

[INAUDIBLE] OK.

Good.

All right. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Luisa Brightman on July 27, 2015 in West Hartford, Connecticut. Thank you very much, Mrs. Brightman for agreeing to speak with us today and to share your life story and experiences.

We're going to start at the beginning, and I'll ask some very basic questions. So the very first one is, can you tell me the date of your birth?

I was born in Milan, Italy, on January 26, 1924. I am one of a couple of twins. I have a twin sister. We are not identical twins. And we're always a little special because we also had two brothers that were twins.

No, really?

And they were 22 months older than us.

I'm going to ask you about them in a minute.

Tell me, what was your name at birth?

Luisa Julia Aghib.

Aghib?

A-G-H-I-B.

"A-gheeb." Is that how I pronounce it?

Yes.

OK. And what was your twin sister's name?

Carla Fanny Aghib.

And your brothers' names?

Giulio Edoardo Aghib, Gian-Alfredo Aghib.

OK. I'm not very familiar with names from Italy-- last names from Italy. Is Aghib a very Jewish name for Italy?

Aghib is a very, very old name. We came from Persia in about the year 1000. The family arrived in Leghorn at the time when the harbor was being built. The family, as far as we know, were traders in coral and gold.

And according to the story, they became the bankers of the Grand dukes of Florence.

Wow, what a history.

One of my cousins was a professor of history and did the research. And all the papers that I have I sent to my nephew, who's the only one that bears the name. And I hope it keeps him well.

It's quite a history. Sometimes we have people being able to trace back their family to the 17th century, and that's

impressive. But to know that the roots of your family go back a millennia-- millennium-- that's amazing.

Right. Right. We came to Italy way before the Sephardic Jews came from Spain. We were there--

--already.

--400, 500 years before.

And how did you learn about all of this?

Well, Italy has a wealth of traceable material. Cemeteries, Jewish traditions keep records. So this was handed down. A part of it was lost during the war, but this cousin of mine did the research. And from time to time, the name appears.

One of my nieces was in Lucca. And in the paper, they said that the Villa Aghib was being sold. So she got very interested in finding out who they were. And it seems that it had not been occupied by them for 200 years, but it still bore that name?

A dealer? What was being sold?

A villa.

A villa.

Yeah.

A villa.

Yep. You know, I don't know how much is the real history and how much is--

--stories.

--stories. But there are-- I think in Leghorn, there is one tomb that is dated 11-something. So that's when they were there. Genealogical work was done, and they go back to that.

The cousin who did this research-- did they do this-- did this person do this after the war or before the war?

She started way before the war. When the persecution started, she was a professor, and she came to, first, I think to South America, and then she was a professor at Wesleyan University. And her name was Levi D'Ancona. She was born Aghib, and she married Levi D'Ancona.

OK. What were your mother and father's names?

My mother was Olga Romano. The family came from Trieste in Venice. And my father was Enrico Carlo Aghib, and his family was from Pisa. His father was the president of the Jewish community in Pisa. And the Romanos, far as I know, they were importers of grain from Russia and Hungary. And that's all I know.

How did your family that is-- how did your family support themselves?

Part of the family founded the insurance companies in Italy in 1838. [ITALIAN] in Venice and [ITALIAN]. And my father was an engineer. He studied in Turin. And he was working for the Harvester Company.

Harvester Company. Yeah?

Yeah, from the United States. As a matter of fact, he came to visit the United States as an engineer. And when the

depression started, the company was disbanded. And he went to work at the insurance company in Milan. We were living in Milan then. And that's--

This is a point of curiosity. Are you the very youngest in the family, or are you the older of the twins?

We are the youngest.

You are the youngest.

Right. The boys were born in 1922. We were born in 1924.

My question was, which of you is older, your sister or yourself?

My sister.

So you're the youngest in the family.

Well--

Not really.

There was a big discussion. It's 15 minutes. And according to-- the first one that is born is the youngest, and the second one is the oldest. But my system maintains that she is the oldest.

OK.

Tell me a little bit about your family life. If you have some earliest memories of home of your childhood.

Well, we were-- and I realize it more now than before-- upper-middle class. We always had help in the house. We always had summer places. We went to private schools, we had nannies, we had an Irish au pair, we had a French mademoiselle.

This was the middle-class life in Italy. And of course, the Jewish community in Milan-- Milan had, in those days, about 1 million people. The Jews were 1,000.

That's not much.

So I knew very few Jewish people. I could count them on my hand. And the Jews in Italy had become extremely assimilated.

Well, that was one of my next questions.

Yep. There were no laws . Against the Jews as a matter of fact, religion in Italy is a very peculiar thing. The government supports the church, the temple, the senators. They subsidize all these things.

And I'm talking this in the '20s, and '30s, and '40s until the war. Do you want me to go on?

Yes, please because this is good-- very interesting background.

The big difference came in 1938 when Mussolini decided to join Germany and Japan.

In the alliance.

In the alliance.

And they instituted a form of the Nuremberg laws. The Nuremberg laws in Italy were very different because they recognized Italian Jews as preferential citizens. My father had been a volunteer in World War I, was an officer. And therefore, we were considered Italians.

The foreign immigrants there were Jewish were almost immediately interned in camps, but Italy always had a dual system of laws, that if you did something good for the country, the country was going to protect you. So some of the foreign Jews that had come in the last 10, 15, 20 years were exempt from any form of persecution. Of course, this was the beginning. Then they started making things more and more difficult.

We'll come to that. Now I'd like to go back to family because we're coming to the war years.

Yeah. Right.

And I'd like to first get the picture, paint the picture with your words of, what was life like beforehand for you and for your family?

It was a very pleasant life. We went to school-- the boys never did very well in school, so they always had to have two tutors-- and summer vacation in Milan, very extended. They are generally, July, August, September, October. So we used to go to the seaside, to the mountains, and then to the country and come back beginning of November. It was a life-- especially now, I realize how privileged we were. We didn't think nothing of it then.

That's all you knew.

Right. And we were not a religious family, but my mother was maybe a little more religious than my father. So she's the one that insisted that the boys should be bar mitzvah. And when our time came, she had us bat mitzvah.

We didn't learn very much. We took a few lessons. And the bar mitzvah were done for the boys. Just the two boys did, but for the girls, it was all the girls that became 13 in that year. So we were 6 or 7.

And I still remember the rabbi saying, just open your mouth and close your mouth, and don't say anything, because we didn't know anything. But that was the idea. In Italy, at that age, all our friends went to communion. And they had these beautiful dresses, and the parties, and so on. So my mother felt that it was right for us to have something too. And that's exactly what they did.

OK.

So traditional rituals and habits-- did you keep the Sabbath?

No.

No. OK.

When one of my brothers was a bar mitzvah, he decided that we should have Passover. So my father said, OK, you want to have a Passover you run it. And that was the first time we ever had a Passover. And I must say it was the first and last time. We never had it again. And it was like somebody telling a story more than a tradition. We knew that we were Jewish.

And perhaps the most important thing that happened is when the laws became a little more strict, my father interviewed each one of us separately. And he said, the time has come that we have to talk about religion. If you want to convert, I will not say no. But I want you to think about it and decide on your own. Do you want to become Catholic like all of your friends, or do you want to remain Jewish?

And each one of us separately told our father we wanted to remain what we were. We were not going to throw away this

inheritance. And that's what happened.

It's very interesting that one is assimilated, as assimilated as your family was, that very few traditions are kept. But there is an identity.

Right. And there were things that were passed down--

Such as?

--one of which you see there.

OK. Oh, yes. I see a menorah.

That menorah came from Pisa from the House of my grandfathers. And it is of the 16th century. It's an oil menorah. And it goes to the Israel museum in Tel Aviv, I think-- or in Jerusalem. I know I've-- that's where it's going.

What a legacy.

That's where it's going.

Yeah. What a legacy.

Yeah. Are there any other things-- things in both--

There was three books of the Bible that were, I think, ordered by one of my ancestors. I don't know who. And it was sold and is now at the Yale Beinecke Library Museum.

Have you seen it there?

I went to see it, yes, because I was very curious if anything had been written on the inside of the book. Nothing was written.

And it as miniatures. And again, the history that I have of the sale and so on was sent to my nephew because he has the name of the family. And he's very religious. He has become very religious.

And I feel that he should know, and his children should know, where it is.

Yeah. And I went to see it as soon as it was available.

Did your family sell it? Did you sell it or one of your siblings?

My father left it to the four of us. And like everything that is left to four siblings, some were in financial need, and some were not. I wanted to buy it from my siblings. They didn't want to sell it to me. So it was sold, and the money was divided.

I see. I see.

It did not have any really deep religious meaning. We couldn't read it. We knew that it had been in the family for a long time. And like every object which is very ancient, we don't know how much is true and how much is not true, whether it was ordered by one of the relatives or whether it was bought in an antique shop. We don't know.

Yeah. Yeah. Sometimes the scholars will be able to date things better. But yes, the history of the item is-- if it's not written down, then it's unlikely that you can really be sure.

Yeah, right.

What kind of personalities were your mother and your father? What kind of people were they?

My mother was an artist. She could play the piano and paint. Unfortunately, her mother died of childbirth, so she was raised by her father and by nannies. She had a nanny until after she was married. It was like it was her mother.

And her nanny was the one that organized the help in the house and so on when we were very, very young. And when we were born, we also had a nanny that stayed with us until we were 14. And she was a surrogate mother to all of us. And she also helped my mother organizing the house, and the help, and so on. It was part of the way.

I mean, we were not that wealthy, but that was the way life was in the bourgeoisie in Italy.

Well, it is also so that many middle-class families-- not even upper-middle class-- but middle-class families throughout Europe had help at home.

Right.

And even today, if you have American diplomats who go abroad, they may have a very basic middle-class life here in the United States, whereas in other countries, they have help with household chores. They might have a housekeeper, or a cook, or something like that.

Right. And it's not something that only the very wealthy-- it's not upstairs or downstairs. It's not 20 people. It's one or two people. And I remember a seamstress that came, I think, every two weeks to do all kinds of mending and letting down the hems when we were growing taller, and doing those kind of things.

Speaking of which, did you buy your clothes off the rack when you were a child?

No.

Or were they made for you?

No, they were always made. They were always made. I think that only the outerwear was bought in department stores. Otherwise, we had seamstresses making things. And if you had something special, you went to a designer and had the dress made.

You said your nanny was like a surrogate mother to you.

Mm-hmm.

What was her name?

