

Ruth's good storyteller.

Yes, she is.

All right?

Yeah.

Describe for me what it was like to come past the Statue of Liberty that August morning in 1944.

Well, we had been at sea for many days. And it was a pretty rough passage, a lot of waves, convoy-type situation. I think the submarine warfare had pretty much calmed down at the time. But there was that concern.

And all of a sudden, they came when we were approaching the coast. And the Statue of Liberty is a dramatic sight in any event. People crowded up on deck. People prayed, sang. Most of us just stood and stared I think.

As soon as we got into the harbor, the Red Cross ship came up, pulled alongside. And between our deck and the Red Cross ship, there was perhaps 1 or 2 feet difference. And people jumped over like pirates in the olden days. The Red Cross workers who ordinarily served GIs coming back from the war were terrified. Here was this mass of unkempt humanity advancing on them.

And after the food was consumed, people started passing the goodies back, chairs, tables, back on board. And I remember the sight of the male Red Cross workers shielding the female Red Cross workers in a corner of the boat.

Next stop was one of the docks in New York for delousing. And all men went on one side and all the women on the other. And everything got sterilized by steam and everything shrank. So when we came out, nothing fit. I remember I had a little leather wallet, which became a miniature wallet with all the stuff wrinkled up. The stuff they used for spraying, for delousing, stung in some very sensitive bodies spots. And all the men were crouched over coming back.

And then we were put on a train to go to Fort Ontario. And I don't remember how long it took. It seemed like a long time.

Can you recall your emotions those first hours? I mean docked finally at the United States. This is where you had been striving to get to for all those years. And you had to run. And finally, here you are.

All I remember is mostly curiosity looking over. In Italy, I had known a few Americans. And they were gods, you know, looked up to. I remember a conversation with a Black GI in Italy. And he explained to me how the US government basically worked-- the legislative, judicial, executive bodies. And that's where I got my first training about the American process.

So when we arrived, we were docked alongside for some time. And time, I don't remember how long. But you looked down and you saw Americans en masse unloading. So the overriding feeling was curiosity and good anticipation.

Was that train ride to Oswego difficult for you? Or did you notice it was difficult for anyone who-- train rides had had a pretty terrible symbolism to a lot of folks in Europe.

Remember, most of that information came later. So to me, the train was a way to get there, wherever there was. And that, we didn't know.

Were you able to inform your brother that you were coming?

No. When we moved to Bari, I started searching for my brother because we'd lost touch with him for several years also. As a matter of fact, I didn't know he was in the army. And I walked into an American military establishment and said, I

have a brother. I think he's in the American army. Can you help me find him? And they were very kind, very courteous.

And about 10 days later, exactly 10 days later, we received a telegram from my brother. And that's how we found out where he was. And he was in England at the time.

So did he get to you in Oswego at any time?

No. He came out of the Army in, oh, gosh, must have been '45.

OK.

No, later than that, '47, '48.

The camp was in quarantine for a month.

Mhm.

And you first got to the camp, you come off the train. And you see this old army camp surrounded by a fence topped by barbed wire. What was the reaction then?

Well, we were still-- we never had doubt about the hospitality and welcome that we would receive. I was not afraid. My parents certainly weren't. The mood was happiness.

The fence was there. The barbed wire was there. But the fence was the main thing that you saw. It was a tall, cyclone fence.

I've been back to Fort Ontario fairly recently. And I've taken some pictures of the fence. That's still there. It's still a tall fence.

On the other side of the fence were the locals of Oswego, most of them curious, staring, talking to us. I remember being singled out particularly by people of Italian descent because I spoke Italian. They gave us money, not much, dimes, quarters, which were wonderful.

And throughout the war whenever things got tough and there was no food, my parents would dream about something. And one of the things they seemed to dream about a lot was mayonnaise. So a barber, an Italian barber, gave me a quarter. And I found a kid on a bicycle. And I said, could you go get us some mayonnaise? And the kid never came back. That kid owes me a jar of mayonnaise. If I ever find him. [LAUGHTER]

Do you remember when they lifted the quarantine? There was a big open house at the camp. Several thousand people from town finally came in.

What I remember is getting little blue passes. And we were told, one, that the kids would be permitted to go to school.

That was a big break for you.

Oh, yeah, that was wonderful.

How long had it been since you had been in a school room?

Well, I had gone through second grade, which would make it 8. By that time I was 14. So-- I went to school briefly in Italy, but not much.

So you were happy to get back to school?

Yeah, sure. There was also a day when the entire population was permitted to go to town, four hours. I remember the gate opening up and this Oklahoma land rush of people walking down the long street heading for town and then assaulting the stores.

Now, remember, this was still rationing time. And I remember people going into the grocery store and bargaining with the clerks for fruit, apples. And the clerks utterly bewildered, never having had anybody bargain with them.

They spent quite a bit of money in town. And then when the time came, they streamed back in, laden down with whatever they bought. It was a wonderful sight. It was funny, even then.

When you first walked into an American school, what was your reaction there? What did you think? You saw the classrooms. I think you probably took a tour of the day before school opened. Do you remember that? How important was that?

