

To get you up in Oswego because that's the real juice of the questions.

OK, any time. Any time. Of course, the camp no longer looks like what it did then.

Right. What I want to do up there is I want to walk around with you. And we'll shoot from distance. We'll put wireless mics on us.

Sure.

And we'll walk around. And I'll have you describe what was there.

Sure. This time I'm bringing a pair of my own pliers.

OK.

The only way I got a piece of that barbed wire fence is I borrowed a plier from the crew.

Oh, great.

And I asked the caretaker to turn around. It's government property. And he did. And I went and slipped a piece.

Sure. OK. Because you were fluent in a couple of languages, you played an interesting role on board. The one time they must have gotten a message on board about the bombing of Berlin, you read the news over the loudspeakers, is that right?

Yes. I assume because I spoke several languages, seven or eight at that point, English the least, that I was asked to broadcast translate over the public address system the news of the war in the various languages. And that's what I did. So they gave me a communique, which I think was written in English.

And I translated it into Yiddish, into German, into Italian, into French so that everybody would hear the good news. And I felt so great because they were applauding. I could hear them out there. And part of it, I felt, was applause for me. But it was really how well the war was going that they were applauding. But at the age of 17, it was quite a thing, quite an achievement to be asked.

There must have been mixed emotions there too, and not only pleasure at the bombing of Berlin, which means the war is going well, but people lived there who were on board.

Yes. Yes. Any good news about the war, any news that entailed the defeat of Germany and Nazism was superb news because even when that kind of news was happening during the occupation, we, of course, were never told about it. The Germans were always winning. They were always defeating the Allies. And that's what we had come to believe. We had come to despair that the war would ever end and that if it ended, it would be a disaster once again, that they would have conquered the world. Their propaganda was phenomenal.

At first, the 1,000 refugees and the 1,000 wounded soldiers from Anzio and Cassino were separated. And fraternization was frowned upon. But soon, that broke down.

It broke down. Some of the ambulatory soldiers came to the tip of the boat, and sort of stuck their heads through the doorways, and eventually stepped inside the part where we were. But it had been broken, too, because my mother became quite ill on board ship and had to be hospitalized. And so she was in the ship's hospital. And we were allowed to go visit her. So there were some severely wounded soldiers in these three bunks. And my mother was in this one and so on. So I had access to that part of the ship.

What kind of reaction did they have toward you and the other refugees?

It's so hard for me to remain objective and judge their reactions to me, when my reaction to them was one of awe as a 17-year-old. Those were the conquering heroes who had given their blood to liberate us and so on. So I can talk about my reaction. I don't think I can be objective in terms of judging theirs. We must have been some strange-looking people to them.

Was there resentment when the subs and planes came by those incidents, that that was done because there were these 900 Jews on board?

I don't think we rationalized it that way. I think we were too afraid of anything happening to even argue without logically. When it was over, it was over, and that was it. At the time it was happening, we were all scared. I was scared. I was petrified.

So after two weeks on board, you come here to your new home, what has since become your home. Take that ship through New York Harbor past the Statue of Liberty. Tell me about that.

Indescribable, indescribable. Again, there's a picture in the book Haven of all of us looking at the Statue of Liberty. Some of us didn't know what the Statue of Liberty was, the adults did, that had become the symbol of the United States. But all of us knew we were in the United States at this point. And that was the significance of passing that statue on the way to wherever we were going. I don't think anyone on that boat-- there wasn't anyone who did not have a deep emotional reaction. The voyage was coming to an end. And it signified the beginning of another trek. But that part of us was behind us.

It signified the beginning of who knows what?

Exactly. We did not know, absolutely right. We did not know. And it was freedom. But what kind of freedom, for how long, what would we have to do in return for that was all unknown. It was an unknown entity.

You stayed on board that night and looking at the--

It was awful. It was awful. One of us, I learned, subsequently, managed to be smuggled out by a sailor and did the town, Times Square. We could sort of see the lights of it. It was an indescribable experience to be sitting in that harbor with all the New York lights and all that that meant at that time. Don't forget, we came from a Europe that had been in the dark at night for four years. Here it was, life, pulsating city. And we couldn't go. It was tempting. But there was nothing we could do. But it almost didn't matter. This was the United States. And we were there. We had reached haven. We had reached safe.

The next day or so you were ferried over to Hoboken.

Yeah. And from there by train.

There was a delousing or DDT spraying there. Do you remember that?

I don't remember that one. I only remember the delousing in Aversa, in the camp over there, which was a terrible experience, everybody parading nude-- men, women the soldiers gawking, and so on. I do not remember the delousing procedure there. And I have very little memory of the train ride up to Oswego. I remember arriving there, but I don't remember much of the train ride.