Balia-- we always called her Balia. I don't know her first name, nor her last name. I know she came from Udine, which is a little north of Venice. Probably if I think deeply, I might remember what her name was.

So it's Balia?

Balia, which means "nanny."

Oh, OK.

Yeah.

And would you say you are closer to her than to your mother?

No.

OK.

No. No. No, but it was somebody that handled you day-to-day, and whatever she said went. I think mother was a little gentler than nanny. Nanny was--

The disciplinarian.

Right. She was the one that made us behave.

Two sets of twins not that far apart-- you can have your hands full-- four kids.

Oh yeah. Right. Right.

But it's also interesting that you mention this because it seems sometimes-- here, I'm going to go off topic a little bit. But you know sometimes when people talk about their mother and their father, one is the one who is gentle and never enforces any rules, and the other one is then, either by choice or by default, made into the bad guy.

Right.

The one who has to-- well, if you have a nanny, neither of them have to be that way, and the nanny is bad guy.

Right.

The nanny is the one that, you know. I remember we always, after a certain age, ate at table in the dining room. And if we misbehaved, the punishment was to go and eat in the kitchen with the help, which sometimes we liked better than eating at the table with our parents. And those were given. There were things that were normal in every household of the people we knew, and most of the people we knew were not Jewish. But this was the way the middle class lived.

How did your mother then-- if she was freed from having to raise you by herself and do household chores, what did she do with her time?

Managing a household with help this a job.

Yeah, that's true.

Because you have to plan not only for the necessity of your close family, but also, for the necessity of the help. You clothe them, you take care of their health, of their teeth, or whatever else comes. And children go to ballet classes, they go to piano classes, they go to painting classes, whatever.

And in the case of my two brothers, they always were taken to do the various tutors, if the tutors were not coming home at the house to teach them, because they were not keeping up. Although they were both very brilliant, they were not disciplined to study. And it was always an aggravation for my parents that their report cards were not that good.

And in Europe, if you don't pass certain exams, you can go on.

That's right.

And you know, eventually, the whole thing meant nothing because then everything changed.

Yeah.

But that was what I remember.

So your mother was a manager.

Right.

And she had the financial part of running the household. My father gave her money, and she had to run it. And it's not running only one household. We had a place in the country. There were arrangements to go to the sea, there were arrangements to go to the mountains, and whatever else.

Did you have a car?

No. My father bought a car, a Ford, in the '30s, just before the depression. When he came back from the states, I think in 1928, he bought a Model T. And then the company closed, and he couldn't afford to keep it. And he had the overhead of this pretty fancy household anyhow.

In Europe in those days, transportation was mostly by street cars and taxis. And the schools were very nearby. We always walked to school, whether it was elementary or the private schools. They were not that far. They were maybe a couple of miles. And we always walked back and forth.

And what about your father? If I asked about your mother's personality, what kind of personality did he have? My father was a mountain climber, a hunter, a great stamp collector.

Oh, really?

And that is how-- I'm going off script. When he had to leave his job as a director in insurance, he went to work for a stamp-collecting shop where he used to buy stamps. And his knowledge was such that they welcomed it, and they gave him a seat.

According to the laws against the Jews, you could not work in any company that had more than-- I don't know what it was-- 25 employees or 50 employees-- but a very small number. The insurance company was enormous, thousands and thousands of people.

And fortunately, because he knew so much about stamp collecting, he was able to earn a living. He arranged it and maintained a stamp collection of a very famous banker. And he had this job in this shop.

In this sphere?

Yeah.

And what about his relationship to the children? Was he a close or a distant person?

No. He was a very close parent. Of course, he worked very long hours, but he was delighted to take us on long walks. In the summer, we did a garden together-- a vegetable garden and a flower garden. And I think that's why I still grow flowers.

And he was always trying to spend time with us, and also, relieving my mother of the responsibility of managing four children. And he always organized games and competitions. We had races, we had a soccer team. Of course, we were four, so we didn't need too many other children to play. And because we were four, we always had all our friends in our house because nobody wanted to have four children come visit.

[LAUGHTER]

No. We learned to swim from my father, we learned to climb mountains. Mother was not that fond of sports. My father



was. So we learned tennis for him, and that's what he was.

How would you describe the feeling in the atmosphere at home when you were growing up? Were your parents happy with one another?

I think so. I really think so. I never considered them to be unhappy. They were not fighting about anything.

They were very, very concerned about us. And I don't think that they ever took any trips without us. They never left us. Whether it was going to the seaside, the mountains, we were always together. They were rather strict about who we associated with.

What were the criteria?

Good manners. If they saw children that misbehaved, they didn't want us to fall with them and do the same things that they were doing.

Mother tried to get us a little bit more religious than my father, and so she took us to some of the Jews shows and so on, but it didn't take much with us, also, because there were so many other things that we were doing. We were taken to the opera, we were taken to concerts, and there are just so many hours. And studying was several hours every day after school.

So we were not allowed to go out and play until we'd finished what we were supposed to prepare. And of course, we were speaking two other languages-- English and French.

Tell me, so you spoke Italian with one another?

We spoke Italian, but we also had foreign help in the house to learn English and French. And my parents, when they didn't want us to understand, they spoke German between each other. Of course, we did understand what they were saying most of the time, but that was the way.

Tell me, did your father have brothers and sisters?

My father had only one sister living in Pisa. She was not married. And my mother was the only child.

Child.

And her mother had died of childbirth. And the strange thing is that my father's mother died also of childbirth when his sister was born. It was a fairly common thing, unfortunately.

My grandfather from Pisa remarried. And I vaguely remember the grandmother in Pisa. She was called [ITALIAN], which means grandmother, the kitten.

And my grandfather in Pisa had a long, white beard, and that's about as much as I remember. And he died, I think, in-- she died before him, maybe 1928. So I would have been three and 1/2, four. And he died, I think, in 1929.

And my mother's father died maybe 1930. I remember him vaguely. I remember him coming to the park when we were there with the nannies and a dog, but other than that--

--coming to a park where he was buried?

Hmm?

Coming to a park where he was buried?

No, no, he would come to visit us. We would be taken by the nanny, and he would come to the park to see us and to walk with--

I see, to visit, to visit.

Yeah. So your father was the last Aghib until he had sons, until he had four children of his own.

Right.

I see.

And now you have a nephew who is the only one who still carries the family name.

Right, one of my brother's sons is the only one that carries the name.

Does he have children?

He has two girls.

And there is another one who's in Belgium, Peter Aghib, who's the son of my older brother. You know, he doesn't keep in touch with the family. I try to. [INAUDIBLE] a rather peculiar young man. He's not a young man anymore.

Well, I'm asking simply because I'm thinking of a millennia-old family that has the name Aghib and who still would carry it today.

Yeah. As far as I know, the name we [? land ?] with the Milan. My niece that lives in San Francisco has adopted her maiden name and made the her children carry the name. According to any laws, it's a fiction.

That's right.

She has a son and a daughter, and so their name is Barbieri-Aghib.

But it's-- yeah. Yeah.

That shall be as it is. This is--

It is as it is.

Yeah.

It is as it is.

We didn't talk about school yet. Tell me, what was school life like when you were growing up?

In Europe, more schools have got a uniform boys wear black-- in those days, they wore black overall, and the girls wore white.

So they would wear black shirts and black trousers?

No, it wasn't like a black caftan, but only to the knees, even the boys.

Really?

Yeah. This is 1930s. That's what they wore. And the only difference is that the girls could have a ribbon at the neck, a

bow or something. But then when you went to what was the higher education, then you wore whatever.

You want your any clothes.

Right, any clothes you want. And we went to five years of primary school, and then, I think, three years of the private school, and then is when we were not allowed to stay in school anymore. And we went to a-- first, we went to two schools simultaneously-- a private Jewish school where we were five pupils, and the British Institute.

Then Italy went to war with England, so the British Institute left. And we graduated in, I think, a year and a half. And we did four years of accounting. And when we took the public exam, the six people that had gone into the private school for a year and a half were the top of the class.

Amazing.

Well, because we had private--

Instruction.

And we were evidently better prepared than the other children. And the boys went to elementary, and then gymnasium. And they started a lyceum And that's when they were not allowed to go to school anymore. Things changed.

In those years when you were allowed to go and everything was normal, you said most of your friends were not Jewish? Or all of your friends were not Jewish? How was that?

I think that we knew maybe three families of Jewish people in Milan, one of which were cousins of my father. But everybody else-- there were not enough people to know, really.

But your social life was then very mixed?

Completely mixed, yeah. And not only mixed religiously, but because my parents had traveled and we had visitors from England, from France, and relatives from France, and so on. And so we always had a cosmopolitan atmosphere around us.

It sounds lovely.

But the borders are so close. And New York and Connecticut-- they speak two different languages in Europe.

That's true. That's true. Sometimes even in New York and Connecticut.

Right. Right.

So did you have any best friends, or were you very close with your sister? Were you each other's best friends?

We had some. Generally, we're not friends of only one of us, but of two of us. We did a lot of things together. My sister, I think we were about eight when she wrote a letter to my father saying that, no, she didn't want to be dressed like Luisa. She wanted to be a person with her own wardrobe and be different.

And my father said, very well, we agree. From now on, you choose your own clothes. So then we fought between the two of us which color we wanted to wear and so on.

It sounds like he treated you all with a great deal of respect as children. The incidents you're telling me-- that he'd hear you out, and then agree. He'd listen to the rationality of an argument, and also, when he came to talk to you separately well the choices that you were making.

I was the domineering of the two sisters. My sister was person had to study much more than I did. I had, in those days, a photographic memory, so I listened in school, and I knew. She had to study-- and the same with the two boys because one was maternal and one was--

Fraternal--

--from the father.

OK.

And we were complete different persons. There was nothing similar in our characters. My sister never talked unless she was addressed. I talked all the time.

And one of my brothers was the same as I was that, he was the life of the party. And the other one was very circumspect. And this is how we continued in life.

So who of your parents-- was it your mother who was more reserved?

My mother was more outgoing, yes. And she was more artistic, and my father was more regimental. And he had been in officer in the army, and he was very ideal to every rule and so on. That was the way it was.

Were there more twins in your families?

No.

That is so unusual.

It was studied extensively because they couldn't understand why. And they came to the conclusion that after World War I, when so many people were lost, they were, in Europe, a lot of twins that were born.

Of course, that has no--

Scientific basis at all.

