberated Bel--, caught up with my schooling in Belgrade and then after that he became professor in the university in Sarajevo and we moved to Sarajevo [SOUNDS LIKE: and I work and went to technical] school in Sarajevo. The photographs would be very, uh, funny to see if you would have any. There's some in

museums hanging around. Uh, there was not an official uniform for example. You would be dressed like a German or Italian because it is what you would grab from a dead German or Italian to wear.

You would strip dead people to have some clothes to wear. As I was a child, I didn't have shoes. My feet were bleeding and frozen and because [UNINTELLIGIBLE] any boots, I mean, you can strip a German, but you cannot find a small pair of shoes. [LAUGH] So you can kind of redo a jacket into smaller size, but you cannot make shoes for a small child. So they, they were very, very different ways, I mean, we all wore a red star, five pointed star on our hats and so we would, we came there and they would talk by the fire and I remember that vividly because I was wondering as child at the time, what are we going to do here. [LAUGH]

And, uh --

QUESTION:

Were you scared?

MIRA PRICE:

No, I wasn't, I don't remember ever being scared. I really do not remember ever being scared even when they caught, the [Checmix] caught me, I don't remember being scared. I remember kind of being surprised more, scared was, it was kind of strange. I felt always things will resolve, as young as I was, I always felt things would resolve, there was always some kind of ways out. And why, I don't know.

I don't have the slightest idea what gave me this perspective. And so I heard that my father, they arrived there and then that my father will go to one of the, it was called the First Prole- -, Proletarian Brigade, uh, we had a moving hospital, you know the one that would be carried on the shoulder on a stretchers made from rough wood, blankets and moving all the time moving, I mean, there was like at most beginning at least in the partisans at most there would be six or seven hours in one place.

It was the most rest that we, were always moving, uh there

were flies, flies, and uh, poor uh, very, very poor peasants. They had such horrible houses and this main room didn't have a ceiling, but then little rooms where they slept like a whole family, one room, had ceilings and they would go out and give to the soldier mattresses, that they were straw really, they were not real mattresses. Um, then the flies would be unrelenting and I remember one day somebody's gun was there and I took the gun and shoot the flies [LAUGH].

You get so tired of the buzzing around, it was just unnerving. I mean, it was crazy, it's hard to even confess how crazy it was during the war, how crazy I was during the war. Your whole thinking was different. Uh, for example, one day I was so tired and we rest, took rest and we were at the edge of some woods and one of the German planes that flew very low saw us parked there and it flew so low that you could see their machine gun out of their window.

And they were shooting like crazy at us and I was asleep, I never woke up. And when I woke up, somebody shook me to

see if I'm alive and I was alive and they were all surprised because left and right from me there were dead people. I mean circumstances that you can- - cannot imagine or one time a bomb fell not far from me and the earth covered me, a little bit of me was visible obviously because somebody saw a body sticking out and tried to take the earth off and I was asleep.

QUESTION:

You didn't wake up through that whole thing?

MIRA PRICE:

I didn't wake up. I mean, it was a big bomb. It must have made tremendous noise, but I was tremendously tired, I never woke up. It is, I mean, things like this, it's hard to believe even, the circumstances that were. It was a survival with the partisans but it was also a con- - conscious, a conscious that bothered so many in this primitive country that it was an idealistic move to fight.

It wasn't just life, preservation, it was, uh, liberation,

but not just from the Germans per say, it was liberation for those miserable, uh primitive people who never knew better, but you hoped they will one day. I don't know, sometimes we were so hungry we would eat plant leaves from the trees. The percentage of Jews in partisans was about five percent. Because mostly were intellectuals and there were not so many intellectuals in Yugoslavia to start with and so many were killed in the camps.

And so, us, in most countries Jews were the ones no matter how poor or persecuted you are, you were going to be educated. I mean, this, in my mind Jews were the most gentle species in this world, they, they do not think that you would not be stoop down to that level. In partisans was also, they were all, they were mostly boys from from more primitive environment and so they were mostly looking up to us. Um, as much as anti Semitic, they were, they were needing us.

