United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Jack Bass
December 15, 2014
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PREFACE

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JACK BASS
December 15, 2014

Gail Schwartz: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Jack Bass. It is being conducted by Gail Schwartz on December 15th, 2014. And is taking place over the telephone in Minneapolis, Minnesota and at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This is track number one. What is your full name?

Jack Bass: Joachim, J-O-A-C-H-I-M, middle initial H like in Harry. Last name is Bass like a fish, B-A-S-S.

Q: What is the H stand for?

A: The H stands for Henri, or Henry.

Q: When where you born?

A: November first 1932.

Q: In the Gruber book it said November 11th. Is that a mistake?

A: That's a mistake.

Q: OK, Good. I'm glad I clarified that. And where were you born?

A: In Bern, Switzerland.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your family. Your parents' names?

A: My parents. My mom's name was Eva.

Q: And where was she from?

A: I believe that she too was born in Switzerland.

Q: Ok and your father?

A: My father's name was Morris.

Q: And where was he born?

A: I believe that he was born in Switzerland too from Polish grandparents.

Q: What kind of work did he do?

A: He was an accountant.

Q: Did you have any siblings or do you have any siblings?

A: Yes, I have my sister Gloria whose her real European name is Yolanda and Americanized is Gloria.

Q: You were born in Switzerland and how long did you stay there?

A: Well to the best of my recollection which actually isn't accurate because I was a baby about a year and a half old when they moved me to France, to Paris.

Q: How religious was your family?

A: My grandparents were religious. They were Orthodox. My grandfather was a cantor or better known as a **hazzan**.

Q: Is this on your mother's side or your father's side?

A: I believe on my mother's side.

Q: Were they Zionists? Do you know if they were at the time?

A: No, I really don't know what they were but I was brought up in a Yiddish home and my grandfather and grandmother spoke Yiddish. To me, as soon as I was able to comprehend any kind of words.

Q: Any kind of language yeah. When you were a year and a half you moved, you said.

A: Well they moved me. I never did this on my own. Not at that age unless god knows what. But they took me to Paris, France and I grew up in Paris, France to the ripe old age of about I'd say about six to six and a half.

Q: Do you have any memories of Paris at that time?

A: Well to the best of my knowledge, my mother used to tell me that I had blond curly hair and I wore a little blue sailor suit and when she took me through department stores in Paris, shopping, I used to sing and people stopped, and listening to me. And of course I would have, ordinarily I would have accepted donations but I was too young.

Q: Do you remember what you sang?

A: It was just blurring, anything that you might hear from a child. There wasn't anything specific.

Q: I see.

A: I would like to sing Frank Sinatra's Come Fly With Me, but –

Q: Why did your parents go to Paris?

A: Well my father's business carried him to Paris. I believe that he was engaged in accounting with some large firm who specialized in watchmaking in Switzerland.

Q: Whatever memories you have of Paris. You were so young, I know. Anything that stays in your mind, besides singing in the stores.

A: Well at the ripe old age of, that age when I was singing in the store, I gradually grew up to be somewhere around five and a half to six and that's when they decided to leave Paris and go to the northern part of Italy.

Q: So now we're talking like 1938, 37, 38.

A: Yes in that area.

Q: Why did they decide to do that?

A: They decided to do that because again my father's business carried him throughout Europe and Italy was one of the countries which he, that did a lot of his business. And then also there was a period that we remained in Milano, Italy and then went to Genoa, Italy. And then my grandparents, my grandmother lost her husband, my grandfather. He passed away and then it was my grandmother in cities like Genoa which my mom and my grandmother were in.

Q: Had your grandmother come with you to Paris originally?

A: Yes.

Q: So she was with you, they were with you at the time. And tell me some memories you have if you do. I know you were so young of Genoa and Milan.

A: Well Genoa as I grew to be seven and eight and so forth, I got some schooling from a public school and I remember the name of my – I had a couple of teachers and they were both sisters and their names were **Madaloni,** last name was Madaloni. And Genoa was a city which at that age, I became accustomed to their language and spoke Italian quite well. That language by the way stayed with me, even as we speak now. The language that I forgot immediately when I came to this wonderful country was French. Got rid of French but I retained Italian and German and of course the mother language which was Yiddish.
But Genoa was where I began to grow up a little bit better. It was a peaceful city with a peaceful environment and it didn't have the scars that perhaps other cities may have encountered as the dictator leader Benito Mussolini signed an accord with Hitler. And there were, there was movement through Italy, mainly the Fascist movement because Mussolini was a Fascist and there was a segment where young people like myself, were part of a segment of Fascism which was called **Balilla**, Balilla. And they gave the Balillas green short pants with a black shirt and a white sash to wear and we were known as Balillas.

Q: What does that translate to, that word?

A: Balillas, Balillas was the translation of the Fascist regime. It was like saying well not boy scouts, but it was similar. And also may I add that Balillas were not anywhere near of what the Nazi regime did with their young people. This was a separate issue. Mussolini wanted the young people of Italy at that time to pay homage to all his monuments that he had built because he was a monuments architect.

Q: When did you first start hearing of this man named Mussolini? Do you remember when you first heard about him?

A: Yeah, I believe that that was, that was as we left Milano to go to Genoa. I had heard people in other groups talk about him. And what he had done. And of course these people didn't realize that there was an accord in effect that he had entered with Hitler.

Q: Had you ever seen him?

A: No. I saw pictures of him in a film and then of course when I marched with the Balillas, I mean there was no sight of him but even then at that age, we knew of his existence.

Q: Were you proud to be in this group?

A: I didn't know what pride was. I just knew I was a kid and I put on the uniform and we sang a song in Italian which I believe was the anthem of the Fascists, the Balillas. And it went something like this. (singing in Italian) That was the theme of the Balillas.

Q: Can you sing a little more?

A: (Singing in Italian) What I said to you was, I'm very sorry but I forgot most of the words. Said that in Italian.

Q: Did you also in the late 30s ever hear of a man named Hitler? We're talking about the late 30s.

A: Yes. The late, the late 30s.

Q: You were still very young I know.