No, it doesn't seem to be reasonable. I mean, they couldn't come up with a better idea, so they came up with that. But we were studied, and my parents were studied. And there were no twins. I think that a cousin twice removed had a couple of twins on my mother's family, but there were six other gene-- type, [INAUDIBLE].

Oh, I just had a question on the tip of my tongue. Were your parents storytellers?

Hmm?

Were your parents storytellers about their own childhoods?

Yes and no. For instance, I remember that my mother always said that she went to Paris for the international exhibition when the Eiffel Tower was built. And my father told us stories about hunting in Maremma, which is the low part of Tuscany. And maybe you would say that they were storytelling. I have no other--

Did they talk about their own childhoods?

To some extent, yes. Yes. I know that my mother always complained that she had no siblings and that she was brought up by a single man and nannies. And of course, the uncles and aunts were very caring of this girl that was left alone--

Had no mother, yeah--

--so that she had a close relationship with first cousin and second cousin, and aunts and aunts.

How is it that she came to be named Olga?

Hmm?

How is it that she came to be named Olga? Because that's not a very Italian name.

I have no idea.

OK.

I don't know. You know, generally, names in Europe, it's the name of the grandmother and grandfather that are given. I really don't know where her name came from. And I have never inquired.

All right. Did your parents-- two incidents-- did your father ever talk about his service during World War I and what he did?

Oh yes, oh yes. He was madly in love with a Gentile girl. And his family said, no way that you can marry her. And he volunteered. And then my grandfather immediately, when he found out that his son had gone to the military, intervened and made sure that he would become an officer.

And he became a fairly famous person because he was sent to London to represent Italy for three years during the war and one year after the war. And that's where he became absolutely enamored with anything British, and anything English, and anything-- from the tea, to the way you put butter on the bread, which is not done in Italy. And he really loved everything to do with England.

What was his job while he was there?

There were about six offices in London that were in-- because the Italians, French, and British were partners in the war. And he was at the headquarters of the joint military chiefs.

What an interesting place to be.

And he tells a very famous story that-- two famous stories. One is that the Italian officers had to wear plus fours with wool bandages to the shoes.

Explain to us what are plus fours.

The pants that end under the knee. And when they arrived in London, they saw that all the British officers were wearing regular pants. So they immediately went to Bond Street and had pants made. And they designed their own uniform, which was completely illegal.

[CHUCKLES]

That was a story that we were told. And the other story, he was the junior officer. All the others were-- he was a captain, and the orders were generals, colonels, and so on. And therefore he always was left with all the secret papers to be put back in the safe when a meeting ended. And one meeting was ending because there was a parade in Whitehall. And they were supposed to go to the windows to see the parade.

And he was left behind. And he put everything away. And then closed the safe. And then you walked out in the corridor. And he saw a gentleman there, not in uniform. And he said, sir, do you know where the parade is? He said, yes, [INAUDIBLE] on that window. And he walked out with this man.

And when you walked out to the balcony, he looked to the left and he saw his general on two balconies away on one side, the French general two balconies away, and he was in the center. The man was Winston Churchill.

[GASPS] Oh my goodness. [CHUCKLES] What a wonderful story.

Yeah. So those are the war stories of my father. Well, kids are always interested in what their parents did. Now, how did your parents meet? That was my other question.

Arrangements of weddings were generally two families, and friends, and connections and so on. And some of the cousins knew my father's family. And when you moved to Milan, after he finishes the studies and came back from the war, introduced my mother and father, through some cousins and friends.

So the war interrupted his love for this other person.

He had finished college before. But it did interrupt his love with this girl, whoever she was. Because in those days, parents had to approve of the marriage. And otherwise it wouldn't go on. That was part of the deal. And until that time, as far as I know, everybody in the family had married in the religion, which was not that easy when there were so few people.

That's right. That's right.

But it was tradition. And in Italy, you know, Italy was reunited only in 1866, I think. And the country was 17 little countries that belonged to 17 little cities. And the difference between one and the other were really enormous. People did not mingle too well between different cities.

So if you were from Venice and you were from Milan-- Uh-uh. I mean, the Capuleti and-- yeah. To this day, anybody from Milan treats people from Sicily like they wear scum. And some of the jokes is that Italy should have a hinge just where Rome is, and dip the rest in the ocean for 12 minutes, and just keep those that survive.

Oh my goodness. [CHUCKLES]

And people are still-- there are societies that both your grandparents have to be from that town to belong.

So in some ways, it sounds very provincial.

It is. It is. It's changing, because everything is changing. But this was a new country. I mean--

Nevertheless, Italian-speaking however. Didn't people feel united through the language?

They didn't all speak the same language. They speak patois in each city and in each little country. That's why they always say that Florence is the only place where they speak real Italian. And it was not all one language when it united. Education was not as common as it is now. Only the elite went to school.

Well, it's interesting, in this aspect-- I mean, there's so many differences. But Germany was also a fairly new country.

Oh, sure. Most of Europe-- and even very small country, if you go to Belgium, and you go to the Borinage, there isn't a single sign on the highway that says which direction Brussels is.

[CHUCKLES]

Because they speak a different language, and they want nothing to do with Brussels. And Holland, which is even smaller, the lower part of Holland, they are called the potato planters. [CHUCKLES]

You're right.

And you know, each country has these little silly things that are still going on.

And they're fighting because they don't want to be pasteurized. They don't want to become a mix that becomes all the same. And some people will call that nationalism. And some people will call that, that's my identity.

Yeah. Ireland is trying to revive the Celtic language.

That's right.

In certain parts-- well, I know, now, the street signs are in two languages. And this is who they are. I think things are changing because of the internet now. And a lot of things are falling apart because how communication is developing. But other than that--

When you were going to school and you were in this mixed company, did you ever experience anybody laughing at you or discriminating against you because you were Jewish?

Not until the propaganda started in 1938.

OK, so for the first 14 years of your life, you would never be able to tell.

No. We were the same. There was no difference. As a matter of fact, my mother had to ask permission for us not to stay in the class when religion was taught. And you had to ask for that. And my father had a vaster idea, told my mother, he said, I don't see why they shouldn't learn something about a religion, no matter what it is, [CHUCKLES] rather than isolate them. And my mother won. [CHUCKLES]

Did that mean also you were exempt from this class, but you went to Hebrew classes?

The were no Hebrew--

There were none.

No.

There were not.

But when she decided that we should be bat mitzvah, she had this young rabbi come to the house. And of course I think that we gave him a nervous breakdown.

[CHUCKLES]

And he didn't know how to teach, and we didn't know how to learn. And anyhow, we got the white dress, and the gifts, and the whole [INAUDIBLE]. And that was that.

You got a white dress? I mean, you wore a white dress for bat mitzvah?

Oh yeah, we wore white dresses. Yeah. Because this was what all the other people were doing. All the girls, for communion, wore white dresses--

And veils.

No, we didn't wear a veil. No. I don't remember what we had on our heads. That I don't remember. But we had these very pretty dresses. And this was part of the deal, that why should the other girls have all these parties and nothing for

us?

So what happened at Christmas time?

We had a Christmas tree with no religious ornaments. And we had the gifts. And I think that one of my brothers eventually-- when, again, he was bar mitzvah, we had the Hanukkah once or twice. But it wasn't that one. That one was in Pisa. It was not in our house.

And I know that my father contributed to some charities for poor Jews. And the Italian Jews always felt very strange when they saw the Polish and Russian with the long cossack and the big black hats.

You mean the Hasidim.

Yeah. They thought that they were like gypsies. They were strange. Why should they dress different? That's the way it is.

What did your house look like?

The house was an apartment.

OK. It was a 10, 12-room apartment.

That's huge.

Well, we were six people and plus a couple in help living in. With a kitchen, a dining room, a big living room with a grand piano, and then a room where we studied and played, and then the various bedrooms, bathrooms, and the maids' rooms.

Was this in the center of town, or in a residential area? Where was the apartment?

It was within walking distance from the center. And when I went to Milan a couple of years ago, I went to look at the house where we were all born, which is still there. And which is in Via Moscova, which is the center of the city. Because in those days, the women didn't go to hospitals.

That's right.

The births were in the house. And 24 Via Moscova is still there.

Well, describe to me the building then. Did it have many apartments in it, or just a few?

Milan was strictly apartments. There were very few areas that had single-family homes. And those were mostly added in the outer part. Milan had what is called-- there were two rings. One was a canal that used to transport all merchandise, which is called naviglio, which is a round. And the next one were the rampart, which were taken down, part of which I still remember.

They have been taken down only about a few years ago, which were the fortification of the city. And we were born within the circle of the canal, which is considered the very center of the city. The apartment where we went when we were growing up, was within the rampart.

As a matter of fact, the avenue where we lived was where the rampart had been. And it had green lawns and two ways, one going up and one going down, and no streetcars. The streetcars were still on an outer circle.

And when there was a bombing on Milan on August 5, I think 1942, our house was destroyed. And I went to Milan with my father by railroad. And we had to get off the train because the railroad station had been hit. And we walked maybe



10 miles to go. And as we were approaching on the avenue, we could see the sun where houses had been destroyed.

And we were cheating ourselves that the house was still there until we almost got there. When we got there, we saw that the bomb that hit. And we were on the fifth floor. And there were five floors below. Each had the music room and the grand piano. And I went through the rubble, saying, there must be at least one key left. And there was nothing.

But there was a round little armchair where my father used to sit, with broken legs, but who was on top of the rubble. And my father sat there and looked up, and he said, thank God we were not there.

What a sad story.

But the house next to us was--

Not hit.

--not hit. And we could see the library and the books falling down. Because part of the library was still standing. And we walked to the center of the city. And we went to a restaurant. And it was a very hot day. And my father had his jacket on his arm. And we sat down. And the waiter came. And he said, sir, you have to wear your jacket. And he did. And he didn't complain. Because that was the way it was.

Did he have a yellow star on that jacket?

Hmm?

Did he have a yellow star on that jacket?

No.

No, no. This was just decorum. This was just etiquette.

Etiquette. You don't sit at the restaurant in those days without a jacket. And this was in the Galleria, which is the center. If you want, I'll show you pictures. I have some pictures that somebody took.

But this was the beginning of the end.

We'll get there. We'll get there.

You know, we knew we knew that things were never going to be the same.

We'll get to that part. Right now, I still have another question that has to do with your home. And do you remember the address that the bombed-out apartment was on?

Yeah. Number 7 Viale Bianca Maria.

Number 7 Via Blanca Maria?

Bianca Maria.

Bianca. Does that mean white Maria?