During the war, we never felt anti Semitism as before and after. It is hard to describe the times. The pictures

that are jumping in my head from that time is walking, walking, and walking, being in fields that, and I don't believe other than contagious diseases like typhus, things like that, that I ever had a sniffle. I mean, I was half frozen, but I don't think I ever had a sniffle. [LAUGH] Otherwise, something contagious. My father, my mother and my sister, we were not always together.

My father was mostly constantly going around with the troops and when, uh, the troops grew big enough, then he was more stationed in one place in Bosnia and was kind of a central hospital and my mother was in that central hospital, a nurse. And I was always in between as courier going, from one partisan group on one hill to the next partisan group the other hill and Germans or [Checmix] and so on in between. [LAUGH] And so dressed as this peasant child with some cows or sheep and going from one place to the other bringing messages.

I started doing that because one time my mother was in the central hospital, my sister was working with the, um,

Canadian doctor and my father was in different make shift hospital. And I was saying and there is nothing for me to do. And somebody off- -, the officers said to me would you mind bringing a message and I said no, I wouldn't mind at all and being young and being ignorant of the dangers I was very flattered that they entrusted me to take a message from here to there with in between was nothing but danger.

And nobody else could really do it because they were too old to do it. They would be caught, tortured, uh, whatever to confess what's going on. Nobody even thought of a skinny, young kid to, not to be a peasant child going with cows in the field and doing anything else.

MIRA PRICE:

And so it wasn't anything that, I mean, it was dangerous, but from the point of not to do, go from here to there is really a danger, but being entrusted it was my thrill of the thing, to be treated as a grown-up and I considered myself already a grown-up at the age of twelve. It, it was of course ridiculous, however, it flattered me that they considered me good enough and grown enough to do this. And so you do it once, you do it twice and it becomes routine.

But my mother wasn't very pleased, but she didn't have much choice really. There was no way of her parenting me as she would if we were at home or the normal circumstances.

First of all she was herself extremely involved in helping out with the wounded and second, um, she, I don't think was told at the time exactly what I was doing because she didn't have that, nobody supervised me.

I was, the innocence disappeared I think that young people can do is build a, and that is why I think I was blessed that I was so young and my sister was more suffering with

the war because she understood more than I did, but a young child can be taught that it is a wonderful thing to even sacrifice yourself, like you have now martyrs, I mean, it is horrible, you don't know how to approach that issue because it's so horrible and they think they are doing the greatest thing in the world.

Well I am thinking that I was doing the greatest thing in the world when they trusted me enough to give me a message to bring to the other side of the hill. And you do not think about the horrors of the war, about the, um, dangers. And in a situation like this, uh, the war was, you lose your importance as an individual, whatever you do during guerrilla war is you are doing it for the betterment of the whole group.

You're not doing it for yourself. And it is indoctrination. It is indoctrination and survival, but it is also indoctrination because I as a young person at the time thought, I'm the king of the hill], they trust me to do this grown-up thing and so it is an

indoctrination too.

QUESTION:

Because they were able to then utilize that psychologically.

MIRA PRICE:

Exactly, yeah.

QUESTION:

To get you to work.

MIRA PRICE:

It's like training a dolphin.

Maybe sometimes a piece of paper and sometimes they would just tell me say such and such thing, they have uh, codes and say such and such things when you see this and that person.

QUESTION:

So they would dress you as a --

MIRA PRICE:

As a peasant girl, gal and I would happily walk with the cows, nobody ever asked me a question when I was walking with the cow and having a little rope around the horn and walking her and, uh, I would just say what am I going to say if somebody asks me where do I live? So they would tell me few town names of the towns around that I would remember and say I'm going home to such and such town. During the war you utilize anything. It's so abnormal. It doesn't make sense.

