

--6, and that will tell the whole story, I hope. Or in microcosm, it will tell the story. I'll be talking with you, Fred Baum, Steffi Steinberg Winters.

To search the grounds around the monument to pick up a chip of that stone and couldn't find one that I was sure was part of that. But I did snip off a piece of the barbed wire, which I have at home.

Oh, good.

And which I will keep forever.

I think what we'll do here is half the interview.

You're going to have that as the background, right?

I see your diploma--

You diploma in the background.

Oh, OK. Everybody ribs me about the disorder here.

I don't want to ruin too much of the spontaneity when we meet in Oswego. So I'll save most of the Oswego questions for up there.

Sure.

We'll just play it by ear. Are you ready?

Mm, hmm. Rolling.

OK. Why don't you first just tell me about what your life was like in Europe prior to boarding the Henry Gibbins. Were you running from the Nazis? Were you in concentration camps?

Yes. But even before that, it was a very peaceful existence in Belgium. My parents had emigrated from Poland, settled in Antwerp. And I lived there and grew up in Antwerp happy, contented youngster, leading a normal life until, I think, the invasion of Poland, which caught us during a vacation time in 1938, I believe it was.

And so my father literally in an emotional breakdown, because his parents and my mother's parents were in Poland and were caught in the vise of the German juggernaut, and I remember beginning to become aware of what that Nazi danger was all about. My parents never saw their parents again. And, of course, things became very hot politically and otherwise after that.

And it became apparent that at some point, we might have to leave our homes too, although we try to keep that in the distance of our consciousness. And of course, on May 9, 1940, when Germany invaded Belgium, France, and Luxembourg, that's when we picked up and never saw my home again until many years later when I returned on my honeymoon with my wife. So that began the Holocaust period for me in May 1940.

And you stayed on the run for quite a while?

Yes. Yes.

Tell me about that trek over the Alps.

Funny you should ask. A book was just reviewed in The New York Times, which I purchased yesterday. Can I mention

names?

Sure.

It is called *The Holocaust and the Italians*. And it is a book that describes the German occupation of Italy and the political and social and so on climate. And in it read really for the first time mention of the little village in the southern portion of France where my family and I were interned under the Italian occupied powers. It was a little corner of France that they had gotten as a bounty for having attacked France on the last days before they were to surrender to the Germans.

And with the abdication of Mussolini in September 1943, I believe it was, that occupation ceased. The Germans, we knew, would suck up the vacuum. And having prepared a route in advance, we undertook the trek to cross the Alps into Italy, having heard a false rumor that the Allies had landed in Genoa. They didn't.

But that's what we hoped to do. We would meet the Allies, and we would at last be free. And it was a harrowing trek, several days duration.

Can you imagine 1,000 people trying to worm their way up? We looked like little ants in the distance with whatever possessions they could carry, babies, pregnant women. Rabbi carried a Torah. A man threw away his crutches because he couldn't manipulate things with them. And yet this sort of had become part of our destiny at that time-- to pick up and run and seek shelter and refuge and save ourselves. And that was one of the episodes.

And what happened when you got to the crest and came down on the Italian side?

Well, we were greeted by the Italian patrols who still had not heard the total picture about Mussolini's abdication. They were still in the army. And they must have observed us for hours as we were worming our way up the mountain and helped us up.

And there was a military detachment there. Whether it was a company or smaller than that I don't know-- with barracks at the top of the mountain overseeing both the valley into France and the other side into Italy. They helped us out and gave us quarters, but then subsequently proceeded the next day when we were on our way into Italy to rob most people, who trusted them with their possessions and loaded them on the mules, proceeded to disappear with the possessions and never to be seen again.

And as soon as we arrived in Italy, my family and I were fortunate, my father had fought on the Italian front in World War I. And so his military booklet had some Italian translations of his service. And wherever he needed to show his papers, he was automatically permitted to go through as other people were herded into a camp.

And panic started all over again. Fortunately, the camp was abandoned by the Italian troops the next day. And they simply dispersed and left.

And what many of us did is we sought shelter again. Some stayed up in the mountains with the partisans and so on. And that book tells the story of the little villages. Until eventually, we got to a slightly larger village, Borgo San Dalmazzo, where we stayed for a couple of nights.