Bianca Maria-- actually Bianca Maria di Savoia, which it means-- Bianca is a name, Maria is a name, and Savoia is the royal family.

OK. Bianca.

Viale Bianca Maria.

And was the apartment building built late in the 19th century? Or do you think before? Was it--

When we moved in-- and I think we were maybe 3, 4 years old-- the apartment was new.

So it was built in the 1920s.

Yeah.

And it had, I take it, electricity and running.

Electricity, elevator, marble staircases, and balconies, and a French door in every room, especially the room on the avenue. The other room had different-- you know, the ceilings were very high. In Europe, most of the houses have got 12-foot ceilings and that kind of thing.

You get the feeling of space being in them.

Yeah. And one of the things that I remember is one of the first air raids. Because the thing that you did, whenever there was the sirens, you opened all the French doors so that the precaution of the bombs would not break the glass. And the glass had strips of sticky paper to keep the glass together. And I remember opening the windows of our room and seeing the B-54 flying and dropping the bombs.

And you become fearless. It's like a game. Is it going to fall here or next door? And eventually we evacuated from Milan to the villa in the countryside because it became too dangerous.

This would have been what year?

Hmm?

What year would this have been?

I think '41, '42.

OK.

Yeah, I guess. Because I'm trying to remember when Italy joined the war.

It could have been about then, huh? Another question for the 1930s, and that is how much did political events going on in Italy, going on in Germany, going on in Europe, how much did those things get spoken about at home?

Continually. We were very aware that there was danger. See, we, as a family, had no tradition of persecution, the Italian Jewish community. One of our cousins was a senator for life. He had been secretary of state. Most of the Jewish community welcomed the fascists because they represented order, they represented discipline, they represented a return of Italy to a more glorious ideal.

Besides, when a man can speak so well as Mussolini did, he converted a lot of people.

Did he speak well?

Oh yes. And the Jewish people supported-- financially, emotionally-- the fascists. Because they represented order. Italy was in turmoil. Nothing was working. They were more or less like Greece is now, where nothing happens except banks are going under and so on.

This is 2015 we're talking about.

A schoolteacher from Ravenna was welcomed as a person that had vision and then wanted to unify Italy and bring some work order and some-- to have some things function.

Was this also true for your family?

Hmm?

Was this also true for your family?

Yes. It was a very general-- there were very few anti-fascists. There were people that were radical to begin with. And there were people that had affiliation with political parties, very strong affiliation, and were persecuted by the fascists.

Oh yeah.

They were generally not imprisoned, but sent away from the country.

Would this have been-- I mean, I remember reading that Mussolini started out his political life as an anarchist, which would have put him on the left.

He was actually on the right.

I know, I know. But that does that mean that when he came to take up those positions, that the leftists were the ones who suffered?

I imagine, yes, they were not part of the party.

No, they wouldn't have been.

And to be in power, you had to be with the party. And this was 1922, where there were-- I mean, the revolution in Russia. And the idea of communism seemed a leveling situation, where you didn't have the very rich and the very poor. And it was a new experiment. Therefore, some of the intellectuals tended to go way left. And some of the moderates went, instead, way right, saying, we don't need all that. We need just better laws.

And Italian people dislike government of any color of any description. Anything that has to do with power is against the romantic idea of Italia. And I will come back to that.

OK, OK.

What time is it?

Hang on. Let's break.

OK, we're rolling.

OK. Before the break, we started talking about a political atmosphere. And you described the very ironic occurrence that many Jews in Italy supported Mussolini when he first came to power, because he represented order and he represented Italy going back to an ideal that people could identify with. Now my question is, did events in Germany ever catch the interest or imagination or the conversation of your family in those same years? I mean, when you were 9 years old, Hitler came to power. So when he came to power in 1933, do you remember that being remarked upon?

No, not in 1933. That was the height of Depression. And I think the thing that was important, my father was

transitioning from being a director of a company--

Harvester.

Right, the importers of International Harvester-- to become a director in an insurance company, which meant that you had to study, among other things. And although they never discussed finances with us children, we knew that something was going on. Politics was not one of the things discussed at that age, not with 9 years old.

We were in some of the fascist organizations for the schools. And I remember going to some of the games where there were 3,000 children performing in an arena. And I remember very clearly that one of these was for Hitler. And I must have been 12 years old.

So '36, '37.

And this was before the Nuremberg laws. At that age, the discussion of Germany, I have no recollection whatsoever.

Did you know that there was this person called Hitler?

Oh, yeah. And we knew because Mussolini thought that he was such a great man. So it was in the paper and, in those days, radio, not television. And he made visits to Italy. And Mussolini went to Germany, and so on. So we were aware of that.

My father belonged to some kind of fascist organization which was part of-- because he was in insurance, he was expected to.

Both my brothers and my sister and I, we all were in the various-- it was like being in the Boy Scouts or the Girl Scouts. You had uniforms. And you did--

So youth groups, youth associations, that were party-affiliated with the Fascist Party?

Oh yeah. This was the national party. It was the only party that there was?

What was it called in Italian?

[SIGHS] Partito Nazionale Fascista, I think. But it didn't have to have a name. It was the only thing that there was. There was nothing else.

And among the first things that were not allowed for the Jews was to belong to the Fascist Party. This was one of the things.

In Italy, the laws moved very slowly. They always moved with reprieves. If you were a good Italian, you didn't have to--

Listen to the law.

You were exempted. And it was for the foreign Jews that have come to Italy. And even that, there were excuses. If somebody was, for instance, a very, very good doctor or any kind of other-- it was exempted from the laws. And this is typical of the way Latin countries function. You have a law, but it's not for everybody. If you are a little better, you don't have to follow. That's what's happening in Greece now.

And every time that there was some news, it was news a little worse. In other words, you were not-- if you were in what is called university-- it would be college here, but it would more be like a PhD preparation. If you had already entered, you were allowed to finish. If you had not entered, you were not allowed to enter.

So a lot of families would send their children to France to study, because they could go to college. And if you saw The

Garden of the Finzi-Continis, you see the young man going to France whilst the girl is studying in Venice, because she had already started. And this is the dance did we started dancing.

Did you start dancing this dance in 1938, when those laws were passed, or even before? When you're saying things happened a little bit at a time.

No, '38 is when the first laws-- when we had to register as Jews. Because people were not registered by religion.

Before.

And in 1938, they gave us some pink cards. The punishment if you didn't register must have been awful. Because there was no hesitation among the Jews to register. I never knew exactly-- and probably if you do some research, you can find out. But it might have been imprisonment. It might have been something pretty bad.

And the Italians were never enemies of all the people. So nobody talked too much about. People that had in their background any on the Pogrom of Russia, Poland, Hungary, and so on, they immediately started making plans to leave. We started making plans, not so much because we were afraid of what would happen, but because we were afraid we would not be allowed to go to school.

So we started making plans to go to England. And my mother got sick.

This is 1938?

'39, '40. Then the war. Then the economical crisis. Then my father lost his job, because he was in a big company instead than a small company. And that's when you went to work on philatelic endeavors.

OK. So let me step back a little bit and just make a few things clear in my own mind. The first one I have to admit I wish I knew-- this is such a basic question-- but tell me, what year did Mussolini come to power in Italy?

1922. I think the March on Rome was October something, maybe October 24. He marched on Rome from Bologna, and he conquered the right to govern. And one of the first things that he did was to break relation-- are you sitting down?

Yeah.

--with the Vatican City. Because the influence of the church on Italy was enormous. That's why the church had subsidy from the governor. The reconciliation with the church was in 1929. Give me--

Four, five years.

I may be wrong, but I think it was 19-- which was considered something incredibly difficult to negotiate. But it was achieved. And they gave permission to keep the part of the Vatican that belonged to them and to keep the summer residence of the Pope.

So the Vatican was able to retain those.

Right, and to have a lot of-- the defense of the Vatican was assigned to Italy, but the Vatican could keep the--

Swiss guards.

The Swiss guard, and the Vatican didn't have to report their income, a lot of things. But more than anything else, it accepted Catholicism as the official religion of the kingdom of Italy-- because it was a kingdom in those days.

And in the atmosphere of the period, this was a tremendous success. Because France had thrown the church out and wanted no part of it. And even to this day, France, if you mention anything to do with the church in France, you've got

troubles. [CHUCKLES] They just want no part.

The success of Mussolini was that he had something for the common people. He established regulation that people had to go to school. And it didn't matter whether it was Sicily or Veneto. Whichever, it had to be the same. And trying to make a nation of this country divided in so many little states, he immediately realized that there were problems in the economy of Italy. All the big powers had colonies. And the colonies were supporting them financially. Italy didn't have them.

So one of the first things that he did, he went to Libya. I didn't know how he got Libya, but he got it. Libya became won. Then, in 1935, I think, he went to Ethiopia. He already owned Eritrea, Mogadishu, and all that part. Now he conquered Ethiopia.

And Ethiopia was, in Africa, very similar to Italy. It had the ras, and it had so many little kingdoms. A lot of land, very few people, no infrastructure. And this was a very popular thing, the war in Africa. Because now Italy had colonies. And they should be able to support the motherland. Never he knew that this would cost him money and produce nothing.

How was it responded to in your family?

Hmm?

How did your family talk about this war in Ethiopia?

We were involved because the son of one of our farmers was sent to Ethiopia. And he thought that it was a wonderful country. That's as much as I knew. We were children. You know.

Of course.

What do you know of the world?

When you're saying the son of one of our farmers, does that mean somewhere close to your country place where you lived?

Yeah. One of the tenants and workers and so on. And I remember that we, as schoolchildren, would write to him to lift his morals. And of course he'd go there after the war was finished. And he was very fond of the monkeys and that kind of thing. You know, he was a kid himself. He was maybe 19. And that's all I know about--

The war in Ethiopia.

--the African wars.

So we come to 1938. And those laws are passed, as you say, these Nuremberg-type laws. Is this the first time that a kind of anti-Semitism is creeping in to the Fascist Party?

Right. Not only that, but there was an office dedicated to propaganda.

And what did the propaganda do?

Against the Jews, writing all kinds of stories about how bad they were, how conniving they were, how all they worshipped was money, and those kind of things. And I how subversive they were towards the rest of the nation. And the laws went step by step with what the Germans were doing. If somebody was emigrating, they could take only so much and nothing else. They would forfeit the rights of what they had. So what most people did, they sold their properties to friends or to friends of friends. And sometimes they were not real sales, but just to divest themselves of the property so that the government wouldn't take it away.

Some of the rules became very strict also for the regular citizen. For instance, you couldn't carry, on your person, more than a certain amount of money.

