

[INAUDIBLE]. Let me go back in time a little bit.

OK.

And ask you about in Italy--

Yep.

--what the selection process was like. Do you remember any of that and how you were selected? There were a lot of people who wanted to go. And not everyone could. There was a big selection process.

I don't remember, although I was working with that Captain [? Koln, ?] who was doing that whole thing. I don't remember how the selection process went on. I know that some people didn't want to come who could have come. I just don't remember.

OK.

Don't know.

No problem. We were talking about Joe Smart, the camp director. What kind of guy was he?

He was a very--

He came into camp--

--nice guy. I liked him. I had a very nice relationship with him. He was fair-- fair. There was no reason to talk about him being fair. There was no reason for being unfair. He was doing his job. He was the camp director. But he had a big staff of people, welfare workers from the federal government and so on. Thank you.

What kind of problems did you two face in trying to get the message out to the 982 people who were there?

Well, the big problem there was work in the camp. You know, people didn't like to work. This was really the biggest problem that I remember having there is having people who would go around collecting garbage, having people who would go around delivering coal, having people work in the kitchens. And this was always a problem.

And we were getting a grant from the government. I don't know. I think it was \$18 a month for working people and \$8 a month for non-working people. I don't recall exactly, but it was a small amount. And people didn't care really. They--

Why didn't they want to work?

[LAUGHS]

There are people who don't like to work, right. Now, mind you, we were guests of the United States. If I'm a guest in somebody's house, I'm not supposed to work.

No, this was a problem. Work was a problem. There were certain people who would work all the time. And other people, you could stand on your head and you couldn't get them to work.

There were no sanctions for people who didn't work. The only sanction was you're not going to get the full allowance, whatever it is, get only \$8 a month. But I was involved in this thing quite a bit.

Was it because people had other jobs and didn't want to do menial work?

What other jobs?

In Europe before the war.

Well, sure they had other jobs before the war. Sure, they were doctors and lawyers and whatever you want to. But there are quite a number of young people who were past their college age. They didn't want to work.

Now, you know, that young people were going to high school. And they were going to the state teachers college there. And they were not supposed to work because they were going to school. But the other bunch of people, between let's say 25 and 30, quite a bit of them didn't want to work.

You had to set up the workings of the camp and set up the kitchens, the mess halls. And there was a request for a kosher kitchen as well.

Yeah.

That must have all been--

But listen, the kitchens were set up by the time we got there, right. They were all set up. The kosher kitchen wasn't set up. But this didn't take long time. They even built the mikvah there. Right. No, the kitchens-- you know, I remember we got there, and we were fed immediately.

There was a-- I remember reading about an interesting discussion over black bread and white bread. Do you remember how that happened?

Well, you see, the Europeans are not used to that white bread, white sliced bread. And they wanted to have black bread. They wanted bread which you can bite into it and not bread which will melt in your mouth. And-- you lost the light.

If you want to keep going, you can go right [INAUDIBLE].

OK. Why don't we just check the light first. We'll come back to it. It faded. I wonder if the bulb blew or if the fuse blew or--

I can try [INAUDIBLE].

Mr. Wallace. OK, let's take it from the top again on the--

All right.

--white bread and black bread issue. Tell me how that happened.

Well, as I told you, you know, Europeans are used to eating bread which you bite into it. And the white bread, you don't bite into it if it isn't toasted, right. So people weren't happy with having white bread.

But, you know, OK, the bread story is fun. But there is another part of the eating in the camp, which most of the Europeans didn't know what the heck it was all about, were the cornflakes which came in those boxes, like you have today. But those boxes were such that you open them up, they were lined with wax paper. And you pour milk into it. And nobody believed that you would eat anything this way, right. [LAUGHTER]

That's a good story.

It was the first exposure to cornflakes for most of the people. And you don't eat-- in Europe, you don't eat nothing out of a paper box. And you pour milk into the paper box.

For the kids, it was great because they got to go to the Oswego public school.

Right. The kids, I don't think the kids had much problems there. They went to school. And then they came back, and they had those recreation rooms. And there were no problems with the children.

The grownups were the problem really. They came committee where every nationality had somebody representing on the committee. And they were fighting like cats and dogs, those guys. I was the interpreter in that thing too. And--

What were they fighting about?

