

And I'll give you a cue. Anytime.

You were saying.

Yeah, the woman who was very religious, she wouldn't eat anything of what they were giving her unless it was green stuff, you know, that she thought was kosher enough. But generally, the people were not religious, no.

Many of them were from Germany or from Austria, and they were all assimilated. The orthodox Jews mostly that ended up in Germany and Austria came from the Polish Pale. They were religious. They were very orthodox.

My grandparents, my mother's parents came from there originally. They were orthodox. When we went to the temple, for instance, the orthodox temple. The women sit up on the balcony, and the men are down there. And I was bored stiff every time I had to go to the temple because what did you do up there? You couldn't even look down to see what was going on.

So the people in the camp they weren't holding services on the weekends?

They were only taken because they were Jewish.

Were there any Italian Jews?

In the camp, no. They had some of these women who were a kind of prostitute. I don't know. Then there was the Yugoslav people and other Jewish people that they just picked up.

Did you have any religious or spiritual point of view yourself?

Whether I did?

Yes.

I really didn't. I felt very strongly about Judaism. But I never was very religious because I didn't get it from my home. What I got, I got from my grandparents, but that was, kind of, secondhand.

What aspect did you feel strongly about then? What aspect of Judaism did you feel strongly about?

Gee, that's a difficult question to answer. I don't really know how to answer that. I feel strongly about it now too, and I'm not very religious. I cannot understand orthodoxy. It's very difficult for me to understand because it seems to me that it is like the Pope, who still clings to what happened 2,000 years ago, and the orthodox Jews do the same thing.

When people lived in a Pale, it made sense that they wouldn't drive because they went to the temple, maybe it took two minutes to get there. In those days, putting on candles maybe was considered an effort. But today, to turn on the switch of the electric light, you know, the civilization has-- progress has become so advanced that these orthodox ideas to me seem to be very old-fashioned. I can't understand them. I wouldn't fight anybody who is orthodox. I respect their right to believe what they believe. But I personally cannot see that way.

Did you have any religious point of view yourself other than orthodoxy?

I don't know. You know, when I was teaching in Napa one time, a girl asked me, Ms. Cassel, do you believe in God? And I said, I don't really know because when I think of what happened in the concentration camps when they took innocent babies and threw them against the wall to have their brains fall all over the place, I wonder how God, a God, a merciful God would permit this?

You know what she said? Ms. Cassel, but don't you understand? God wanted those innocent souls with him. And I think

this expresses my view more than anything. You know, I just wonder if there is a God, what kind of a God is he? That's what I ask myself many times because my whole family has been destroyed. For what reason? They were decent people. Millions of people were destroyed. They were decent. What for?

Many people tried to explain it by saying, well, it's not God's work. It's the people's work. God put the people in the world, and from there on, the people have to make up their own mind what they're going to do. Well, you know, you have to look at it from different points of view, I suppose.

What were your spirits like when you were in the camp? How did you keep going from one day to the next?

God knows. I was very young, and when you are very young, you have a lot of resistance. I was always very rebellious all my life. I always have been. And I suppose I didn't always have an easy time. A couple of times, for instance, when those two girls that escaped that I was talking about, they thought that I had helped them, and they were interrogating me for a long time. They couldn't prove anything.

And I very often felt that I would have liked to hit somebody, but you couldn't do that. And then when I came out of there, you know, it wasn't much better because maybe worse because the German occupation in Rome, I think was worse than the concentration camp.

And even after the liberation, life was not easy because Italy was destroyed so badly. Rome was not so badly damaged because they say that the Pope saved Rome. Well, they declared Rome open city, but it was open city to a certain extent. While the Nazis were there, they did everything that would have made the fact that it was open city a lie.

I don't know whether you ever saw the film Open City. It's very well done. If they ever do it, try to see it. I don't know whether it's still in existence. There is another movie on a book, The Secret of Santa Vittoria by Crichton. Santa Vittoria is a little village, which lives on wine production. And the Germans come. They know the Germans are coming. So what are they going to do if the Germans come? They'll take all their wine, and that's their livelihood.

So they hide the wine in underground cellars, and it's in the movie. It's very funny. You see these people standing in line and pushing-- putting on the wine from one end to the other until it gets in there. And the mayor of the city has quite a run-in with the German commander. It's very well done too. It's worthwhile seeing. Anthony Quinn is the mayor of the city, and Anna Magnani is his wife.

When you were interrogated, were you asked questions harshly, or were you beaten?

No, I wasn't beaten. They were asking me questions and questions and questions. And of course, it's been such a long time ago, I can't remember details. I only do remember that I, at one time, I was suspected of having helped those girls to escape. They might have said something to make themselves less guilty also. I don't know.

Did your rebelliousness ever take that route to try to either escape or sabotage anything?