A: Yeah, it was eminent that Hitler's name was among the Jewish population and I would have to say Milano, Genoa, Bari, cities like Trieste which were way up north, almost near the Yugoslavian border, it was apparent. In the newspapers, they played it up big about this accord

that went into effect with Mussolini and Hitler. But Hitler's name unfortunately was very apparent and it surfaced quite a few times.

Q: Were your friends Jewish?

A: My friends. To be honest with you, the friends that I had in Italy were friends I never bothered to ask them what religious, rather what religion they were but I would have to say that they were Italian and if I just took a rough guess, I would have to say they were brought up in Christian and Catholic homes.

Q: Ok, so the school you went to in the late 30s.

A: In Genoa.

Q: In Genoa was like a public school.

A: It was a public school correct.

Q: Did your parents observe any Jewish holidays at that time?

A: My mom and my grandmother observed the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and of course there was always Hanukah. But of course in those times to celebrate Hanukah you really would have to close your eyes to see what was around you, but it was just a mention of the celebration. It wasn't a celebration in its entirety.

Q: It wasn't an outward, you mean an outward celebration.

A: No.

Q: Did you experience any anti-Semitism or were you aware of any anti-Semitism at that time in your life?

A: Well yes. Yes. In, in Milano there was an array of anti-Semitism from people who basically came from cities like Turino, **Padova**, Trieste. Later on, later on I found out that many of the people in Trieste were collaborators with the Germans and helped the transportation and execution eventually of many, many Jewish families.

Q: You yourself did not experience that you remember any anti-Semitic –

A: Well there were slogans around, around the walls of the city. There were swastikas.

Q: What did that mean to a young boy like you when you saw it?

A: I couldn't, I couldn't really interpret it as a sign of aggression because it was, it was new to me. I only knew that the only, the only mention and the only collaboration that I had as a young person being in the Balillas was that there was propaganda that came from German speakers and was interpreted by Italians that there was another leader that appeared in Italy. And that leader's name was Adolf Hitler.

Q: Were you an independent child? Did you do things on your own?

A: I –

Q: How would you describe yourself?

A: Well more or less, I was a, I had a few playmates in Genoa. And basically you know as the war was getting nearer and nearer I, I sort of remained on my own and was more, was more closer to my mother and my grandmother, as opposed to having friends my age which they slowly disappeared because you know the war, the war came eventually and kids disappeared as well as families.

Q: These are Jewish children and their families?

A: These were Jewish children, correct.

Q: Were you interested in – did you have any hobbies? Did you like to read or sports?

A: I liked trains, I liked railroad trains in those years. It was full of trains and railroads and I loved to go on trains. And I remember my grandparents took me on a few trains. I remember in Paris before I got to Italy. And when we got to Italy there were even more trains and I loved the sound of the locomotives. It was, it was nice.

Q: Was it the kind of thing that you could talk things over with your mother and your grandmother about changing conditions and anything that was upsetting?

A: It wasn't – my curiosity was aroused when all of a sudden I didn't see the friends that I played with.

Q: How did your parents explain that to you?

A: I'm sorry, can you repeat that.

Q: How did your parents explain that to you?

A: Well they, my mother explained to me that the war was eminent and that we were Jewish people and that we had to be on the watch and we had to be careful as to what we had to say to other people because friends or people, or adult people in Italy at those times, we were fearful that they, that their collaboration with the Germans might get us into trouble because we were Jewish.

Q: When you were eight, nine, ten years old, did she let you out on the street alone?

A: When I was eight or nine I played with some friends on the street, but always close, closer to the home.

Q: And then were you able to talk this over with your father? Was he upset about what was happening?

A: Father was gone. My father had disappeared between Italy and the other cities, between Milano and Genoa my father was gone.

Q: In other words he left your family?

A: He didn't leave. I think that he was taken away.

Q: Did you mother ever explain what happened?

A: Well my mother was without a husband and I was without a father. And even at the ripe old age of seven, eight and nine I could see that he had vanished. And of course my mother, to calm me down, told me that he went on a trip because he used to go on many trips as an accountant. So it looked like he went on another trip.

Q: I see, so you just thought he was on another business trip.

A: That's correct.

Q: Emotionally how did she handle that? Do you have any memories of that?

A: Yeah, my mom was a very emotional person and she missed him a lot and of course I could see in my mom's face the emotions and the sadness. And, of course, I was too young to realize that my father was not there and he wouldn't be there period.

Q: And your sister was born in what year?

A: I don't, presently I don't recall the actual year. But I know that my sister was born in **Potenza**, Italy which is in the southern tier of Italy. It is south of Naples, south of Rome. I believe that it might have been 1943.

Q: I see. So now you -- which city did you go to first? Genoa or Milano.

A: Milano was the first city. Went from Paris to Milano.

Q: And what year was that, you were – was that 36, 1936 or so?

A: Somewhere between 36 and 37.

Q: And then you stayed there for how long?

A: Where? In Milano?

Q: Yeah.

A: A couple of years and then –

Q: And then you went to Genoa?

A: Yeah and then went to Genoa and then we were, I believe that we were, I believe that we were apprehended.

Q: In Genoa?

A: In Genoa and I believe that from Genoa we were sent to Potenza which was a city in the southern tier of Italy. More or less on the way to Palermo, Sicily.

Q: And what were your memories of that time?

A: Well Potenza was where we were placed eventually in an internment camp which was in the vicinity of Potenza and that internment camp I believe was called **Ferramonte.** And Ferramonte –

Q: Was this about 1942 or so?

A: Yes, 41 to 42.

Q: And this is you, your mother and your –

A: And my grandmother and also I might add in 1943 when my sister was born, her first appearance in my life was in the city of Potenza and I might add that at that time, my mother I believe was taken away and put in a women's prison camp which at that time, which even now I don't recall the name.

Q: This is before Ferramonte you're talking about? Before? Is this before Ferramonte that you're talking about now?

A: Yes, this is a little while before Ferramonte. So then it was my grandmother and myself and then my mom showed up after being released from those prison camps. She showed up in camp. She showed up with my sister. Yeah, I believe that my mother, my mother might have been raped in those prison camps.

Q: Cause your father had already been gone for quite some time.