The Germans began to move up. An SS detachment came into town, spotted a line in the morning of people waiting for bread. As soon as the people in line saw the Germans-- they happened to be the Jewish refugees who had crossed the Alps-- started to run. They caught one, blurted out the story the next day, placards all over the town and surrounding villages that all the Jews subsequently changed to all foreigners recently arrived in this area must report to Gestapo headquarters, et cetera.

They caught a large number of people. They were eventually deported from what I hear. And very few, if any, returned.

We instead chose to go up into the mountains to hide. And when it was safe, we sent my brother to Turin to explore

possibilities. Eventually, worked our way into Milan, into Turin, into Florence, and eventually Rome. And this is as far as we could go and went underground with the help of the church.

That's a hell of a way for a young teenager to grow up.

Yes, it was. It's an overnight growth. You see, you become-- go from boyhood to manhood overnight, mostly because of anxiety and fear.

You must have been afraid--

Terribly.

--an awful lot.

Terribly. We knew, contrary to what the conception is, we knew what happened and what happens to Jews. We knew about the crematoria. We knew about the ovens. We knew about Auschwitz and Dachau and Auschwitz-- and some of the assorted other camps. That's what we were running from. So--

And you finally meandered your way into Italy.

Into Rome. And somehow-- we arrived in Rome just about the time when the SS found the synagogue in Rome. I don't know whether you know that part of the story. There was a bounty exacted from the Jewish community, 50 pounds of gold. We arrived on the day when that whole story was beginning to unfold and tried to find shelter.

Eventually, we made some contact with a priest by the name of Padre Benedetto, who had been very active in France, in Marseilles, with Jewish refugees-- Pierre-Marie-- Pere Marie-Benoit, now Padre Benedetto. And he provided shelter. The Vatican had apparently opened up certain institutions and asked them to take in Jews and refugees.

And we found shelter-- my mother in a convent, my father in the caretaker of a monastery-like structure, and I in a school, a boarding school run by Marist brothers. And I was in hiding there with several other Jewish people, including some, I found out later, Italian officials and English flyers and God knows who else, all dressed in the appropriate clergy outfits.

A lot of luck, a little cunning.

Most of it luck. Most of it serendipity. I remember, for example, one time playing soccer in the courtyard in Rome with the kids. And I remember one of the priests who kicked the ball a little too high. And I was perturbed by the fact that he had a pair of striped trousers rolled up. And I knew that priests don't wear that. They wear short length Black trousers.

And it wasn't until Rome was liberated that I found out who he was and why he left every day with a violin case. The violin case had no violin in it, but had a machine gun and hand grenades. And he was some sort of underground Italian soldier, who found shelter there and was continuing his activities throughout his hiding days there.

Wow. So you get to, at that point, liberated Italy.

Yeah. Rome was liberated on, I believe, D-Day plus 1, if my history serves me right. It was just after the-- or just the day before the invasion of Normandy or the day after.

And how do you hear about the possibility of going to the United States?

That was through the military government in Rome, the occupation authorities in Rome. We had heard and had seen a reprint, which I still have at home, that the United States is interested in bringing a group of refugees to be selected from among those who suffered most during the war, whatever, at this point, bring them over to the United States for the duration of the war and then to be brought back to their respective countries.

We presented ourselves because my mother was extremely ill with a thyroid condition, which necessitated an operation. There were no antibiotics in those days. There was no food. Surgical facilities must have been relatively nonexistent. And her thyroid was choking her literally.

And so our reason for presenting ourselves was so that mother could be helped. And we were selected and were brought to Fort Ontario, Oswego, New York. That's how we got here.

You all signed-- let me ask you this first. Is it accurate to say that you and the other refugees were saved or rescued? You were already in pretty good shape in liberated Italy.

Good shape. Well, that, of course, is a relative term. If you had seen us now the way we looked then, you wouldn't think we were in good shape. We were all emaciated, torn clothing. We looked like we had been through a hell of some sort.

But at that point we were free. And that was the essential ingredient. Yeah, we were OK at that point.

All of you signed the waiver form in Italy, which was pretty explicit saying at the end of the war you would have to be repatriated to your homelands.