Whether you were Jewish or not.

Regardless. Because there was a black market. Because now the food became very scarce because Italy couldn't import from anybody. And Italy always needed imports to supply enough food for the people.

So the first two things that disappeared-- coffee and sugar. Meat became very scarce. And the black market flourished. People that came in from the countryside, they were frisked to see if they had eggs, poultry, whatever. So everything was done very hush-hush because the food supply started to shrink.

We had coupons. And I think that the sugar ration for one month was less than a pound per person. You were allowed so many dozens of eggs and so much milk. And it became like a different currency. Having money didn't mean that you could buy. You had to have coupons or you couldn't buy. And ersatz bread-- there was struan bread, there was all kinds. And it became very difficult. Because it wasn't real famine, but there was a deterioration in what you ate. It had no substance, especially with growing children. And this was for everybody.

So how did it affect your life and your family's life when you were in the upper-middle class? What changes did you feel?

You had to find some black marketeer to subsidize what you couldn't find. And then you just didn't have. If you had no butter, you had no butter. If there was no oil, you had-- instead than olive oil, there was linseed oil, which was a very inferior kind of thing. Butter became margarine. And then even margarine was not available.

So little by little, the food became very scarce. And the first reaction that everybody with children had, the teeth deteriorated. Because that, in children, is what you need-- bones.

But we saw people going away.

What kind of people were going away?

The rich. The people that had experienced, not in this generation but in the previous generation, of having escaped other countries. They knew that something worse could come. We never thought that way because we didn't know. You know, I had never met any foreigners that were not extremely wealthy that was Jews.

I remember the Golbens. They were Russian Jews. The mother was a ballet dancer. Their business was furs. And they arrived in the land, I think, maybe in the middle '30s. And they bought a fantastic apartment. And the girl went to ballet lesson, to skating lesson, to tennis lessons. You name it and she went.

We met her in the private school where we were. And as soon as the law started, they emigrated to the states. And I met her, eventually, in New York. But we didn't have that experience. We felt we were Italian. And you don't change your nation.

And so when was the first time you personally felt, oh, this is not comfortable being a Jew in Italy?

Walking on the street, and one of my best friends was on the same side of the street. She crossed over. She never said hello. She turned her face to the other side. I knew she had seen me, the same as I'd seen her. And I even can tell you the name, Mondadori-- Mimi Mondadori. They were the biggest publishing house-- and they still are-- in Italy.

And I had known her since I was this high. And I realized that it was she didn't want to see me. You know, we had already been thrown out of the school and so on. That was the first time that I really felt they have poisoned the system. Leaving the school was difficult.

Tell me about it.

Well, because my mother had gone to that school. Two years ago, I went back to Milan and decided I wanted to go back and see the school.

This is in 2013.

Uh-huh. And I went. And it's now going to be a museum. It was a beautiful, beautiful place overlooking the public garden, with Tiepolo fresco on the ceiling and marble on the floor. And that's when I realized how privileged we were. To me, seeing a fresco-- when you're born in Italy, they're all over. And they don't seem so rich as when you come to this country.

And there were workers there repairing things. And when they saw me walking in, I said, this is not a school anymore. And they said, no, it hasn't been for many, many years. I said, when I was very young, I came and I was in the school. They said, would you like to see it? I said, I would love to.

And they started to talk to me. And the minute I said that I was in that school, senora, come this way, senora come that way. There was deference, which I hadn't felt in years. I was somebody. And they were very nice. And they said that, if there is enough money, it will be a museum. And they showed me around and so on.

And there was the feeling of, this is what my life what was once and is not anymore.

Before all of that happened. Before all of the--

Yeah, yeah.

What was the name of the school?

Via Manzoni Scuola per-- Scuola Femminile Manzoni, women's school Manzoni. And for one of those very strange happenings, I was looking through some papers last year, and I saw a letter that my mother had obtained from the president of the school, saying that we had been in this school for three years and graduated, blah blah blah. And it's signed by the grandfather of my niece's husband.

Wow.

So I gave it to her. She had never known her grandfather. And you know, I saw the name, Porta, and I knew who it was. And I said, maybe you want this. And I gave it to her.

Do you remember how you found out that you couldn't go to school anymore?

Oh, yes, in the paper.

So you were at home, and you read it in the paper? Your parents read it to you.

It was published in all papers, that all students of such and such schools could not attend school. They had to find other institutions. They were allowed in elementary school. They were not allowed in anything beyond elementary schools.

Did this decision come during the school year or in the summer holidays?

I don't remember. I don't exactly remember when it happened. I assume that it was in summer. Because it's when the war started with France. No, no, I'm wrong. No. I don't know, but I think it might have been in summer. Because I have a vague idea that we were in Verezzi. We were not in Milan when we were informed.

And my mother and father tried to find out which schools were available. And that's when we found the British Institute.



And that's when they found this accounting school.

So I guess I was trying to get a sense of whether one day-- it's a Tuesday-- you go to school, you come home, you read the newspaper, and on Wednesday you can't go again.

No, we were not in school. You probably are right that it was during the summer vacation that this happened. Also because most of the announcements were done to crowds in squares. And that was generally when the weather was nice, not in winter. And it was in summer.

So was there such an announcement in the square about the schools.

I'm sure that there were plenty of announcements and speeches about these terrible people that the Jews were, and that they should not be with our children, and blah, blah, blah.

Now, when this propaganda office started working and these articles appeared, that's the first time you ever are exposed to something like that.

Right.

And for someone who's assimilated, did you have to do a double-take to think, oh, they're talking about me?

Well, something very peculiar happened. Some of our friends or people that knew us, they said, this too shall blow away. Don't worry about. In a couple of months, these idiots would be out of power, the war will be over. And the laissez faire, let it be. it's going to blow away. Don't worry too much. You know, this is Italy, this is not Germany. And we have never done this before. They're not going to start now.

So when you're talking about the war, we're already talking September 1, 1939, when Germany attacks Poland.

Right. But that didn't affect us. We were neutral. It is in 1941 that Italy, with Japan, joined Germany.

So it meant as a formal axis power.

Yep. And France was ready to capitulate. And Italy joined Germany because they were afraid they would lose the right to some parts of France that they thought belonged to Italy because most of the people spoke Italian there. And they joined--

So it's partly a land grab, a desire for land.

Mm-hmm. And that's when I think France surrendered, in a matter of two weeks.

Tell me, at that point, between 1939 or maybe even before, you have those laws that are enacted that start to change your life. Did you ever get news of what was really going on with the Jews in Germany at that time?

No.

So you had no idea.

No. If there is something that the Germans did to perfection, it was to keep the secret secret. They divulged information that was completely adulterated and false. They said that they were employing these people to work. They never said that they were sending them to concentration camps. When they started rounding up the people--

Where?

In Italy. They rounded up, I think, about 10,000-- and I will tell you later-- they did it with such a secret system that

people disappeared, but nobody knew where they were, where they were being taken. For instance, they discovered, about five years ago, a retaining hall in the main railroad station in Milan, where they found writing on the walls-- and now I think it's in museum. This is where they put the people until nightfall before transporting them to Germany. They didn't want anybody to see them, not even the people working in the railroad station.

So you're saying that only about five years ago-- so that would be 2010-- workers in Milan discovered a false wall.

A retaining area. They knew that there were-- in the railroad station, there are a lot of halls where they deposited merchandise and--

Oh I see. So it could be like a--

The secrecy of the deportation was so complete. OK, I'm going to tell you a part of the story which is difficult. Don't ask me the dates because I don't remember exactly.

We had seen a friend of ours who was fighting as an officer-- he was not Jewish-- in the Greek campaign that Italy was doing against Greece for the Germans. And we had seen him in Milan.

And he had gone. And I wanted to find out, from his father, if he knew where he was. Because in the meantime Italy had surrendered. And I didn't know where this young man was. And I went to this father, who was the partner of a cousin of mine. It was a CPA and an attorney. My cousin was the attorney, he was the CPA. And they had a joint office. And I went to the office. And in Europe, you don't go to an office unannounced. But I was young, and I wanted to know.

And when the secretary went in to see him, he came out, and he said, come with me, Luisa. And he took me on the balcony and closed the door. And he says, what are you doing here? I said, what do you mean? He says, don't you know that your cousin has been taken?

And I didn't know. I was there asking about his son, not my cousin. He said, they were on the lake where one of the children was in a private school. And it was father, mother, and one child. The child that was in private school was slightly mentally retarded. They didn't know at the time. They thought that he was just going through a period. So they put him in a private, I think, Catholic school. They had converted.

They had converted to Catholicism.

Yeah. And the grandfather was with them. They were surrounded. They took them. They didn't know that they were picking up the child. So the child in school stayed. And they never came back.

And how did the partner know? He received a postcard from his partner-- we are traveling in a cattle car. May God help you. That was the last communication. They never came back. Their name was De Benedetti-- Hugo e Anita De Benedetti, and the son, I don't remember the name.

And Reiner was the grandfather. He was in his 80s. And the only one that remained was the son that was mentally retarded. And he survived the war. He remained in that institute and school through the whole war. And he died maybe 20 years later. It was more or less like you were talking to an 8-year-old kid when he was 70.

And that was the first time that we personally found out that they were picking up people.

People.

We didn't know.

So I know you said, don't ask me dates, but I'm going to try and place this chronologically. You say that you found this out after Italy had surrendered.

Right.

So by surrender, you mean join the axis?

No.

Or you mean surrender to Germany when it came--

Surrender to England, America--

That's what I was wondering. So this would have been 1945? Before 1945, you wouldn't have known--

No no no no no no.

Or '44?

No no no no, back back back, '43. '45 is the end of the war.

OK. I've got my dates wrong. I'm sorry. You're right.

See, Italy had gone to war, I think, in maybe '41, '42, I don't know exactly-- when France was ready to collapse. When Sicily was invaded, eventually, as the Americans were coming--

You're right.

--the boot, Italy surrendered.

OK. You're right.

Because they couldn't continue. This was after Rome was conquered. Rome was an open city. Finally, the king abdicated and surrendered. And Italy was cut in two. The Germans took a piece. And where the armies of the French--

The Allies.

--the Allies arrived, they stayed there. And then, eventually, little by little, they conquered the rest. But it took two other years.

I got my dates confused. Because my understanding, sometimes I think, America only joined the war on June 6, 1944. But that's not entirely true. That's when they invaded Normandy. But there were allied forces in Italy before that.