A: Yeah, correct.

Q: I understand now.

A: That's correct.

Q: All right and then the next happening, the next event, or your next –

A: And then.

Q: You were there for how long?

A: We were in Potenza, I would have to say maybe about a year or so. And one day there as an Allied bombing. Bombs began to fall and the neighboring countryside of Potenza. And along with the Allied bombing, there was also raids with the German aircraft. I believe they were called **Messerschmitts** and they were dropping explosive pens all over Potenza and all over the countryside. Because they knew that the Allies had invaded Anzio or Sicily and the German troops were retreating at the time from Anzio, right through cities like Potenza. But once the Germans cleared that area and then further north where they lost anyway, the place was full of pens that exploded the minute you picked them up off the ground.

Q: Were you, I'm a little confused. Were you in Ferramonte at the time?

A: I was in Ferramonte. Ferramonte was in Potenza.

Q: Yes, yes, ok. Let's talk about what life was like in Ferramonte, for a young boy. You're what ten years old or something like that. What was it like for you?

A: Well it was, it was obvious that it wasn't a country club but it had war prisoners that came from the German occupation of certain provinces of Italy. They held them there. They also used that as a debarkation point for men who the Germans and Italians felt were capable of going to labor camps. And they were sent from there. And the rest were refugees who resided in that camp. In that camp was Ferramonte. There were no atrocities committed in comparison to what Buchenwald and what Dachau had and the others. But it was brutal in itself simply because

through the eyes of a young person, when you see an imprisonment of people and your curiosity is aroused and you become the entrance of confusion that enters the mind of a child, like it entered me. I kept on asking my grandmother, what's going on here. Why are they hauling people away and why are there are lot of people crying here, all over the place? And why is there little food? And the answers were perhaps evasive, but they were realistic enough for me to comprehend that we are in a little bit of trouble.

Q: What were the living conditions like? Did you --

A: There were barracks there with, with nominal dormitories which you could label as barely able to sleep but I mean people didn't sleep on the floor. There were some beds, if you want to call them that. And there was food. I mean if you call, if you call potato soup for breakfast or potato soup for lunch or for dinner. I don't know. You've got to be, you've got to be, you've got to love potato soup an awful lot to take all that three times a day.

Q: Right. What was a typical day like? What did you do as a –

A: Typical day you got up and if you found some other – gesundheit, somebody just sneezed here. So anyway, you got up and you, and you found other friends your age.

Q: Where there a lot of children there?

A: Yes, there was, not a, not a huge amount but there was maybe I don't know, 40, 50 kids and you know I found some of them and they found me and you know we played together. You know I mean, I mean there wasn't enough room in Ferramonte to play but there were little bushes and little trees where we played Hide and Seek. And where we played military games, you know. I was the captain, you are the admiral you know. What do nine and ten year old kids play? You know.

Q: Did you understand any German then?

A: I understood German.

Q: At that time?

A: I understood German because I spoke Yiddish. And as you well know, Yiddish is a dialect of German.

Q: Right, ok so this went on and for how long did you stay there in Ferramonte?

A: Ferramonte we stayed, I'm going to have to say about a year or so.

Q: Was there any cultural life there? Did people get together? Did people try to teach you all?

A: No.

Q: Conduct classes or anything like that?

A: No. Whatever that we heard from the adults was, it tried to be somewhat educational and they tried to give us a message that one day this, this soon will be gone and that we would be able to see some light at the end of the tunnel and that everything would be ok, that we should not be fearful.

Q: Was there any religious life going on in Ferramonte? Apparently there was a rabbi there?

A: Well I mean there was, yeah and there was a couple of rabbis there. There were some services being conducted perhaps on a Friday night or the Saturday morning. So it was -- the Italians basically had taken the training from the Germans as to how to conduct themselves and what their criteria would be with all these people that were in this camp.
So we were given some latitude to pray.

Q: Where did this take place?

A: There was I think a makeshift synagogue in the camp, which was part of a little barracks and people were able to go there and they were able to pray. If I may interject. My mom came where, where she was, yeah ok. It was called **Casallanda** and camp **Deguya.** Those were the two camps.

Q: This is where she was before Ferramonte?

A: Yeah and then she joined us.

Q: And she came back?

A: And when the bombs started to fall in Potenza which was part of Ferramonte, my mother, my grandmother, myself and my baby sister decided to go on a hundred kilometer trek going north. The Germans were behind us. They were being forced to go north from Anzio so we had to be careful and the Italian farmers were compassionate enough to help us with some milk and with some bread and, and a little, a little human refuge so that we wouldn't be discovered.

Q: So this was just your small group or were you in a bigger group of people?

A: No small, small group. My mom

Q: Your grandmother, you and your sister. And that's it, just the four of you.

A: And that's it, the four of us.

Q: So this was your mother's idea to do this?

A: Yeah it was, it was to continue going on that hundred kilometer trek, yeah towards Naples. And we got to a point where I remember crossing a little, small little bridge over a small brook and I heard a tick, a tick like an alarm clock and my grandmother said, forget about that. I got

something else in my purse, just to make me continue walking. And we walked about a half mile and that little bridge blew up. Ok and this is all happening in front of my eyes, my mother's, my grandmother's and of course my baby sister was too young to _____.

Q: How did your mother explain to you that you were going to be leaving Ferramonte.
Do you remember how she phrased it?

A: She said we're moving out, ok and we're going to go north away, away from this area. Because the area was bombed. There were, there was no more refuge to be had and we got to move on. So, so let's stick together and let's go. So we moved.

Q: And you were not unhappy leaving the other children or anything like that?

A: Yeah to be honest with you, at that stage it wasn't a question of being happy or unhappy. Was I glad to go? Absolutely. I mean who wants to see bombs fall, whether you're ten or a hundred. But we continued on this trek and we came about three days later after we started, my mother turned around to my grandmother and said I'm going to go for some help. So she left us in an area in the woods and came back three days later with a jeep and with a couple of soldiers. I think they were either American or British and we got on that jeep and we went to Naples.

Q: Amazing woman, your mother.

A: Well were it not for her, I wouldn't be talking to you. This was a woman that had, that found strength that she didn't know herself that she had. And courage, fortitude and an extraordinary woman.