Yes.

Despite the fact that these homelands had kicked out all the Jews--

Yes Yeah.

There was no confusion over that--

Oh, at that point, I think, in order for us, for those of us who wanted to go to America, in order for those of us to be able to do that, we would have signed almost anything. And some of us couldn't believe that the United States would stick to that. We felt it must be some sort of pro forma statement that we were signing.

And Europe was devastated at that point. Just a small portion of it was liberated. But we knew what the rest of it must look like, where the battle was yet to come. No food, no shelter, no clothing. And we decided anything must be better, even for a year or two or three-- we didn't know when the war would end-- than to stay in that hellhole.

At that point, I couldn't tolerate Europe anymore. I had survived. But I wanted no part of it.

And you are how old at this time?

About 17, I would say.

And your family somehow is still together?

Yes. My family, consisting of my parents and my brother, younger brother, 3 years younger than I am, and myself, yeah.

On the Henry Gibbins, or as you boarded, you talked a little about how you looked. Tell me more, and tell me how everybody else-- physical condition and emotional condition.

On the boat?

As you boarded. Just before--

As we boarded, well, we spent a number of days in Aversa, which is near Naples, sort of waiting either for the boat to

be readied or for us to be processed. We looked like a motley crew. We looked like we had survived some sort of hell. Our clothes, our-- we were ill fed. We looked like refugees, like the typical pictures of refugees.

Some people even were wearing some of their concentration camp uniforms, striped uniforms. I think there's a picture of some of us on the boat. And you can see in the background someone's standing there with their striped outfit.

Despite the-- I'm sorry. Go ahead.

But we were smiling, you know, on the other hand. We had survived a cataclysm. We came out relatively unscathed. Things were going to be OK from now on in, so we thought.

Despite your harrowing trek over the Alps, you were among the best off though?

Oh, yes.

In comparison to--

Oh, sure.

--some of the others.

Oh, sure. I mean when I compare my survival to some of my friends, for example, who were part of the death march in Auschwitz, mine was a picnic. Yet I can't really define it as a picnic. But in comparison to that, it was nothing. Yet I suffered my own private hell, and they did theirs. Yet the two experiences are not comparable in any way.

On board the Henry Gibbins, there was a considerable fighting among the various ethnic groups of you refugees.

Yes. Not fist fighting.

No--

Verbal--

--verbal fighting.

Right.

Despite the fact that most of you were Jews, and all of you had the common experience of fleeing the Nazi terror.

Yes. I think it had to do with residual tensions. All we had known at that point was four years worth of fighting. I mean, everybody was fighting everybody. And you become part of the fighting system, territorial imperative--

We were first of all living like rats in too small space. We were confined to the tip of that boat. And if you see pictures of it there are close to 1,000 people confined to a space that shouldn't hold more than 40 or 50. The close quarters I think provided part of the anger too, caused some of the anger because the quarters were too close. So everybody was violating everybody else's territorial imperatives.

We weren't feeling well. The sea was rough. The voyage was long. The food was-- well, most of us couldn't touch it because we couldn't eat. So conditions were not terribly favorable. Some of it continued, spilled over, to Fort Ontario too. But eventually, I think that ironed out.

During that two-week sea voyage, some pretty harrowing experiences--

Oh, yes.

--of its own, dodging planes and subs.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There were two distinct episodes. One was planes, and one was submarines.

And I remember clearly the two episodes where the convoy halted. We were part of a very large military convoy. And we were smack in the middle of it, I think strategically placed in the middle together with other boats that contained prisoners of war in order to protect us and the sick GIs, the wounded GIs that were on board. And we were surrounded with other naval vessels. It was a huge convoy coming back.

Now what happened that night of the bombers?

Well, they threw some smokescreens around the boats. And gas chambers and gas and smoke get confused in moments of panic. And people panicked. They wondered what was happening.

Everything stopped. We were asked to keep quiet. We couldn't go on board-- on top of the deck. We were confined downstairs in the sleeping quarters.

And the Germans were at us again. I mean, we had just escaped them, and here they were once again. You just-- there was no running away from them.

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Fine. How are we doing on tape time too?

Just about done.