Oh, heck, what did they fight about? I don't remember what-- they were just fighting about nothing of great importance. They couldn't have been fighting anything of importance. There was nothing very, very important happening that they would have to fight about. Maybe how many people should be on the committee from each nationality. Whether it should be by the number of the people in the camp or which nationality, or whatever. I don't remember.

But I know that those meetings were rather fiery. I know that at one point that one of those meetings I got mad. And I walked out I said, to heck with you guys. I don't want to listen to this thing. I had to tell them this in three languages. [LAUGHTER]

So for the kids, it was good. But for the adults who were trained professionals, had jobs in Europe before the war broke out, to come over, and they didn't want to do the manual labor at the camp, it must have been difficult because they couldn't go out. They could see outside the fence where there was real freedom to do what they want. They had to be in the camp and couldn't work. It must have been difficult for the older folks, even older than you at the time.

Oh, yes. Yes. For them it may have been difficult because they didn't have anything to do. They were just hanging around. And, you know, when people hang around, they start-- they talk about things. And before you know, they start getting on each other's nerves.

We had separate recreation rooms for nationalities there. The Yugoslavs would have their recreation room. And the Germans would have their recreation room.

Did that surprise you that the individual groups stayed as separate as they did and didn't come together?

No. No, it didn't surprise me because I went through that thing in Italy in that camp in Ferramonti where we had lots of different nationalities, and they were still-- they kept together. We had fights in Ferramonti between the Yugoslavs and the Poles, or the Yugoslavs and the Germans, real fights, like barroom fights with chairs and all that stuff. There were fights in Fort Ontario too, punching people and so on.

You were so close to real freedom, yet so far. You never knew when your situation would be resolved.

True. Right. Right.

Was that the most difficult thing? The living in limbo.

I suppose so. It must have been for many people really, yes. And I may not be the right guy for this--

You are the right guy.

You will-- I'm sure that you'll get people who want to interview who felt much stronger about being in the camp than I felt. But then again, I may not have felt this way because I was busy, right. I was working. I didn't even have time to think about what am I missing, or whatever.

Was there any antisemitism in Oswego that you could feel?

Not really. I don't remember. Well, mind you, we were in contact with Jews of Oswego. And there was a number of Jewish families who were very nice to the people in the camp. There was, I think, Klein's Department Store, Mr. Klein, he came there with his daughter. And there was the Shapiros who ran the concession in the camp and charged \$0.10 to cash a check for us. There was Mr. Shapiro's son-- it's the first time I saw it, who had an Oldsmobile with an automatic drive, which was a sensation, you know. It was just the beginning of the automatic drive back in 1944.

We had a guy who worked in the administration. I don't know what his name was. He used to be the Cadillac dealer in Oswego. He stopped being a dealer because he couldn't get cars anymore. So the only thing he had he came to work in a Cadillac.

These were interesting characters, the people who worked in the administration, the people from Oswego who worked there, this guy or the chief of police or the fire chief there. And then we had a bunch of girls from Washington who worked in the camp, social workers or whatever.

Eleanor Roosevelt came to visit not long after you got there.

More or less, yeah.

Tell me about that visit.

Well, I was interpreting for her. I have pictures of it. And I have a letter from her thanking me for interpreting for her. The letter and the picture hangs in my den at home.

Well, it was interesting. She came. And she started walking around. People-- Smart was showing her things. I was next to her telling her what-- I didn't have to tell her anything. I was-- no, I started interpreting for her when she was talking to the residents. And then there was a large meeting in the big central recreation hall, where I interpreted for her in several--

What did she say to the refugees?

Don't remember. Come on, how can I remember things like this? [LAUGHTER]

I had to ask. Giggle. I can try.

There may be some records someplace what she said. Somebody may have taken it down. I don't remember what she said.

Were you impressed with her?

She was a nice woman. She was a nice lady. She came with Mrs. Morgenthau. She was a very nice lady.

Some of the refugees did get to work outside the camp.

Yeah, they were working in the canneries outside the camp.

How did that ever come about?

How did it come about? There were a number of canneries in Oswego or outside Oswego, not far away. And they were short of help. And somebody came to recruit people who wanted to work in the canneries. And then they were sending buses in every day.