Q: Absolutely.

A: So this is why of course I believe that this where the motto of you've come a long way baby comes from.

Q: Her full name?

A: Eva.

Q: Her maiden name?

A: Eva Ebl, E-B-L maiden and then of course there was Bass.

Q: Bass, yes. So now you're with the American soldiers you said in the jeep?

A: Yeah, yeah we were, once we were in Naples, we saw Allied troops there of various nations. There were Indian soldiers there which were part of the British army. There were British soldiers there. There were American soldiers so we knew we were in the right place.

Q: Yeah and as a young boy, must have been a tremendous sense of relief.

A: Well it was – I was happy to see that my mother, as sad as her eyes were, and my grandmother, they were, they were deliriously happy that we made it to there.

Q: Absolutely. Did you ever take anything with you from early childhood that you carried with you all along during those years? Did you have any toys or anything, books or anything special that you kept with you?

A: No, no, no. There was no mementoes to take. The whole concept was, was to take yourself.

Q: Right. So now you're in Naples. Where did you live in Naples?

A: Well I mean Naples was the debarkation point. There was a, it was announced that there were two countries that were taking only a thousand refugees. Israel was opening its doors for only a thousand refugees and the United States of America was opening its doors to only a thousand

refugees. So now out of these hundreds and hundreds of thousands of refugees, roaming all over destroyed Europe, these two nations came forward and they said we'll take a thousand each. My mom decided to go and come to America. We then got, we then got on a ship. I believe it was a merchant ship that was called the Henry Higgins.

Q: Gibbons, the Henry Gibbons.

A: Gibbons.

Q: Let's move back a little bit before we get to that. How did she have the money and how did she manage? How did she feed you? Where did you stay?

A: There was no money, there was no money.

Q: Tell me what it was like before you got on the boat.

A: Yeah there was no money. We were hungry when we, when we walked and we hitchhiked and we kept on walking. I told you before that the farmers helped us, the Italian farmers.

Q: This is on the way to Naples.

A: This is on the way to Naples before we were liberated in the woods, when my mother went to get help.

Q: How did you get new clothes to fit you? I'm sure you were growing as a young boy.

A: Well whatever clothes that there were, whatever clothes that there were, that's basically what we carried. Now when you walk a hundred miles or a hundred kilometers, you're not worried about what you're going to wear.

Q: Yeah. Were there any particularly dangerous times during that trek that you made, that, besides the bridge that blew up. You talked about that. Any other --

A: We saw Americans, American planes flying over and there was a few, there were some German aircraft that were over our heads, but they weren't, they weren't shelling. They weren't doing anything because it was the open countryside and there was no, the Allied troops had not gotten there yet

Q: Did you see a lot of other refugees making this trek?

A: No.

Q: Ok and how did your mother know what direction to go in? How did she know –

A: It was north. It was easy. It was once you leave, once you leave Potenza you begin to go north. My mom knew, my mom knew that we were heading north.

Q: North ok. How long were you in Naples?

A: Oh maybe about four or five days.

Q: Oh just a short time, I see.

A: It was a port. It was –

Q: Right, right, so you were just there for a little bit and that's when you got on the Henry Gibbons.

A: Yes.

Q: Boat. And do you have any information from your mom how she was able to get on, to be part of that list with you all?

A: Well she said that we would go to America.

Q: But how was she able to be one of the lucky ones, that's what I mean?

A: Well I believe, I believe –

Q: Do you know?

A: That the American authorities. There was a woman there who was the assistant to the Secretary of Interior. Her name was Ruth Gruber.

Q: Correct, yes.

A: Ruth Gruber, she accompanied this group, ok and I believe that in the August 21st 1944 edition of Life magazine it shows a lot of refugees that eventually wound up in Oswego, but that's later on. And these people were, were, were musicians. They were doctors. They were lawyers. My mom was an entertainer and I guess she was chosen because she was an entertainer.

Q: Oh I see. So you were one of the fortunate ones to be able to get onto the boat?

A: To get on the –

Q: Do you remember getting onto the boat?

A: Yes, yes to get on the boat, yes.

Q: The actual getting on. What was it like for you, as a young boy?

A: Well I mean, I mean we get on this boat. We were sent underneath to you know to quarters where there were some bunk, bunks and there was a café, there was a self-service kitchen there where the American personnel provided food. And we had to go under a camouflage because there were still U boats in the north Atlantic. Germany had not surrendered yet.

Q: Right, it was very dangerous right.

A: Very dangerous and the Henry Gibbons chugged her way through the north Atlantic and with a group of people who by the grace of God were saved and the American personnel were very, very courteous and very, very receptive to us. And you know they gave out candy to the kids. In those years they gave out Life Savers, multi colored Life Savers and Hershey bars. And overall you know we were in the transit maybe for about ten days or so until we reached, we reached the coast and then of course we landed in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Q: Let's talk a little bit more about that voyage. How did Ruth Gruber get to know you with all the children on the boat?

A: Oh, Ruth Gruber knew everybody in that group. She introduced herself. But we knew basically who she was. We used to talk to her all the time and Ruth Gruber spoke to my mom. So there was a good line of communication between the two of them. Ruth Gruber of course did a tremendous job taking care of that group of people. And she was there to listen to everyone.

Q: What did America mean to you as a young boy of 12, cause you were what, 12 years old I think by then.

A: Well

Q: What did it mean to you, what did the United States mean to you?

A: Well you know, you know many people say that when refugees arrive in New York harbor and they see the Statue of Liberty, it's a new sign of hope and freedom. I was, I was I mean I

was there when people saw the Statue of Liberty coming in the harbor. But I was elated. I was, I was joyous that we had made it safe, even at the ripe old age of 12. Ok. I was deliriously happy that we got out of an inferno ok. And I became Americanized quickly. It didn't take me a long time to speak broken English cause I had heard American soldiers in Naples before we got on the boat. They were speaking English. And I picked up a few words and those few words composed into a vocabulary so by the time that, that we were sent to Oswego, well let me go back a minute if I may.
The ship landed in Hoboken, New Jersey and all of us were disinfected.