Oh, sure. And they were in North Africa. The Rommel campaign.

That's right. So when Italy surrendered, you're talking about half of Italy having surrendered.

Well, Mussolini created headquarters on Lake Garda, at Sirmione, and created the government there, and created a republic, and of course was allied with the Germans. He was trying to negotiate through all kinds of-- a way to disintegrate the allegiance to Germany.

To Germany.

Because he knew that they were losing. And Mussolini was very opportunistic. If he could extricate himself, he would try to do it. It didn't work. And I was in Milan the day of the surrender--

Of the southern part.

--of the southern part. And everybody thought that all of Italy would be freed. It wasn't. The Germans came down. They really invaded the rest of Italy. They had armies on the battlefield and they had armies that were running away from the battlefield. And they invaded the rest of Italy. And they became the sovereign power. And Mussolini was more and more a puppet. And this is when we, as a family, started considering what options do we have. And they were pretty much none.

All right, hold that thought, and I'm going to go back and try and retrace a few things. But before I do, I want to make a few things clear in my own mind. So the southern part of Italy surrenders to the Allied forces. When you go to inquire about the son of the partner who was involved in the Greek campaign by Italian forces on behalf of Germany, you are physically in the part that's still ruled or controlled by Mussolini and that is soon going to be controlled by the Germans or already is.

The line, I think, was below Pavilla, Bologna, from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic. It was above Florence-- Florence, Prato. Genoa, I think, was in the German part. Bologna was-- I'm not sure whether it was. I know Venice was. I know Trieste was. And of course Milano and Turin, they were all in the German part.

And you were still living in Milan at the time?

No, we are leaving in Verezzi because the house has already been destroyed. We're living in the countryside, in the house in Verezzi, where we used to go in the summer.

And the partner and the office are located where?

Milan.

So you were up in Milan.

I took the train. The train is an hour from Verezzi to Milan. And I was inquiring. And that is the first time that I'd heard that people were disappearing. And this was family.

Mother's or father's side?

Mother, father, one son, and the grandfather.

No, I mean were they from your mother's side of the family--

No, from my father's side.

OK, from your father's side of the family.

Yeah. And when I came back home, we knew that things were changing and changing rapidly. And what do you do? The alternatives are very few.

And that night-- our villa was on the valley. And there was a railroad here, and a big, deep valley, and a river at the bottom. And we could hear noise of armored divisions on the other side of the valley. It was the Italian army leaving Italy and entering Switzerland to give up their arms.

And one of my brothers who was home said, I am of the same age. I should go with them. And my parents kissed him, gave him a couple of gold coins, and said, go. The older brother was away. The boys had a hard, hard time. They were inducted in labor camps for a couple of months.

This is previous to your brother leaving.

Yep.

So let's go back now. When did you decide to leave Milan?

We didn't really decide. We had gone away because they were bombing Milan. And then the house was destroyed. So we couldn't go back. So we stayed in the summer house.

Which was an hour away.

An hour away, yeah. And I think I had a job with an insurance little office. My sister was working somewhere. The two boys had been drafted for forced labor.

And this is what year? Do you know? I would say '42. So it happened fairly quickly. If Italy joins the war in '41, then in '42, already your family's directly affected.

Oh yeah.

The last I heard is that you had to register, and that people did. And then you're thrown out of school, which was traumatic.

Right-- thrown out of work, my father.

OK, father was thrown out of work.

Right. And then I think the first thing that happened was the two boys were drafted for forced labor. And they were put in a quarry to break stone, which was the job generally given to prisoners and hard labor in jail. And these were two boys in their 20s. And my father knew the then-president of Italy under Mussolini. He was a friend of his. And he contacted him. And he said, this is what is happening to my son. He said, don't worry, Enrico, I'll take care of it. The following day, the boys were released.

What is the name of the president?

I wish I could remember. If I think hard enough, I might. If I think now, I--

It's OK.

--the name may come back to me. But that was a favor that was done. But this was very typical of Italy. Italy is a country-- when people say mafia, they think that they are talking only of perverts or burglars, or mafia, or--

Criminals.

--bad people.

Criminals.

No. One hand helps to wash the other. If you want a job, you better move somebody in Italy, even know. That's how you get a job. You don't go to an employment agency. There is no such thing. It's word of mouth.

When my father saw the hands of his sons, he knew he had to do something. He had to ask as powerful a person as possible to help him.

The night before we left--

Hang on a second. I'm sorry. So that means your brothers were taken for forced labor, but they would come home in the

evening.

Yeah.

And he could see that their hands were--

Bloody.

--bloody. And so they were in these forced labor camps for how long?

I think maybe a month, a month and a half.

And then your father called the person.

And got them out.

OK. When was he thrown out of the Fascist Party?

Hmm?

When was your father thrown out of the Fascist Party?

Oh, immediately. I think in 1938. It was one of the first thing that when the Nuremberg laws were applied, we were thrown out from all the junior organizations, and whoever was Jewish. This is the only thing that Mussolini did, because it wouldn't hurt anybody.

Got it.

And Mussolini was a very ambiguous person. He did one thing one way for Hitler, but he tried always to protect the Italian people. He was like an actor who was pulling off a big show.

But anyhow, now we come to the nitty-gritty. There is curfew in Italy, which means that after a certain hour, nobody can be found in any street except doctors, firemen, and other-- and our doctor comes to our door. And he said, I have been sent by the head of police to tell you that he has order to pick you up tomorrow. Please disappear. He's going to be here at noon.

So we pack a little suitcase. We put mountain boots on. My father and mother took whatever was valuable that could be put in the hem of a skirt-- gold coins, jewelry. My father took the book that is now at the Beinecke Library. And we went to the railroad station and instead of going towards Milan, we went towards Lake Lugano, going down to the lake, near the Swiss border, to see what we could find. Is there a way to go?

And my father went to visit some people that we knew were very good fascists and asked if they knew a way to get out. And they said, yes, we'll help you. And we were taken by a-- I still remember a very tall woman who was a smuggler. And we climbed the mountains. And we hid in the bushes when the German patrols came by.

And when we we're almost at the border, in the border between Switzerland and Italy, had a very high wire fence with bells on top. But there was a spot where it had been lifted, where people could pass under. And my father said, I am an officer and I do not leave my country. And I said (URGENTLY) Daddy, you must come because we can't go without you.

And I was the first one under the-- and a little old soldier came out with a gun that looked like 1895. And he said, [GERMAN]. And I said, [GERMAN]. And he said, come.

[CHUCKLES]

And he took his gun. He gave one side to my father. He put the four little suitcases, and we started walking.

Oh my gosh.

And that's how we got to Switzerland.

Oh my goodness. How long did that mountain trek last?

About two hours, two hours and a half.

You mean when you when you went up in the mountains, it wasn't like something for days, it was something that was--

No, no, just hours. The mountain-- I think it took a couple of hours.

OK. And yet they were German patrols on the roads as you were climbing up there.

We never saw it. But the guide made us hide. We heard some noises. And they didn't see us, we didn't see them. Or I wouldn't be here to tell the story.

Of course. So what then happened in Switzerland?

We had hysterical elation. We had made it. We didn't know. And the first thing that the Swiss did, they brought us in a military garrison. And they gave us food. And they served polenta, which is corn meal mush, with a salad. And I started laughing hysterically, because we would never serve that together.

And my father looked at me and said, don't you ever laugh at what they give you to eat. You just eat and say thank you. And I still remember that he was telling me how to behave when something strange was presented.

And then they gave us a piece of cake. And we hadn't seen anything baked with sugar for years. And we were absolutely fascinated by how good it was. Then they said, well, now it's time for you to go to bed. And they said, you have to be all in one room. And they took us into another building. And they said, if you want to use the bathrooms, you better go now because we're going to lock the doors. And of course we thought that this was very funny.

This was a jail. They had other place to put us. And I don't know whether they thought that we would run away after we had run in. But anyhow, they said-- and they told us that they would wake us up at 7:00 in the morning, and we would be able to shower or whatever, and then we would be interrogated.

And this was in Bellinzona, which was the little town over the border.

What's the name again?

Bellinzona.

Bellinzona?

Yeah, which is in the Ticino county, which is the Italian portion of Switzerland-- the Italian-speaking portion.

Is this an Italian name, Bellinzona?

Yeah, all the towns, villages, are named in Italian.

So they didn't have a German--

Lugano, Ticino, yeah.

It didn't have a German version of the name.

No, no, no. Switzerland is divided in three languages. The lower part is Italian, then there is the German parts which is further north, and in the west part is French. And then there are subdivisions of the division. But--

That's where you were.

The three languages are divided that way. And we realized that it was a jail, because there were all the writings of the people that hadn't been there before us. And this is the first time that we saw that there were people in there that had nothing to do with Italy. There were gypsies. There were some German military that had escaped to Switzerland. There were some British prisoners that escaped from Italy to Switzerland, Polish-- not Jewish, Polish army-- that got there.

And they woke us up in the morning. And they brought us to a restaurant to have breakfast. They gave us breakfast. And then they transported us to another little town. I can't remember the name. And that's where one of the most difficult things happened.

They said that if there was a man in the group-- father, brother, uncle, whatever, he was the one that was going to give the information to the authorities. And the women and children stayed in another part. So my father went. And eventually they told us that we were going to be moved, my mother and my sister and I, and that my father was going in a different place. This came to us as a terrible shock. We couldn't understand.

And in comparison to some of the other people, at least we had a few belongings, each one in his own suitcases. Some people had everything mixed up together. So the father had what belonged to the wife and vice versa.

And they tried to make sense of it that the accommodation where we were going were very limited, and that there was no way to isolate husbands and wives if they were in the same area. Therefore they decided to put the men in one place and the women in another, and eventually they would reunite the families as soon as they could.

That created chaos-- crying, praying, screaming, hysteria. Eventually people calmed down because they knew that this was going to happen.

This meant the rest of the family, all of you.

All the women in one place, all the men in another.

And we were sent to Rovio, a little hilltop summer children's camp with a very beautiful building with very small beds. So now they divided the young people from the older people. The older people went into the teacher residence because the beds were big. And we younger people went in the small beds. And [COUGHS]

Should we stop?

Anyhow, we got to Rovio. And I would say we were about 200 people, women and children. And they established routine. You got up. You were assigned to do whatever jobs. One was cleaning. One was cutting the flowers, one was washing the dishes, the laundry, whatever.

Then we would be taken out for a walk with two armed guards. The armed guards were maybe 80 years old-- [CHUCKLES] soldier with guns. And sometimes they gave the guns to us to play with. Because we were not going anywhere anyhow.