These people were making, at that time, a nice amount of money. I think they were paid like \$1 an hour or something, which was quite a bit of money at that time. And I think this lasted for quite a while.

Was it difficult because there were-- did it make people angry when they could see that they were German POWs who were working in the fields and doing some other work around the area?

Well, there were POWs in the camp too. They did some work there in the camp. I don't think it made anybody angry. I don't remember though. Maybe it did. Maybe somebody will remember that they were angry with the POWs.

Do you remember when Dorothy Thompson came to do a broadcast on radio from the camp at around Christmas time?

Sure, I remember. I did a number there. They used me. And they said somebody else was doing the broadcast. There was a Yugoslav Yugoslav, not a Jew, whose name they used. But I read the thing for him for the Christmas broadcast, right.

So that's your voice on the broadcast?

It's my voice on the broadcast, right. It was an NBC. Right.

Was it kind of an emotional roller coaster at the camp for 18 months? You got there, and everybody was happy for being in the US. But then, it kind of--

For many people, yes. For many people, it was an emotional roller coaster. Many people were very unhappy at times.

And there was talk about the hunger strike in the camp. And-- what else was happening there that was-- and then when the families came to visit, this was also very emotional for the people who had family. You know, I didn't have the problem. We didn't have no family in America, so--

My brother-in-law, my sister's husband, his name was Ruchwarger. He was a medical doctor. And the list of residents was published in newspapers. And one day, a guy from Newark-- Belleville, New Jersey, an optometrist came. He says my name is [? Ruchwarig. ?] My brother-in-law was Ruchwarger. And this was [? Ruchwarig. ?] And this Ruchwarig adopted my brother-in-law, sort of like a family. And that friendship lasted for many, many years after they came.

In the winter of '44, '45 was especially harsh.

Oh, boy, was it harsh, was it high snow there. The snow, when the kids were going to school, they were going through passages which were about 6 foot high. You know, Oswego, that Lake Ontario, it's not a nice lake in winter. You know, all the weather gets right into Oswego.

Did that add to the depression of many people?

I don't know. I don't-- it didn't add to my depression. I enjoyed it, snow.

There was a suicide at the camp.

Yeah, that was the lady, Breyer or whatever, not Breyer.

[? Caroline ?] [? Bleier ?] I think so--

Yeah, something like this, right. Well, she was mentally unstable from long before. And she left two children, I think, and a husband. She walked out of the camp and took aspirins and then froze there in the river there. Yeah.

And then shortly thereafter there was the coal accident.

Yeah.

Did that kind of did play a part in the group during the--

The coal accident more than the suicide. The coal accident was very upsetting to many, many people. Here, they make us work, and look what happens.

The suicide did not, as far as I can remember, didn't make so much of an impression on the people. The accident did. And it enforced the belief of the people who didn't want to work. You see? I was smart. I didn't work.

From what I understand, [? Arpad ?] [? Bucher ?] was one of the good workers.

Yeah. Yeah. He was a working man, right.

There were rumors of freedom around Passover time 1945 and stories of people going out to buy suitcases. And it must have been difficult to try to keep the rumors down. Everybody wanted to go free.

You know yourself that in a closed society like this you have rumors all the time, right. I remember there were those rumors. But I don't know that people went out buying suitcases. Maybe they did I know I didn't go buy out-- I didn't buy any suitcases.

When FDR died in April--

Yeah.

What effect did that have?

Well, it was a shock. It was a shock for everybody, a shock. We had memorial services for him. I made a speech. Everybody else and his uncle was making speeches. And, well, it was a sad occasion.

And once again, you were thrown into what's going to happen in the future?

Right. Right.

When the Allies finally were victorious in Europe, VE-Day, describe how that happened.

Well, we heard about it. And then everybody ran into Oswego and celebrated, got drunk. Whoever wanted to get drunk went to the taverns there and so on. Well, probably this was the time when people started worrying, what's going to happen now the war is over? Now we have to go back.

So there was joy and also fear.

I would say that there was fear, yes. yes, on part of some people.

And then the Congressional hearings came up.

Uh, huh. I made \$5 on this thing here. I was interpreting at those congressional hearings. And there was a stenographer from Oswego. And she asked me to come to her house to help her transcribe things. She paid me \$5 for it. I remember that. [LAUGHS]

Change the tape.

Again? OK. Wow.