Q: Which meant?

A: Put on trains.

Q: How were you disinfected? What did they do?

A: Well they, you know they sprayed powder.

Q: DDT powder?

A: Yes. Because you know I mean listen we got, you know we came from an element where you know most of the kids were scratching. Most of the adults and kids were dirty and filthy. And we needed to be disinfected and they disinfected us. And then, and then we had, and we hopped on the train. We got to Hoboken, New Jersey and then we got on the train to Oswego. Rather to Niagara Falls where we crossed the rainbow bridge there. I guess as a technicality because that's what the government wanted us to do and then they took us by bus to Fort Ontario which was part of Oswego.

Q: All right. So that wasn't when you were leaving Oswego that you went to Canada and had to come back in. I know that's what happened also.

A: No. No, no, no. we crossed the rainbow bridge.

Q: In the beginning?

A: Yes. Then they took us by bus to Oswego.

Q: What did that look like in your 12 year old eyes when you arrived there? What greeted you?

A: Well when I was, when I arrived there I mean this was all new to me.

Q: I'm sure.

A: I mean this was very new to me and in, in Fort Ontario which was a former army base, used for training troops to be shipped to Europe, we were put in barracks, which were formerly occupied by these American divisions and companies and eventually shipped out to Europe. And then of course everybody lined up in the camps to get soap and towels and blankets and the American personnel were there. People who lived in Oswego and worked in this camp. And I stayed there for about a year. My mother who already was very weak from the war, and had a, had my sister who was a baby, she (sound drop out) and then, and then also she decided that she couldn't take care of me and she sent me to a foster mother in Philadelphia.

Q: We'll get to that. I want to stay up in Oswego for a little bit. What was your grandmother's health like, up there?

A: My grandmother's health was almost in the similar condition that my mother was in but not as serious. My mother had the cardiac condition that was brought on by the turmoil that she had gone through.

Q: I noticed in Ruth Gruber's book that she said your mother sang and gave performance on the boat.

A: Yeah, on the boat my mother, my mother sang. She had a guitar. I don't know where she got the guitar. But you know she sang, as well as she sang later on in New York.

Q: Oh really, we'll get to that in a minute. So anything else you want to say about the boat ride.

A: The Americans on the boat, the sailors, the cooks, the people that were there, the Americans were extremely respectful of the refugees. They were compassionate and they represented what America was, is basically all about. I mean, I mean this was no act on their part. They were who they were. So that natural compassion and mercy and respect, came and surfaced very quickly.

Q: Do you remember anybody's names, any of the Americans' names who were –

A: I should but I remember names from Oswego.

Q: When you first arrived and got off the boat and put your feet on the ground in the United States, was that a special time for you or a special time for your mother or your grandmother?

A: It was a very special time. It was a, we had an air of satisfaction and, and simply ecstatic, ecstatic about being there and being liberated from something that was awful.

Q: Did your mother know any English at that point?

A: Broken English.

Q: Broken English. So now you're up in Oswego and do you go to school?

A: There was a college up in Oswego. Oswego State Teachers College, and I believe that they opened up a wing and they took kids from our group based on their ages and they put them in various grades.

Q: And you were one of them? You did that?

A: Yeah, I was one of them.

Q: What about the New York students your age, kids your age in the town. Did you have any contact with them? The American children who lived there. Did you have any contact?

A: People of Oswego came around the camp. The camp was, there was barbed wire surrounding the entire camp. Because we had not established yet permanent residency. We were brought there on the condition that upon termination of the war we would have to go back. That was one of the conditions. So it took a little while, a little red tape sending here and there with Ruth Gruber fighting for our basic right to stay there and it was I believe that it was through a Democratic congress under Harry Truman that we were given permanent residency.

Q: But I was asking did you have contact with the New York children at all or just the refugee children, during that year and a half you were there?

A: Here's the thing they were from Oswego and they came to the fence and of course the adults brought gifts. They brought blankets and food and whatever. The people of Oswego were fantastic.

Q: And you got outside of the camp grounds to go to school?

A: Eventually, eventually. There was, it was forbidden to leave the camp under any conditions, but eventually after eight months or so, people dug a hole in the fence and people were able to go outside and nobody said boo. But as far as school, we were transported to Oswego State Teachers College.

Q: Did the other refugee children that you were with talk about their war time experience and did you share yours? Was that something that kids talk about at a time like that?

A: Kids remained, all kinds of kids that were there remained secluded with their parents. I mean, I mean this was not a picnic. Or a party. This was people, even children who were elated about being there. But it took them a little while to adjust to the fact that here are all these American people that came to the fence of Fort Ontario to greet us and to talk to us and it was that way the children were able to commute with other children of America.

Q: You were there for how long, for a year and a half?

A: Yeah I was there, I was there for a year. Then my mother sent me to a foster mother in Philadelphia and then I came back a year later back to the camp. So I got to say a little over two years.

Q: How did she arrange for that? Do you know?

A: She had, she had gotten in contact with somebody at the camp and they had made arrangements with an agency I guess to get me to that foster mother. I believe her mother, her name was Mrs. Stein and she lived in Germantown, which was a section of Philadelphia.

Q: How long had you been in Oswego at that, when you left to go to Philadelphia?

A: About a year.

Q: And then you went to Philadelphia.

A: Then I went to Philadelphia.

Q: For how long?

A: Just before, well I was in Philly for about, oh for about nine months.

Q: Ok. Was that a hard arrangement for you to be away from your mother?

A: No, no, no. not really. I got accustomed to the American way of life very quickly in Philadelphia because my foster mother took us you know to areas where we could buy some food or clothing or –

Q: Were there other children with you?

A: No. there was one boy that lived with Mrs. Stein.

Q: Another refugee child you mean?

A: Part of that group.

Q: Part of your refugee group?

A: Yes.

Q: And then she sent you back to Oswego?

A: Yeah right. Then about nine months later, almost ten months, I had my bar mitzvah in Philadelphia in a temple. She arranged that.

Q: Was your mother able to come to that?

A: No. My mother couldn't come because nobody was able to travel from the camp.

Q: How did she get special permission to have you leave?