It was an overnight trek. There's a chance you probably slept through most of it.

Probably right, all the tension, finally.

And at this point, how is your mother?

Weak, very emaciated looking, the typical look of the hyperthyroid patient whose hair is falling out, whose eyes are exophthalmic, whose breathing is heavy because of the throat being impinged on, but happy to be here.

And she made the trip on the train as well?

Yes, yeah.

Was that train ride difficult for some, if not you, because of all the symbolism of a train ride to you don't know where?

Yeah. Some people, apparently the older ones, must have experienced this with a great deal more anxiety than the young ones. To the young ones, this was a new adventure. To the older people, train rides, having had train rides in the past that led to catastrophe, I think they boarded that train with greater trepidation. And some of them, when they arrived in the camp, finally, and saw that the camp was encircled with a wire fence, atop of which was some barbed wire and the barracks, became acutely anxious.

In fact, some of these people's memories are that that fence was electrocuted-- it was electrically wired. Nonsense. That all of it was barbed wire-- nonsense. That it was designed to keep us in-- nonsense. The fence was there long before we got there to keep other people from coming into the camp, rather than whoever was inside the camp to go out. But we came all too ready to believe that, once again, catastrophe had hit. And this was it again. And we were tagged. And we couldn't go out. And we were quarantined, all for good reason, probably.

A dehumanizing experience, though.

Very much so. Very much so.

And even the tags you wore said, you were baggage.

Baggage. I have not been able to put my hand again on one of those. I'm sure we threw them out, most of us, because I don't know of anyone who has one of those. But apparently, yes, it said baggage. And we had become excess baggage in a very real way. People didn't want us. We were excess. We were to be disposed of. At least, that was our experience for several years during the occupation.

Of course, you didn't know it then, and most people still don't know it today, of the absolutely atrocious-- I'll opinionize hear-- the atrocious record of the United States government in terms of rescue. Most people are familiar with the turning away of the St. Louis in 1938, the fact that we knew what was going on as early as 1942 and didn't do a damn thing. Now, what does that do to you?

It makes me sad, very sad. And I've expressed myself on that topic many, many times, whenever given the opportunity. It makes me very sad that a country like the United States, the tremendous power, couldn't see fit, A, to get in into the rescue issue much earlier on a much larger scale and to, even after the war was finished, to bring more people over here than they did. We were literally a token group designed to induce others to do the major portion of rescue and sheltering.

I didn't know it at the time. I wouldn't have believed it if I had known the facts. I would not have believed that the United States knew and could have bombed some of those concentration camps into oblivion, at least the railroad leading to them, and created havoc that they refused to do so. I would not have believed it had someone told me that. This is how ready I was to believe that they could do no wrong.

And you were personal guests of President Roosevelt.

Yes.

And much has come to light since about what President Roosevelt knew, and didn't know, and what he did and didn't do.

Right, right, right.

Your feelings then and your feelings now about FDR?

Changed, changed, and very much so. I now know, for example, that Dulles was sitting in Switzerland and received firsthand reports. They probably knew every time someone was killed in a camp. They knew exactly what was happening. And all of that information-- some of it, they sat on. Some of it that trickled through into this country was stopped at this end by assorted people who did not want to stir things up by making this known to the public and so on.

On board the Henry Gibbons, you met a soldier, evidently, who took a liking to you and gave you a dime or something. And that comes to play later.

Yes.

Let me ask this question twice, here and up in Oswego.

Sure.

Tell me about that experience and follow it through for me.

I don't know why that has sort of remained with me as a very poignant memory. But indeed, one of the few possessions I had, aside from my shorts, and some socks that were torn, and a handkerchief that was more holes than substance, this soldier had given me a silver dime with a picture of Roosevelt on it. And I treasured it.

And I had it in my pocket when we arrived in Fort Ontario. And after a quick round of the ground site, the campsite, I discovered that it was a recreation hall and that there was some ping-pong tables, and paddles, and nets, but no ping-pong balls. And I was an avid player. I several times put my life in jeopardy in Turin and in Rome to go play ping-pong. I loved the game. Somebody forgot to buy some balls.

So I quickly went to the fence. This was within the first day or so, where the Oswegonians were standing on one side, gawking at whoever it was on the other side of that fence. And since I spoke English, usually, a cluster formed around me because I was able to communicate and translate. And there's this nice, young man about my age, who seemed so interested in what we were about.

And I suddenly remembered the dime and the fact that I wanted to play ping-pong. Jim, I think, was his name, if I recall correctly. I said, Jim, can you get ping-pong balls here? In Europe, they were unavailable. They made out of casein and so on. Oh, sure. And I dug into my pocket. And I pull it out, said, can you get a ball for that? And he said, oh, sure, I'll get you several. I gave him the dime.

