

--going on. I've been watching Shoah.

I've seen it.

You've seen it. Which is very moving. But we suspected, but didn't know-- or certainly the extent of what was going on was not known. And you look at it through your own perspective, as you say.

I saw Shoah when it first came out in two installments of 4 to 4.5 hours a piece. That's pretty powerful and pretty draining.

Yeah, it is.

The one super thing about that, it's such an interesting piece because there's not one stick of archival footage.

Yes.

And that really-- and still achieves the power.

You're born and raised in Rochester?

No, I'm a New Yorker born and raised, born in the city, born in Brooklyn, raised on Long Island. But I've lived all over the country chasing my jobs all over. I'm only in Rochester about two years now. Let me ask you about the early 1940s before you knew about Oswego. Tell me briefly what you went through. Were you running from the Nazis? Were you in concentration camps?

Well, let's see if I can keep this brief. I was born in a small town in Germany on the Baltic Sea, maybe 25,000 people. And my family was German, had been German for at least six generations. They came from the lost provinces, Silesia and Pomerania, both Prussia's, and had pretty well integrated. Probably in another generation or two, they would have been fully integrated. We lived-- my dad had a printing shop, small newspaper, and worked very hard. I think was on his way of becoming a fairly well-to-do man.

In one of the first memories that I have as a child of political events was that the Hindenburg died. We happened to be on a beach. And the cannons shot. And everybody said, what's going on? It was Hindenburg's death. And I perceived in the reaction of my parents that was not a very good thing to have happened.

Shortly after that, my dad's place of business was boycotted first. Customers were kept from coming in. And then laws were changed in Germany. And he was expropriated. We moved to Danzig in '36, which was then a free city and a very interesting place. As a matter of fact, I've been trying to do some research on the political structure of the free city because I think it was a unicameral type government and very well to do.

We moved there from one place to another as circumstances got harder. When we moved to the free city, it was essentially a trade center. Population was, I'd say, 2/3 German, 1/3 Polish. And there was a balance because everybody lived well.

Between '36 and '39, the character of the city changed dramatically as the Nazi party gained power. And on the morning of the 1st of September, we woke up, I think, it was 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning to gunfire. And that was the first day of the war.

We were not surprised. The change was in the air. And I remember walking down one of the main streets with my dad weeks before and seeing heavy trucks rumble through the streets. And flaps would open up. I'd look inside, and there were tanks on the inside. And soldierly looking people had arrived for weeks with violin cases. So when the war broke out, Danzig wasn't occupied. It had been occupied weeks before.

The Polish resistance in some places was remarkable, very heroic, particularly on an island in the middle of the river. They had established a munitions unloading place. And they had nothing. They had pop guns.

We'd go out on a hill and watch the Stukas dive in. And it was one of the last places that surrendered to the Germans. And that was September.

We had been trying to come to the States for years. The quota system was god awful, especially the German quota. And--

What were you told when you applied for a visa?

We were-- I wasn't there. This was my dad doing it. That the German quota was full for several years. And I had the feeling, listening to my father and the other friends, that difficulties were put in their way-- misspellings, commas missing, you know. It would return the document for one more pass. It was a delaying action.

My dad was able to get one visa. And he decided that the one person that should go would be my older brother, who's 11 years older. Because he was of military age, he felt he was in the most danger. So my brother went off and settled in Ohio and promptly was drafted--

In the US Army?

Oh, yeah. My dad became very concerned. He sensed things that many other people still didn't. And I remember he would go from embassy to embassy to embassy trying to get a visa for us.

And finally, one day, he came back full of hope saying that the Danish had accepted us. And indeed, there was a letter that started, [NON-ENGLISH], which if you transliterate it into German, it says, we can agree. Unfortunately, in Danish, it means we cannot agree. So that was a disappointment.

He walked into an Italian embassy not really intending to go to Italy, but was granted a visa. So November, one day, we packed up what we could in a couple of suitcases. And we left by air. We flew Lufthansa, an old Junker 99 I think it was with a corrugated washboard outside. Went to Berlin, where my grandmother lived, the rest of my family.

And from there, we took an Alitalia to Venice. And we stayed there a few days, went down to Trieste. Now, Trieste was a key location for going further because from there you could ship to Tangiers and then to the United States or to Cuba, which then was another haven.

My dad's plan was to get closer and closer and closer. So the next step was Tangiers. And he got a permit for us to go as far as that on a ship that I think left late in June of 1940. But Italy went to war in June, early June. And that cut that route off.

When you had to say goodbye to your grandmother, was that an emotional farewell? Did you ever think you would see her again?

I remember I was 10 years old. And to me, the enormity of what was happening, was going to happen, certainly wasn't evident, nor was it to them. Prejudice is one thing. But murder is another. You don't expect to be murdered ordinarily. Anything else?

So after the-- yeah.

Before he starts, just let me switch your chair so you're a little closer to the camera.

OK.

And lean.

After-- we rolling?

Yeah.

OK, good. After the Italians went to war, were you in internment camps in Italy?

My dad was sent to a camp. And my mother and I, or my mother petitioned the Italian government to be reunited with him. And the Italians had a system called Confino Libero, which is the Italian Gulag Archipelago, much modified. The locations were an undesirable-- out of the way places.