A: Well, well there was an agency that obviously was connected with, with the American agency that brought us there to begin with which was part of the government I guess.

Q: Now you're back in Oswego and you hadn't seen your mother for all those months?

A: No, how could I. Unless there was some video that I could do.

Q: What was your bar mitzvah like?

A: Bar mitzvah was like, it was in a nice temple and I was wearing a **tallit**. And I said the prayers and then –

Q: You said you had your bar mitzvah and you said the prayers and then a little celebration I imagine.

A: Well I mean you know I was happy. I drank a little wine and –

Q: Did you go to a public school in Philadelphia?

A: Yes, it was a public school a very big school and there was a segment where the principal introduced me to the entire school where they were in the assembly. Then I got on stage and they asked me to speak a couple of languages. And I did and but I became Americanized very quickly in Philadelphia.

Q: Did the Philadelphia children accept you?

A: Yeah absolutely. They accepted me and so did the people and when I went walking with Mrs. Stein in the city of Philadelphia, I saw the American cars and the way that the American people spoke and I picked that up. And I went – she took me to a movie. And then I believe on that stage there was, I believe Count Basie and his orchestra was on that stage. Yeah that's where I became, that was the beginning of me being a jazz freak, 60 years.

Q: Did the other students ask you about your war time experience?

A: Yeah and I told them whatever I could.

Q: You were open about it?

A: Yes.

Q: But they totally accepted you?

A: Absolutely, with open arms.

Q: Wonderful and the teachers too.

A: Yes, especially the teachers.

Q: No sense of anti-Semitism or anything like that?

A: None whatsoever.

Q: Wonderful. Then you go back to your mother in Oswego and you stay for how long up there?

A: For about maybe six months or so.

Q: And you continue schooling up there I assume. In high school or --

A: I finished schooling and then finally when we left the camp, when we were given permanent residency or what is known as the green card, then we went to a different area.

Q: Where did you go?

A: Well I mean we went to New York through the benefit of a Jewish organization called the HIAS.

Q: I understand from Ruth Gruber's book that you also had to go over into Canada to come through again, across the bridge so you did –

A: To my knowledge. We crossed that bridge once.

Q: She says in her book it was at the end of the stay there to become officially into the United States you had to do that. Ok so you said HIAS helped you out? And where did you settle?

A: Well they had a building of their own, HIAS, which later on became the Public Theater. And I believe that one of the refugees that was on that ship became a producer. His name was Joe Papp.

Q: Oh my.

A: He produced Chorus Line.

Q: You're living in New York City now?

A: I'm living in New York City, working in the HIAS in a small room. My mother –

Q: Is this Manhattan?

A: Yes, yeah Manhattan on Astor Place, lower Manhattan, right across the street from Cooper Union College.

Q: And it's again the four of you, your mother, your grandmother and your sister and you?

A: Can you repeat that?

Q: It was the four of you – your mother, your grandmother, your sister and you?

A: Yes.

Q: How long did you stay in that living arrangement?

A: I'd have to say maybe about eight, nine months. And then they moved us to a, they found a tenement house for us on the lower east side of Manhattan.

Q: All right and then, just kind of tell me where you were living and your schooling.

A: Well I mean, I mean they gave us a two bedroom apartment in a tenement house. I believe it was at 132 Columbia Street. And the school was not, the school was within walking distance of that tenement house. It was junior high school 188.

Q: And you felt very American by that time?

A: Oh I was totally American.

Q: Your English was good?

A: I was speaking, I was speaking like a flow of water.

Q: And then on to high school?

A: No high school. Stopped going to school at the eighth grade cause they wanted to put in a maritime school, the Metropolitan Vocational School which was a school where they would teach you how to sail and how to make knots and how to be a sailor. And I didn't want to be, I didn't want that. And then –

Q: So what did you do?

A: Well I stopped going to school and then I was on my own more or less.

Q: Did you get a job?

A: Well I mean I was 15, 16 years old. So it wasn't likely that I had a job but I was able to sustain myself by helping – there was a guy there that had a horse and wagon and he filled it up with fruits and vegetables every day. And I used to help him sell those fruits and vegetables on the big streets in Manhattan, like on 14th street, which was a huge shopping area. And then I used to go with him to Washington Street which later on became Tribeca. And Washington Street you had the, a wholesale produce market where all the trucks came from all over the city and the hotels to get their produce. And later on, a few years later after that, that produce market moved itself to the south Bronx and then of course later on it became Tribeca which is an abbreviation for triangle between Canal.

Q: Then what did you do? Can you tell me a little bit more about what happened after that.

A: Well I sustained myself the best way I could. I went from helping this guy peddle his fruits and vegetables. Then I went on my own.

Q: Doing the same thing?

A: I began, in the summer I sold ice cream. I was 17 years old. I used to push an ice cream cart from a street called Broome, Broome Street, B-R-O-O-M-E Street. Broome Street on the lower east Side and I used to push it all the way down to Wall Street, about four miles. And I went down and I sold my ice cream and then I pushed the cart back. And then I did the same thing the next day again. And then one day I found an area where there was a hospital ship, a former ship that took care of the wounded in World War II and they converted that to taking unprivileged kids across the East River for the day's boat ride. And when I found that ship, where it was docking, I went there and I sold ice cream at 8:00 in the morning when the kids were loading on the ship. So you know I got the smarts very quickly.

Q: And then what did you?

A: You mean after I sold ice cream? In the winter.

Q: Yeah, I'm just moving along.

A: Then I sold general merchandise. I sold a ton of balloons in the streets of New York.

Q: And then?

A: Then I was, I was on my own more or less.

Q: You were still living with your mother and grandmother?

A: I was living with my mother. And then after a while I didn't live with my mother and I didn't live with my grandmother. I was on my own, period.

Q: You stayed in New York?

A: And I stayed in New York.

Q: For how long?

A: I stayed in New York until I was about my god, almost 60 years old.

Q: All right. Then what kind of work did you do as you got older?

A: I was a street vendor.

Q: And then what?