And he hopped on his bike. And I continued to talk. And he came back a few minutes later with a brown paper bag, tossed over the fence. I picked it up, I opened it up, and there are three brand new, shiny ping-pong balls.

And I was so overwhelmed by that and by his gesture that I thanked him. Thank you very much. You are a big ass. And I noticed that the expressions on the other people watching and hearing this on the other side changed all of a sudden, from friendly smiling people to this grim, foreboding look. And I knew I must have done something wrong.

And Jim was a bright young man. He said, what do you mean? And I said, you're an ass. Tell me what you mean. I said, you know, during the war, the man that flies a plane, shoot down the enemy, he's an ass. Oh, you mean an ace. I said, yeah, an ace. It was only afterwards that I realized what I had said to this man. But that's the story of the ping-pong balls and my attempt at English. You are a big ass.

I love it. Let me skip to the end here.

Sure.

And we'll talk some about Oswego when we meet up there. But here it is now, 40-some-odd years later.

God, yes. Yes.

And the refugees, by and large, have made tremendous successes of themselves. Here you are, the director of psychological services at a big New York hospital-- businessmen, doctors, engineers, musicians. What does that say? What meaning can we take from that?

I can only supply my private meaning. And that is how many millions more if we had rescued them, if they had survived, would have contributed to society in a meaningful way, whether as bricklayers or as doctors, whether as train conductors or professors doesn't matter. But they could have become productive members of society. Instead, they're fertilizing fields somewhere.

How should history judge the Oswego experience-- as a triumph for 1,000 people or as a failure for what could have been done and was not?

I think a bit of each has to be included in that. I think a great deal more could have been done now, retrospectively looking at it. A great deal more should have been done. It was a token. Those of us who were rescued and were part of that experience are grateful. I am. But it's not enough.

Let me go back to an earlier issue. You still use the word rescue and save. You believe you were rescued and saved?

In those days, I probably would have referred to it as liberated. Had things gone on the way they were, and that's probably why I used the word saved, we would have all died. It was a matter of time and a matter of luck. Because every day, more and more people we knew were being caught, arrested on the street, their documents not accepted. And they were deported, little by little. And if time had gone on--

Even from liberated Italy?

No, no, during the occupation. During the occupation.

I mean, that you were rescued and saved from when you were taken aboard the Henry Gibbons. I don't know that I refer to it, that component, as saved. I thought you meant the liberation of Rome and my being rescued from. I'm not sure that I would refer to it as that, as saved at that point. Although my mother's life probably was.

That's almost symptomatic, though, of what the US government's role was. I mean, they saved the saved. They saved folks who were already doing OK, comparatively.

Yeah. Yeah. Now, I don't know that we, or I, would have had the opportunities that I had having come to this country. I don't know, for example, that I would have had ever studied. I could afford to study because I went into the army and was drafted from New York as soon as I got here. I got a GI Bill of Rights, which permitted me to study. I don't know whether if I had stayed in Europe I would have gone the route that I went, having come to the United States.

Let me just check over and make sure I'm not going to miss anything here that I should. Well, inasmuch as we're in New York, you are kind of legendary in the folklore up there. I mean, everybody seems to know that that fence did certainly not keep you in and that you made a trip or two down here to New York.

Several trips, right. New York was too much of a lure. And that kind of freedom was too much of an enticement for me to want to stay behind barbed wires, but mostly, because I felt convinced that, even if caught, nothing terrible would have happened to me. And so I we dared. We went. And we came to New York and had a ball. Excuse me.

Is it amazing, interesting, what? How would you characterize it that no one did take off?

Where would we go? And for how long could we have disappeared in this country without papers and so on? Besides, I think by the time we were settled in Fort Ontario, we did not feel that it was a prison. We felt that, at some point, things would change. And I don't think there was a necessity to escape it from that point of view.

On board the Henry Gibbons, Ruth Gruber and someone else also gave English lessons.

Yes.

There's a funny story about that too, about the name of the ship is a secret. We come from the North Pole or something.

I don't remember that.

Yeah, OK, that's Ruth's story. Yeah, sure.

But I can tell you about the distortion of her arrival in the Bay of Naples, which you probably know too.

Tell me.

People could swear today that they saw her land on a plane on the ship. If you looked at the ship, you'd know that no plane and not even a helicopter could land on that thing. But that was the legend. She was the angel that was deposited on that boat by a plane to come and accompany us to the United States. That wasn't at all how she arrived there. But that's the legend.

OK. I got to change the battery and the tape now.

OK.