Well, I remember Ralph Faust, the principal of the school. And Ralph is one of those people who I think understood both emotionally and intellectually what the situation was, what the need was. He was not only a very good educator, but from a social point of view, I think a very great man.

He must have talked to the teachers. And the teachers at Oswego high school were a very fortunate combination of sympathetic people, especially the ladies who taught English and history. To this day, my foundation of history and language is based on what they taught. And I think of it very often.

Ms. Baker, who is long dead, was one of my heroes. And so is Miss Schulke, who taught history. There were many other teachers, very, very fine. As I mentioned you before, Paul, I keep comparing the education I got in high school with that my children got in public school. And it doesn't compare.

You refugee students did pretty well as a group.

Yeah, I think so.

You excelled. Why do you think that was?

Well, desire. I graduated I think 10th in my class. Of all the refugee children, I had the highest grades. I finished high school in a year and a half. I wanted to because to me that was the key to success in the new country. What was being taught was interesting.

Throughout the stay in Italy I was a frantic searcher for new books. I would walk literally miles and miles to find a new book to read. So reading became a necessity. It still is. So the opportunity to learn, being taught by somebody was just fantastic.

At the camp, there was a really active cultural life.

Mhm.

You created a whole world for yourselves.

Mhm.

Do you remember the plays that were on all the time--

Sure.

--things like that? Did you feel any antisemitism or anti-refugee feeling in town?

No.

Was it more difficult do you think for older folks? The young ones could go to school. And it was pretty close to a normal life, but not for your parents. Your dad couldn't work.

Well, of course, that had been a very deep concern of mine for years. My dad's living was based on, first of all, having capital to invest, and, second, being intimately familiar with the language and culture in which he did business. And they were all gone.

So I kept thinking, you know, what will my dad do? And that was a continuing worry in camp. We had no idea. Matter of fact, we didn't know where we would go when the camp opened up.

Was your father upset about having to basically sit around all day and not go to work for 18 months?

Well, remember, he'd done that for four years. It's better to sit around in the United States than sit around in southern Italy.

What do you remember of Eleanor Roosevelt's visit?

Not much. I remember she was there. I remember I stood outside to see her. We did not-- I didn't crowd to shake her hand or get her autograph.

Was there in the camp a continual resentment of you for being German and for the other German groups-- the other Germans in the group? It seems some of the others, despite the fact that you had been persecuted and victimized more than, at least as much as anyone else, it seems that I hear stories of continual resentment simply because you were German.

Oh, I think that's true. I think that existed. On the personal level, you still form friendships because you like people, or they like you. I don't know if there were any other German kids in the camp. There must have been. But I just can't remember one.

And I formed some close friendships. My best friend was a Yugoslav. And the other very good friend was a Russian. To this day I see two or maybe three people who were in camp with we, the same age.

The winter of '44, '45 was pretty rough in Oswego.

Yeah, it was.

That kind of complicated things with-- it brought on almost a group depression evidently with the suicide and the coal accident that happened. Were you aware of the dynamics of the group being a young teenager?

No. Our building, army barrack, in which we lived was directly on the lake. And the wind would howl in from Canada. Snow would pile up. And by some sadistic design, the shower room faced the lake. Being up first to go to school was a wakening up experience, until the water got hot enough.

And I remember that somebody had given us a small radio. And I listened to "Happy Hank and The Breakfast Club." That was the time to get up. And it was a walk to school, gosh, maybe a mile and a half through deep snowdrifts, taller than myself. And it was an adventure. It was great.

In December, when Truman finally agreed to let in the refugees, it must have been some heck of a party that night, huh?

Well, that I don't remember. Actually, my most anxious time started at that time because then you had to make a decision what to do, where to go. And all of a sudden, the fear that we had for so many years was right in front of us. No money, no language, where do we go? And what do we do? Here's this big country.

And where did you go? And what did you do?

Well, after walking across the Rainbow Bridge in Niagara Falls, we went to Toledo, Ohio, because the physician that had been active in my native town in Germany had moved there. He was a friend of my father's.

40 years later, you folks have all made tremendous successes of yourselves, for the most part anyway, doctors, lawyers, engineers, musicians, teachers, made a significant contribution to American society. What message does that send?

Gosh, I don't know what the message is. I think as a group, we acted out the continuation of the life that we started with.

Does it make you bitter or angry when you put it in perspective and realize that you were such a token gesture of 1,000 people and so much more could have been done?

No, I'm not bitter. I'm grateful, which is perhaps very selfish. But for us, the war ended early. We survived. We came over, and we survived here.

I know that when we did get to Toledo, my dad said, what do you want to do? And I had been encouraged by the grades I got in Oswego. And I said, I'd like to go on to college. My dad said, well, tell you what, my gift to you is that you don't have to work and give your money to me. My gift to you is that you're free to go to school. But I can't help you.

And that truly was a gift. He worked at fairly menial jobs. He worked in a shoe store. He worked in a paper factory. And to me, that was heroism.

He never regained his middle class status that he--

No.

--enjoyed in Germany?

But he worked. He was happy to bring the pay home. And he and my mother made a decent, you know, modestly furnished home and were happy.

OK. Tape change?

Yeah, we should--