And we were permitted to go to Calabria, which is the toe part of the Italian boot. Little town, 3,000 people, of whom 700 were in the United States, Albanians. They had come over when the Ottomans occupied Albania. They were Greek Orthodox. So here were three enclaves of Greek Orthodox Albanians living in Italy, had lived there for hundreds of years. They spoke Albanian.

And as a matter of fact, the other day, I saw a movie, Yugoslav movie, called, Do You Remember Dolly Bell? And it takes place in the Albanian part of Yugoslavia. Very reminiscent situation. Great people, very simple. It's like stepping into a time machine, being transported back 300 years.

Comparatively, though, I mean certainly you had to run, your family had to run. You ran in time though.

Just in time.

And avoided any real horror, except for the family you left behind, I would assume.

That's right.

And when did you hear about any family and what was happening back in Germany?

Well, we kept getting letters and postcards. And one by one, contact was lost. The people back in Germany knew that there were disappearances, people being shipped off. And they felt their turn would come.

One of my uncles, Uncle Adolf in Cologne, I think was the first to be shipped off. We heard from his old housekeeper. And my grandmother and aunts in Berlin left. We heard from them twice more from camp and then no more. So in the absence of information, you have a mixture of feelings, both hope and despair. But the exact fate of what was happening was not known.

How did your family decide to take the gamble and get on a ship called the Henry Gibbins and come to the US in '44?

Well, that was easy. First of all, we had always tried to come to the States. Of course, in Italy, we had long run out of money. We survived by selling everything we had that was in the suitcases and borrowing money.

And after liberation in late '43, I believe, by the British Eighth Army, we moved to a little camp, a concentration camp in southern Italy called Ferramonti, and from there to Bari. And when the news came through of the transport, we never hesitated. We said yes.

Despite the uncertainty?

That was less uncertainty than staying.

You were already in liberated Italy, basically pretty safe. Is the word rescue applicable? Or saved?

No, I don't think so. It was one of many unidentified alternatives. But because of our-- desire is too weak-- drive to

come to the America, that was the first, best route. We took it.

Your parents signed a paper in Italy accepting the terms of the transport, which were that you would be in the United States for the duration of the war. After the war, you would have to be repatriated to your homelands.

Mhm.

They signed that paper.

Mhm.

Was there any confusion about it? Taken seriously? Ignored?

No, it certainly was taken seriously. But remember, my brother was in the United States Army. And we felt that that alone would lead to our staying here. And what would be the worst that could happen is that we would be taken back and then come over again.

What condition were you in physically, emotionally, by the time you boarded?

[Technical words] change it back.

Oh, OK.

I have two Cousins in England-- had. One of them is dead. A cousin in Germany went back, lived in Hamburg, until he died five years ago.

OK, what condition were you in physically, emotionally, you with a capital Y, with the rest of your family and the other refugees when you boarded the Henry Gibbins? You said you had already run out of money.

Well, physically, we had been hungry a long time. There are pictures in Life magazine of my parents and myself. I look back to it now and I say, gee, you know, I could stand some of that. But physically, we were in fairly good shape.

We were permitted to walk 1 kilometer outside the center of the village in Italy. We did that very regularly. We kept up our strength.

My parents had a very happy marriage, a very close marriage. And even though there wasn't any food, we were in good spirits.

During that two-week voyage, it wasn't exactly a cruise liner. You had some close scrapes with planes and subs. Do you remember that? Tell me about it.

Well, we left Naples after sitting around, swinging in the tide for several days. And then went, I believe, between Sardinia and Corsica to Oran. And that night, there was a raid on Oran. And protective cover was established, which crept down the portholes and breathing spaces and had kind of a choking effect.

It must have been frightening for a 14-year-old boy.

Yeah, we didn't know what was going on. To be honest, I didn't hear any shots or gunfire. And to this day, I don't know if it was a real raid or a patrol or imaginary.

There was considerable fighting among the various nationality groups. 18 countries were represented, a dozen more languages than that. The Yugoslavs hated the Germans. Poles, everybody at each other all the time. Tell me about that, especially the Germans.

On the ship?

Yeah. And it extended into the camp, I guess.

Well, on the ship, people were jammed together. There were many conflicts set up. Some of them were national. Others were human. The bunks where we slept were stacked, I believe, four deep.

And if you were in the middle, which I was as a little kid, got unpleasant sometime. I remember there was a fat lady on top of me. And her rear end came down so far, I had trouble turning my head, which I remember vividly.

Because we had been starved for such a long time, we all trooped to the mess. And as we became seasick, we still trooped to the mess just because there was food.

There were a lot of people all of a sudden after 3 and 1/2 years of hardly anyone with whom we had that in common, so it opened up a brand new world, new people, new young people, my age, people from the different, not necessarily by nationality, but by background. Like we had film directors. We had musical writers. We had physicians. We had prostitutes. We had the range of humanity. So it's a learning process of people.

Ruth Gruber taught some English classes on board. Do you remember that?

No, I don't.

OK.

We should change the tape. We're about--

OK.