The personal sacrifice is something you do not think about or you don't think about someone you're

young and feel important to the cause. I understood what was going on because we talked a lot about the Germans and the Checmix and the, and what jerks they are [LAUGH] and so odd, I mean, you just daily conversation about what's going on, not really the big picture that is going on in the general front in Russia. Or because we did, had very little communication, it wasn't like today that you have, you know, commun- - my father had a little radio that was going on batteries and he would listen to some news and we would all get around and listen to the news and comments and, and he wanted to save the battery because where are you going to get new battery until we get a new town and then hopefully somebody will rob a store that has batteries and so you would get the battery from somebody. Well, the, uh, woman peasant was there and she said to my father let him talk a little more to the, for the radio and my father did not know how to explain to her at the time he was starting, he said sorry my dear, he's tired and hungry, he has to go to rest.

An hour later the woman appeared with a little uh vessel of milk and some bread and she gave it to my father and she

said would you give it this man so he can talk a little more? I mean, it is the primitivism of that part of the country at that time was just totally incredible. I was otherwise they were not the strongest I think, at least in the area, it is very hard to be exact since partisans have groups and I was with the groups in Bosnia. I was with two different groups in Bosnia. Where they were all over the country in different groups. [SOUNDS LIKE: Tito] was a magnificent strat- - Practically just few hundred to thousands and thousands of people.

QUESTION:

In your groups.

MIRA PRICE:

In my groups grew from uh one First Proletarian Brigade to uh Division, to uh Corpus to it was growing like uh. Depends which time you would want to know how many, but it seemed like thousands and thousands were in different groups. And I would say about five percent of all the Jews in Yugoslavia lived in the partisans. And most probably, 80 percent of those five percent were idealistically going

to the pattern, not as an alternative to the camp, but to fight the Germans and to better the country.

This was definitely very large point of Jewish, Jewishness in Yugoslavia. They, I had to spend every summer with so called poor kids. My mother had really strange ideas about the world and four kids would come to school with nice lunches. I could bring to school a piece of bread with some butter and jelly, that's it, you know, for snacks. Because I could eat at home whatever I wanted, but I should not in front of other kids show off or do, be different and it must be awfully hard. I did not understand at the time and at the time I didn't even care about it. It was not a question of what would my mother say if I do such and such. It was a question what would my commander say if I do such and such, you know. It was totally crazy situation.

For example, I felt like that when the partisans got to a town and everybody was very busy and the commander of that group where I was went to a shop to look for shoes for me, you know. I felt very special, that you know, all the dumb things happening around us that somebody would look for shoes for me. And on other hand I didn't feel so special when we were all very hungry, everybody had anything to eat and nobody would even think that here's a young child that is developing and needs some nourishment to develop because for example I couldn't get pregnant for the longest time because I wasn't developing normally during the war.

I had to be on some hormones, things for the longest time to be able to conceive. All the horrors of the camps details you did not know because the communication at the time were first of all during the war don't have much communication and also the radios and so on were not as readily available and so we would get parachutes [SOUNDS drink and food or they could not, they, they did not know in the beginning who to feed, the [Checmix] or the

partisans because they had the news from very beginning that the Checmix were fighting the Germans.

So we wanted the group that really would fight Germans and it is Tito's but we had the problem, he's communist and Churchill said to him, do you plan to live in Yugoslavia after the war and we said no. Well then, feed him! So we got food from the, mostly [COUGH] you fight, you collect ammunition because whoever fight is the guerrilla of warfare loses and you get ammunition and you get food supplies and some clothes from the dead ones, but it was the source of our food and our ammunition and clothes. Fighting is always taking it away, but peasants were very, very supportive.

The the propaganda of the partisans was so strong to the peasants, if you don't help us, they will come and kill you and as Germans being foreigners you don't want the foreigner to solve your problems no matter how bad your problems internally are. Then feed us, we will protect you. It was kind of an exchange and it wasn't, uh,

the most horrible thing to be hungry. And you eat anything that comes along.

QUESTION:

Like what?

MIRA PRICE:

Weeds, plants, uh, anything that you think it's edible and that you are, that, if you are not want something is poisonous, you eat it. It is, if your warned is poisonous, sometimes you take a chance, but not often. They were very few animals to catch, to uh, because all Yugoslavia had so much woods and animals, but they were so scared of shooting that very early on I don't know, but during the whole war I haven't seen one wild animal.