They had correspondence with the relatives. And the mail was very efficient. So every two, three days, we would get a notice from my father.



What about your brothers? Did you know what was going on?

My brothers, it's a whole different story. I'll tell you--

You'll tell you later.

I'm going on the point. My sister, one night, started running a very high temperature. And they decided she had diphtheria. And she was sent down to Lugano to the hospital where she had to stay for 40 days.

Wow.

And my father was in a camp similar to ours, in an old hotel in Lugano. And he was allowed to go in the street and wave to my sister in the hospital. Because he couldn't go in because he was contagious.

My brothers-- the first brother, as I told you, left with the army. And the stories, when this kind of upheaval happened, are mysterious, misleading, and uninforming. Everybody said that if you stayed in Switzerland, hidden, for a week, you were accepted. Of course it was a lot of nonsense.

So anyhow, my brother, with some other escapee, went in a farm and went in a haystack on the second floor. And they hid there. And at night they would raid the chicken coop and eat eggs. And they found some cheese. They stayed there.

Meantime, in the countryside, the older brother comes home. And he says, I have to leave because they shot at me. He was of draft age. And they were taking up all the people of draft age, whether they were Jews, Italian, or whatever.

And this is before the police captain sends word to your father and mother.

Oh yeah, this was about maybe two months before. This was soon after the armistice. And he said that he was in a railroad station, and they made all the young men line up outside the train. And when he saw that the train was moving, he jumped up, and ran off the other side, and then went into a carriage [INAUDIBLE] the railroad car.

And a rear wheel man came by. And he said, what are you doing? He says, the Germans are picking up all young people. He said, I have something for you. And he gave him a cap and a wand. And he said, walk around the rail and bang the nuts. This is what we do. And you are an official railroad man. They are not going to arrest you.

And that's how we got home. He walked for 20 miles. And he did the same thing as my brother did. At night, there was a group of men trying to cross the border. He joined them. And they got into Switzerland. And he heard the same story, that you have to hide, blah, blah, blah. So he sees the farm. He goes into the farm. And he sees there's a stepladder that is going to the upstairs. He goes to the stepladder. And out comes the head of the older brother. He says, what are you doing here?

[CHUCKLES]

And the twins were reunited.

How funny is that? How funny.

Eventually, of course, they surrendered. And the Swiss-- of course they had no papers. Because the last thing you would carry is a paper proving that you are a Jew. So the Swiss checked if they were circumcised. Because a lot of Italians that had absolutely no reason to escape were escaping because they were fed up with the war, with the poverty, with no food. And they had really no reason except that hoping that, in Switzerland, life was better.

And the two boys were-- one was sent to Lausanne, to the University. The older one was sent to Ticino, also to school.

So an Italian who would go and cross into Switzerland and who had economic reasons for leaving could be sent back.

But once they checked to see who they were-- and this could be a life-or-death thing-- they kept them.

Right. How did they communicate with us? We received a postcard. And the postcard had an Italian stamp. And we soon discovered that if you gave half a pound of rice with your letter, the rice would be sent to Switzerland to buy the stamps, and sugar was sent back with the letter for Italy.

Because the Swiss didn't have rice and Italy didn't have sugar. And that's how the mail between prisoners and free people functioned. And it was a matter of honor. Somebody put that stamp on that postcard. And when we sent back with the rice, it got to my brothers. Because there was no official mail either way.

So it could be that a letter could be posted in Italy as the rice is being sent.

They put a Swiss stamp to send it to Switzerland, they put an Italian stamp to send it to Italy. I wish I had some of those. I don't. But I know that we received it. And eventually, when we were accepted, one of the first things that my father said is, number one, he knew somebody in Switzerland that was in the Swiss government. And that made things much easier.

Can you repeat that? I didn't hear it all.

He gave the name of somebody that was in the Swiss government that knew him and that he knew. And that made things much easier. Because he could prove who he was and that he was not telling stories. And it was the most expensive telephone call that he ever made. He gave a five-lira gold coin to make the phone call. Because there was bribery at the lower level of the officials in any country. It's a way to make money. It's human nature. But it got us in.

OK. Here's my question. How long did you stay-- you, separate with your mother in one place, your sister in the hospital, your father in another, and your brothers in the haystack?

I think I stayed with my mother maybe a month, a month and a half. My sister was still in Lugano when we left. And we were told that we were going near Zurich. And on the train going to Zurich, my father is there. But of course my sister is now in--

Lugano.

--in Lugano at the hospital. Now we are sent to a military camp. Before it was a civilian, now it's a military camp. And Switzerland takes in, in this period of time, 300,000 people. Europe is a boiling cauldron consumed by war. There are military people that are escaping, civilians that are escaping, gypsies, people with deformities. These are all the people the Germans hate. Prisoners of war from Holland, from Hungary, from Poland, from Russia, from France, from Spain, from Italy. And they're all converging on Switzerland.

And the Swiss sent back those that they thought they were fakes. But they took in everybody else. But they didn't know where to put them, what to do with them. They had to make plans, and there was no time.

So we are sent in an old mill where they used to weave enormous length of fabrics. They had taken out all the equipment. They built three stacks of bunks. And we slept on straw and a blanket and a pillow. And there were stamp ladders to go to the second bunk, and steps to go to the third.

The women's room was for 600 people, and the same was for the men. We were reunited at meals. There was a sanitation facility, I think on the ground floor, and showers and so on. And we had a choice of jobs. And I think that I chose to clean the toilets because it was the shortest job and you could do it anytime you wanted and as many times and you wanted. And nobody checked you. And nobody wanted that job. But I was young and I wanted something that gave me freedom.

We were given a loaf of bread every day. And to this day, I can't remember what we did with the bread in between meals. Where did we keep it? I don't remember.

I know that we were happy. We put up shows, we played bridge, we had free time. We could go walking outside on a park, in the snow, sometimes in the cold they took us. And once in a while they gave us a pass to go to Zurich. And I remember going to Zurich with my father and going to a swimming pool.

Now, what did we use for money, I don't remember. But we must have had some money. Because we rented bathing suits and went swimming. And this was, to me, the height of luxury-- the snow outside, and we swimming in the warm swimming pool.

Eventually they decided that I should go back to school-- or so they thought. So they sent me and a friend of mine from Venice to a little camp near Aarau, which is very close to the German border.

And they sent us again with an old, old army men who go promptly lost going to this camp. And we walked and walked. He was the luggage and we were carrying his gun.

[CHUCKLES]

And we finally arrived there. And who is there? My sister. What do we learn there? [GERMAN], which is knitting socks with four needles. And we spent there maybe a couple of months.

Was this in German now? Was this language--

This is in the German part of Switzerland. And the camp, we were maybe 40 women, 50 women. Besides learning how to make socks with four needles, we learned how to cook, how to clean, how to keep house, and how to ski. There was snow. And they had skis, because this was a winter school for children. See, they were using whatever was available or not occupied for--

Housing.

--displaced persons. And they were trying to make us as happy as possible. There was a Dutch camp of boys and men nearby. And sometimes we had parties together. The Dutch of course had escaped from a prison camp in Germany.

Were there any Dutch Jews amongst them?

No.

OK.

No. We met a lot of people that had nothing to do with being Jews.

Did you meet Jews as well?

Yes, and of different nations, nationalities, and so on. I should go back one step. When we were near Zurich is the first time that I saw a tattoo with the number. There were these two very, very tall, beautiful women. They were Russians. And they escaped a prison camp in Germany, carrying the dead body of a guard to be sure that they would be taken into Switzerland.

They landed up in our camp for a few days. And there were some people that spoke enough Russian that they could translate to us. And this is the first time that we saw the tattoo with the number, the first prisoners of war, the first time that we had an idea of what was happening behind the border, how dreadful it was, how lucky we were to be where these people were trying to help us and protect us, when this inferno was going around them.

And the fact that the Swiss, for helping all the people, could be made subject to the same brutality. And these are the things that nobody talks about, as if Switzerland was a paying-guest place.

We had some cousins in St. Gallen. And I don't know how-- probably my father contacted them. And they came to the camp to try and help us. The first thing that they brought-- clothing. They knew our ages. And they emptied their closets and brought us clothing. Because we were supplied secondhand clothes from any organization that wanted to give clothes.

And I remember my cousin. And she was crying. And she was talking to the commander-- can't you let them come to stay at our house? He said, we have no permission to do that. We are doing the best we can. And if you can help, help. But we can't let them go because we have no permission.

Well, eventually, from the camp in the mountain with my sister, we heard that we could go as au pair.

OK, we have to break right now. And he's going to have to change the card.

OK.

OK, so before break, we were talking about your sister and yourself having the offer to become au pairs.

OK, so we both accepted. And we went to Geneva. My sister stayed with this family until the end of the war. I went and I was hired a husband and wife that had a very beautiful house on Lake Geneva. But they moved me to her father in a small chalet at Mayens-de-Sion, which is up 1,000 feet in the mountains near Sion.

And I had a very good time with this old man-- he must have been maybe 85-- until I got very violently sick. I didn't know what it was. And a doctor came. And he said, you have appendicitis.

[GASPS] Oh my.

And this was like a Saturday. He said, come down Monday morning. Because I was up in the mountains. And they operated on me. And it was fall, maybe late August or September. And the surgeon that operated on me was a hunter. So no sooner he finished the operation, the hunting season was opening, and he left for the mountains.

And I developed phlebitis.

Phlebitis? In a young girl.

An irritation of the leg. And they decided to put ice and hot compresses. And the thing got worse instead than better. So now I am sick, I'm in a hospital, I'm by myself. I don't know where to turn.

So I said, well, I'm still Italian. There was an Italian consulate in Sion. And I called the consulate. I said, I'm a refugee from Milan. I'm here. I have this and this and this. Is there anything you can do? Oh, he said, yes. We'll send somebody over right away. And the wife of the consul and some other people came.

And they said, you can't go back to the cottage of this old man by yourself. We're going to go to the people that have given you the papers to send you to your parents. My parents were now in ChampÃ©ry, which is in the French part in the Monthey. I said, if you can do that, fine. And sure enough, they did.

Now, it's not the end of this story. I'm going west in the train towards ChampÃ©ry. There is a train going east, in the other direction. I see somebody that I know on the window. It's my brother. The two trains stayed there for maybe two or three minutes. And he said, I can't tell you where I'm going, but I'm going home. He had been resupplying the insurgents in Italy. He was going to near the border, and then climb the mountains and bring them supplies-- medicine, weapons, whatever they need.