A: And then after a street vendor, after I got – later on I became a little older. I got myself a used limousine from some guy in the Bronx and I began to hustle in the streets of Manhattan, which a lot of guys were doing. Taking people to airports, connections with hotels. New York City in those years was a hustle bustle. It was impossible to starve. You had to be Helen Keller to starve.

Q: What did you do after that?

A: After that I met my first wife. Her name was Harriet Bernstein. She was, her nickname was Pat. And she lived in a good neighborhood in Queens. And I came from the Lower East Side. And I think I met her somewhere, I forgot where. But we got together. Her father objected to the fact that I came from the Lower East Side, that I didn't come from an astute area in Queens, because you know he wanted a lawyer, an accountant, an engineer, for his wife and I'm surprised at that time that he didn't give me a credit report to file to ask me what my score was. But anyway, we eloped and I got into gambling after that. That was a segment of my part, on my part because I wanted to escape whatever was bothering me as far as my mother and my grandmother, the war so, and I didn't have a father and I mean, you know nobody ever gave me a kick in the behind. Told me that whatever money I made, I lost. Shouldn't have done that. And that was part of my life. I got married to Pat. The marriage lasted five years. She gave me a beautiful son. His name was Mark, Mark Davis Bass and by the time that he was reaching 16 she got remarried. And had two kids by her other husband. And that was it.

Q: And then you went on. You stayed in New York?

A: Stayed in New York, did some traveling to Florida. Back, New York to Florida back and forth. I liked to escape the winters in New York. That's why I went to Florida.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

A: Well I got to Florida, one day a friend of mine and I. He was working as a temporary clerk

for the post office from Thanksgiving to Christmas. In those years the post office hired extra help with the volume of mail. Are you there?

Q: Yes, I'm listening.

A: Yeah go so my friend, Philly worked there for about four weeks and one day we were sitting in dairy restaurant on Delancy Street. A dairy restaurant called Ratner's which was very popular. So Philly and I, we looked at each other. There was a winter storm outside and I said what are we doing here? Let's go to Florida. So we went downstairs to the subway. We took a trip to 15th Street and Eighth Avenue. I believe, I'm sorry. It was 34th Street and Eighth Avenue where the bus terminal was. We got on a Greyhound bus and we went to Florida. We arrived on Flagler Street in Miami. We got a couple of jobs in Coral Gables and then found out about Miami Beach and then we worked there.

Q: Did you ever remarry?

A: Yeah I remarried, I remarried maybe about six years after Harriet Bernstein gave me a divorce. She flew to Mexico and she got a Mexican divorce and then I married a girl by the name of Linda, Linda Greenwald and there was no children with her. But that marriage was annulled because there was too much of a turmoil between myself and her family. You know and Linda , so that didn't work out.

Q: Do you have any other children or Mark is your only child?

A: I have a, in 1996 I married Simone Freeman and she gave me a beautiful daughter by the name of Eva. Eva Bass, we named her after my mom. Eva now, recently, turned 18 and she's going to go to college and she's the joy of my life.

Q: What about your mother? How long, she's not alive anymore?

A: My mom passed away in 1971.

Q: And your grandmother passed away when?

A: 1950.

Q: Soon after you got here. And now you're living in Georgia?

A: I'm living in Atlanta, Georgia with Simone and Eva.

Q: Wonderful. Ok, can we talk now a little bit about your thoughts and your feelings about what you went through? How do you feel about Germany?

A: I, I the country of Germany and its people presently ok, I honestly feel that you cannot hold a new generation responsible for the evil that was committed by other Germans. It was a different time and a different place that this genocide took place. And there's a lot of decent Germans in Germany. They're not all anti-Semitic. Hate is not the word, is not the solution here. Hate, hate doesn't do anything but bring more hate. And I, I mean I can, I can relate to the fact that people and relatives and children of Holocaust survivors may be bitter about what occurred. And of course that's understandable.

But in life, you only go around once and in life you cannot take hate with you no matter where you go. Whether you're 10 years old, 50 years old it's got to stop somewhere. The, the absence of hate I feel can make all of us better, better people, better human beings.

When I was married to Harriet Bernstein, her father had come to this country in 1939 or so. And his response to what Hitler did and his henchmen was to drop a hydrogen bomb on Germany. And that, that shows a great amount of ignorance. You cannot, you cannot be the way that your adversary is. The world is peace and contentment. The world has to move in a direction of peace and understanding among all people.

Would I like to see these six million Jews that were – would I like to see that this never happened. Of course. Of course. Hitler killed many more non-Jews. Gypsies, there was no stoppage to that. It was a genocide of all genocides. Am I hateful? No, no. Can I forgive? Never. We must be sure that this doesn't happen again. Without a doubt.

Q: Do you think it could happen again?

A: I believe, I believe in these last couple of years there has been signs of a reoccurrence. I mean wherever you turn around you know. In the Middle East, the unwillingness of segments like Hamas refusing to accept the fact that Israel has the right to exist. That through more than Africa so the four corners of the world including mankind has not yet learned to live in peace. We've had two major world wars in this world – World War I, World War II and for all, for all intents and purposes, if man doesn't watch himself we could have a World War Three. I hope not.

Q: Do you receive reparations?

A: I'm sorry.

Q: Do you receive reparations?

A: No. Through the Article Two, we tried two separate times to seek reparations but Article Two is telling me and my sister that since we did not prove that we were in Ferramonte, there was no such thing. But we're working now on finding the records that indeed we were in Ferramonte and this should be some documentation and some proof that we were there.
The thing that, the thing that alarms me the most is the fact that the guidelines that Germany has put forward through Article Two are things like if you were on the run during the course of this World War Two. Or if you were on the run with a fictitious name other than your own name, and if you were in places like Buchenwald and Auschwitz, then you were entitled to compensation. Ok but that's not where it stops. How do you compensate an eight, nine year old child who has seen and not participated in these kind of atrocities and was not tattooed with numbers on his wrist, ok. But saw enough of the terror and the aftermath. How do you, I mean how do you wipe out the mental scars of a child that has been subjected to this. So Germany has decided to excuse yourself and themselves from any reprosegation that most kids are definitely legally entitled to.