Against the Germans.

Against the occupying, yeah. And he used to go away from where he was supposedly studying, do this, and come back. And then eventually he went, and he fought, and he stayed there until the end of the war. And he was instrumental in helping us to get a place where to live when we came back--

To Italy.

--to Italy. Because the house in the country was occupied by a Swiss family that was working in Italy during the war. We didn't have a place in Milan anymore. And he was able to get us an apartment. And he is the one that came to meet us when the Italian government took us back home.

The war ended, I think, in June.

May.

And we didn't come home until the middle of July. Because they were all the papers to be done and everything to be arranged. And we did get back to Como. And my brother was there. And he was in uniform. And he had commandeered, I think, a truck [CHUCKLES] to take us back home.

And we first stayed in the farmers' quarters in Verezzi. And then the apartment came available in Milan that he had found, and got us back.

Before we go there--

Hmm?

Before we go back to returning to Italy, do you remember the date that you actually ran away from your home in Verezzi? Was it fall, was it summer?

When we left Italy?

Yeah, through the fence.

September 15, 1943.

OK. So that means that you were in Switzerland for almost two years.

Oh, two years and two months.

Two years and two months?

Yeah, yeah. We were over two years, I know that.

OK, OK. So when you're on that train and you are going in the other direction, you end up with your parents?

I arrived in ChampÃ©ry. And I couldn't walk. So they put me on an armchair on a wheel cart. And they took me to-- because the hotel where they were staying was at the end of the village. And I felt like Marie Antoinette going to the guillotine. I'm up on this high thing.

And my parents didn't know I was coming because I didn't want to scare them. And from then on, I stayed with my parents until the end of the war.

And something happened there that was the most revealing thing. There was a family from near Turin, the Nissim. And they had a girl my age, Dindi. And we became close friends. And she was telling me the story of her sister, who was a doctor who had join the partisans and was deported to Germany. And they didn't know whether she was dead or alive.

They were Jewish?

Yeah. And one day I was near the telephone, and the telephone rang. And a voice, in very slow tone, said, do you know the Nissim? Are you in the same camp? And I said, yes, I do know Dr. Nissim and his wife.

He said, I have something very important to tell them. Will you please call them? I said, I don't know where they are now. There are 1,000 people here. But if you give me the message, I'll be glad to give it to them. He said, I am from the Red Cross. Her daughter-- and I don't remember her name-- is alive and well. She is in Dachau. But Dr. Nissim is alive and she is doing well. And she will be repatriated. And we want to convey her this message.

And I said, I will tell them, I will tell them. And I ran out. And when I saw them, I started crying because I didn't have the courage. And then I said, your daughter is alive. The Red Cross called and said she's alive. And that was the most moving thing I ever expected. Because by then we knew what the camps were. We knew the people that went in didn't come out. But she was one of those that came out.

Did you ever meet her?

Yes. But then she committed suicide. The same as Primo Levi. He committed suicide. Those that came back from the camps-- and I've met a few-- when I came back to Italy, I worked for one year with the United Nations Repatriation, UNRRA. And I was in Cremona.

And it was mostly I was working with children from the camps. They were like little wild animals. Nobody had brought them up. They had grown up by themselves. They had no ethic of any kind. They have never had parents. They were used in the mental experimental camps.

And we would try to help them, to make a bridge to wherever they were going, try to teach them something. Because they didn't know anything. They had never experience a family. Therefore all they did was try to run away. And safety was only in running away. They didn't believe that anybody wanted to help them. They kept going to train station and taking any train they could. And then they would be brought back.

And there were language problems, because some spoke languages that we didn't speak. But more than anything, they need affection. They never trusted people. And I worked there for about a year. And it was a very difficult job. But I was glad. I was giving back.

What did you do? What was your particular work?

Housing for the children, clothing, directing them to the various teaching that we had. We had some literacy, learning to write. They didn't know how to read or write in any language. They didn't know how to hold a pencil.

And making sure that they had the medical visits. Because we wanted to build them up. And try to pair them up with family that were adopting them in different countries all over the world.

Were there any particular camps that most of these kids came from?

No, no. From all over. In Cremona, they sent children from age 5 to 11.

Were they mostly Jewish children, or not only?

They didn't really know. Some were children born in the camps. Some were children abducted and brought to Germany. They didn't know what the origin of the children was.

Because most children, when they were in the camps like Auschwitz, they were killed almost immediately.

Right. But not all the time, not all the time. And it also depended what they were experimenting on. And we didn't know the origin of some of the children. We were never sure. The only thing that was--

The numbers.

--the numbers. But some of their children knew where they came from, and some didn't. They were too small. And why they were kept alive, we don't know.

And one of the incidents that happened there is that some of the refugees wanted to kill one person because he was a guard in one of the camps.

Did they?

No, no, other people intervened. And he was arrested and given to the police to be prosecuted. And we don't know whether he really was or was wasn't, or whether he looked like somebody. And that's hard to tell.

But I mean, I saw where I could have been. But a part of me didn't want anything to do with that. I didn't want to deal with that. I had my life to live.

A few questions.

Sure. Where were you when the war ended?

I was in Champagny, Switzerland, with my parents. And one of the things that the Swiss did, they tried to isolate us from any news. But word of mouth went very fast. We knew the invasion, we knew of everything, even if there were no papers, no radio, nothing.

And we thought we would be free in two days. Of course it couldn't happen.

But you heard about it while being there, and you heard about it from other people that the war is ended, rather than some official pronouncement?

There was no such thing as official. It was mostly word of mouth. Of course we had a radio. It was forbidden, but somebody had a radio.

Why would the Swiss have not wanted you to have news?

They were isolating us from bad news, good news, anything they would create turmoils in the camps. For instance, I think it was once a month we were given money and tickets to go and visit our parents or whatever. The only thing that was forbidden, we couldn't go to a dance hall and dance. Not that we would have gone.

The refugees that had enough money in Switzerland to be free could be free and rent a place. And they had the flag of their country. We didn't wear anything as a recognition. And we were allowed to go and visit villages, walk wherever we wanted. We had very little money.

There were some of the charities-- the AGDC, I think, was giving us \$0.50 a week. And some of the Christian charities were giving to the Christian people. Some liberal groups were sending toothpaste, various necessities. We had a certain amount of freedom even once we were out of the military camps.

What always amazed me is how this little nation of 3 million people could take care of so many people the best way they could. I mean, I cannot imagine the United States taking in 20 million people in 3 months. I mean, look what's happening in the Arab world. Look what's happening in Africa. Look what's happening now in Europe with the people coming in. And some of the nations of Europe, they want no part with it.

Yeah, of course. You said your father made a very expensive phone call very early on.

You said your father, very early on, made a very expensive phone call that cost a five-lira gold coin, to an influential person in Switzerland, whose help changed some of the circumstances of your family.

He was a member of the government. That I know.

How did your family situation change as a result?

We were accepted.

Accepted in what way? What does that mean?

As refugees.

Ah.

We could have been turned back at that point.

I see.

This was before we were accepted.

I see.

I think it was somebody that he knew through his philatelic connection. And he knew that he was a governmental official, like a minister or something-- of some kind.

Who would have thought that having a stamp hobby could end up being so significant?

And this happened several times. It's an international group. And when you are prominent in a field, whether it's playing bridge, playing tennis, or playing golf, you are friends. And when you are in need, you would give help to them and they give the help to you.

When the persecution started, my father had a great stamp collection. And he sent it to London, in plain envelopes with just his name, to a very famous stamp dealer. He never said what to do what not to do. And this person kept it until after the war.

And my sister and I went to London for one year as au pair. And we brought it back. And that's how we lived for a while.

On the stamps?

We had no money. Money has only a short life when you don't have it and you need it. And this was the only asset that remained after the war.

Amazing.

And you never know which connection will enable you to continue.

Amazing things-- how they turn out from something that you would never expect would have such a role. You would never expect it.

And I'm sure that there are other people that have had stories that are very similar in results because of the war. I mean,



look at the people that had their property taken, sold, and now regained, unfortunately when the original owners have been dead for a long time.

And after the war, my mother-- I don't remember in which camp, but I think in the first camp, when we were in Rovio, the Swiss authority asked people that had any valuables to please surrender them. Because in the camps there was no safety. And of course it was also that they were thinking of the financial situation of giving asylum to all these people.

And after the war, they took-- I think it was like a franc a day per person for our maintenance while we were in Switzerland. I'm not sure of the amount. And they told us that they would sell part of the jewelry and surrender the rest to us.

And I thought that there was a very fair exchange for the life of six people. If we had some valuables, why not get them up. And some people thought that that was a commercial-- that was it be realistic. This country had spent a lot of money on us. Besides, what is the price of life?

Exactly.

And some of the things that have been written are for this reason. And I think they're wrong. They're wrong. Because if you escape and they save you, what is that worth? That's why I wanted to do this.

I'm very glad that you have. I'm very glad that you've raised such really fundamental and thought-provoking questions. Those are the sorts of things that we hope to learn from listening to a person tell their story like you have told.

When you came back after the war and you said you worked for a year in UNRA, and then wanted to have some distance from what you saw-- I wanted to go back and ask an identity question. Did you feel like you had a different identity yourself than from when you were a girl before 1938?

Oh yes.

How would you define that?

I'd been wounded. There is a feeling that I've had very recently. I was deprived of my youth. But more than anything, I was deprived of education. And that I will never forgive. I think that, as you grow old and you realize what you could have accomplished, and you can't because you never had the schooling. That's why designing furniture or doing embroidery is important.

Is that what you do? Is that what you have done?

I would have been an architect. I still cherish a building. I still think that there is something about permanence in things that are beyond your life that are valuable. I think we have been put on Earth to contribute, not to take away. And this is the sad part that I feel now. If somebody says, what have you accomplished in your life, all I can say is I lived. I'm not leaving a spiritual inheritance. I'm not. Probably I would have been able to accomplish something bigger. I can honestly say that I appreciate a flower, a stone, anything beautiful.

Oh, there's spirit in that.

But like any artist, not having done what you love to do is-- the time went by. And it wasn't available. That's all.

Did you feel more Jewish than before?

Yes and no. Yes, I am a ring in the chain. I represent a connection. No, I am a human being like any other human being. I'm not different. And I don't want to be different.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. And with this, this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Luisa Aghib Brightman on July 27, 2015, in West Hartford, Connecticut. Thank you again.

Thank you.