You cannot separate suffering. You cannot say this guy suffered more than I. Cause there's no such thing. I mean you know I can say well you know I lost my mother. I lost my grandmother and I lost my father. And it's me and my sister against the world. And who caused this. We didn't cause it. Germany in those years caused it. So where do you, where do you, where do you apply the responsibility. According to those guidelines they're off the hook. But they're not off the hook because we're going to continue to pursue this.

Q: Do you feel very American? How would you describe yourself?

A: I'm very American.

Q: What was it like to become a citizen?

A: It was, it was awesome. It was I mean, I mean.

Q: When did you become a citizen?

A: February first, February first 2013.

Q: That's when you became a citizen?

A: That's when I became a citizen.

Q: You waited?

A: I waited.

Q: Because.

A: I was under the impression that my, when my mother became a citizen here she told me that I

would become a citizen. So I just, I just let it go at that and I never followed it up. And I was functioning with my permanent alien registration card.

Q: What made you decide in 2013?

A: I decided to become an American citizen because so many years had passed and I felt that other than the fact that it would be fair to me, it would be fair to this wonderful country that I appreciate with all my heart. So therefore I became a citizen.

Q: Do you think that what you went through made you a stronger, tougher, more independent person than if you had not gone through –

A: I don't. I knew how to survive. I knew how to survive but I did it without any hate. There's no and I mean what good is it to go back to the past if the past was so ugly. The past needs to stay in the past where it belongs. The present and the future are more eventful to move forward. Otherwise, otherwise you go into an old age home and you sit on a chair 24 hours a day trying to figure out why all this happened. And you don't want to do that because then you become a vegetable. I wanted to live in America. When I, when we were in the HIAS, across the street from the HIAS there was a John Wannamaker department store and I saw my first World Series there. And I love baseball and I grew up with baseball. And _____ in baseball was to me what I loved the most.
But the people in America, they're phenomenal. This is the greatest country on the planet earth. No matter what they try to do, whether its Democrats or Republicans, Independents, whatever that they want to do, however that they want to cross lines, it's irrelevant to the fact that this is the greatest country that was ever developed.

Q: Have you gone back to Italy or –

A: No.

Q: You have not.

A: To London. On December 26. My wife is taking my daughter, my daughter's friends and me and we're all going.

Q: You're going. But you have not, have you been back at all to Europe. Since the war.

A: No.

Q: What are your thoughts about Israel?

A: Israel, Israel eventually will get one day past this terror that they've been living in all this time since 1948 when they got their independence. And Golda Meir was there and they got some very good people like that. They are survivors big time. They are surrounded by hostile countries, countries that have been at war among themselves for ages. And Israel is there for good, for permanent settlement throughout, throughout time in the future. No matter what they try to do to Israel, Israel is going to stand on their own two feet.

Q: How often do you think about your childhood experiences and what you went through? Is it something you think about all the time or less and less?

A: Not all the time. I mean. But I do remember. I mean I do remember what it was like. But I just go on forward. I mean I can't, I mean, I can't just sit down and dwell on what happened. I refuse to do that. It's not going to do any good.

Q: When did you change your name to Jack?

A: Because there's a lot of people here in Georgia that can't pronounce Georg--ee. They're chewing tobacco. So I abbreviated it to Jack.

Q: When you were growing up as a high school student and so forth, you were Joachim.

A: They called me Jake. That was later on became Jack and –

Q: Do you keep up in any way with any of the people who were in Oswego with you?

A: No.

Q: No connections.

A: No, I mean I saw a recent newsletter that my brother in law showed me about people that are engaged in voluntary work up in the museum, up in Oswego. There's a museum. I believe it's called Fair Haven.

Q: Have you been back there since you left?

A: No, no but I plan to go there one day. I, generally what I do is I put all this in the past. Life is too important for me to dwell on what happened. I have lectured at elementary schools, at high schools, at one college about my experiences in the Holocaust. Education is an important factor for the young. For the young, because they will know about what happened and there's people out there who will deny the fact that this ever happened. But those people, those people aren't even worth mentioning. I think that they should be more preoccupied as to what happened to them. And if they don't want to take the initiative to understand that this was the mother of all genocides, then you know they're living in la-la land. But that's ok. That's their problem.

Q: Were you active in the civil rights moment here since your civil rights were deprived over in Europe? And your parents?

A: When I came here and in the 1960s the civil rights movement, I turned around to my mother and I said what is this, another holocaust? What is going on? This is supposed to be a country of freedom. I mean the authors of the Constitution of the United States inserted in that magical wonderful document that all men are created equal and look what they're doing to people. Look what they're doing to the black people in Mississippi and in Alabama. How is this possible? And

yet it was very possible cause it still goes on today as we speak. And this should not be. There's no circumstance should that be. How can you ask, how can you ask an African American man or woman to put on a uniform of the United States Army or Marines or Coast Guard or whatever or Air Force and ask them to go fight for you and then they can't use your own bathroom. Are you serious about this? That, that's what bothers me.

Q: Is there, did you have any reaction to the Eichmann trial in Israel when it took place?

A: I'm glad they went there to Argentina to fetch this guy cause this guy deserved what he got. That's what I love about Israel. When they got to do something, they do it. Do you think they called up the Argentina government and say listen, listen we're coming? Could you hold this guy for us? No way. They had to go there. They had to scheme and contrive and get this guy out and they did. And when they went to Entebbe or that, that area in Africa when they were, they went to free hostages.

Q: Are you more comfortable around people who were born in Europe?

A: No.

Q: You feel just as comfortable with native born Americans?

A: Big time.

Q: Well is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered in this interview?

A: Well first of all I do want to thank you very much for the interview. I think that the Holocaust Museum is a centerpiece and a reminder of what one dark day occurred in the lifetime of people, people like yourself and other people that are associated with the Museum. I feel are very commendable and very courageous and I, myself, my salutations on you and your colleagues and I will say this. The young and the education that is available to give the young a segment of what occurred is very important because it's an historical point of view. If this ever happens again,

well the leaders of the world have the answer to that but among the leaders are the children, the young. This is, this is they're given a ball to play with and which way that ball falls only the man above.

Q: That's a very meaningful note to end this on. So let me just say that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Jack Bass.

(end)