Well, where could you escape? This place was way up on a hill on top. The train station was way down. And besides that, I don't think there were any trains running anymore. The fact that these two girls tried to escape, and they were caught right away, was very, very obvious that escaping was pretty futile. You know, unless you had a complete plan, and you had people outside who were helping you, it would have been impossible to do anything. Where would you go? What would you do? Who would hide you? Who would help you?

Did you ever have any connections with the underground?

Only in Rome. When I was in Rome after I left the camp in Rome, well, there was a lot of movement in the underground.

But not in the camp?

The manager, the director of the DELASEM, the Delegation for the Assistance of Emigrants, his name was Sorani. And he was managing a lot of these movements and things. But there wasn't much. You know, every time that somebody did something against the Nazis, for one soldier or one Nazi that you killed, they were taking 10 or more Italians. So eventually, it kind of tapered out.

There were lots of partisans in the hills who were trying to do something. But they were not very effective because they didn't have enough weapons. They didn't have enough food. In the winter, it was getting cold because the Germans had taken Rome in October. And in the winter, it can get pretty cold there too. And Rome wasn't liberated until the June of the following year.

You referred to this woman who was the main jailer. Were there other people who were in charge of you in the camp?

No, she was the woman in charge, and then there was the man, the commissar. I don't know what he would be the equivalent in America, a police inspector or something like that. He was there only during the day, but he was there during the day.

And during the day, there were also policemen who were watching the door and who were watching us when we were going outside. They were there all the time during the day. But at night, the place was closed and medically. And the woman had her servant. She had a servant. They were there.

About how many prisoners do you think there were?

Prisoners?

Mhm.

In the camp?

Yes.

There were about 60 or 65, something like that, all women.

Did you ever do anything for fun besides knitting?

I don't know. There wasn't much to be doing for fun. There was one of the Gypsies. She thought she was an opera singer, and she had opera scores. She was walking around singing all the time, and then she loved to smoke. And I don't know how she got the cigars, but she always had cigars to smoke. She must have had some connection with somebody. I don't know.

Do you have a memory of the trip to the camp? Was that difficult?

I don't know. I think I was, kind of, dulled, you know. I was sitting on this train, and next to me was this policeman. And the train that I took, I don't know how long, maybe eight hours or something like that, 10 hours.

You mentioned that all of the foreign-born Jews in Italy were told to leave by the end of March.

Yes.

When were they told that?

At the end of October when the Axis was formed. You see, when Hitler came to visit Mussolini several times, and it seems to me, it was in '38 that they formed the Axis, and then it was said that foreign Jews had to leave by March '39. And of course, it was very difficult because the Germans had no more passport. When I came to the United States, I had a Swiss stateless passport that was issued to me through the Swiss consulate, all with the help of the American Joint

Distribution Committee. Because, on my own, I would have never been able to make it.

Was the Italian Jewish community of any help to these foreign Jews?

Well, Sorani was an Italian Jew, and he was very helpful. The other guy from the men from the Jewish community was a certain Renzo Levi. Levi, we would call him here. He was a very unpleasant man. Personally, I didn't like him, but he evidently, also did a lot.

But the strange thing was that this Levi and some other people, who were in the Jewish community, they could not believe that the Nazis would do what they were going to do. And they had been warned several times by some of the people who had seen what was happening. They had been told, well, get away, tell people to go away, and they wouldn't believe it.

That was a tragic thing because that way also, the Nazis were able to get everything, all the artifacts, and the manuscripts, and the books, and everything that they had in the Jewish community in the temple. It was all taken. Nothing was left. Now, if they had believed what they were told, they could have hidden it. And they would have saved millions of dollars that way because some of those things were very precious.

I was wondering, whether you between, say, '34 and '40, were meeting any new refugees, who were coming from Middle or Eastern Europe and talking about what was happening there?

I met one woman from Yugoslavia. As a matter of fact, for some time, we shared a room because it was very difficult to get a place to stay. And she was a very difficult person. It was not the easiest thing to stay with her. She was one of those people who always finds fault. Everybody else is bad, and I'm the only one who is good and normal. So that was very difficult.

She wanted to come to the United States, and I helped her to come here. But when she came, it was just impossible. I had to give up on her because she always found fault with everything that was being done for her, whether in Italy or in the United States or wherever.

But did she talk to you about where she had come from?

She came from near Zagreb. What do they call it now? Zagreb, does it have a different name? I don't know.

I know of Zagreb. I've heard of it.

Yeah, she came from that area. And she had to flee also because she was Jewish, so she had come to Italy. And there were lots of other people there that I found out afterwards, during the German occupation, by force, you got together with these people.

In the camp, you describe that there were rooms with one or two people or 60 people. Even with 60 people, were the rooms large enough? Or did you feel terribly overcrowded?

In the camp, you mean?

Mhm.

How did I feel?

Did you feel overcrowded?

Well, it was overcrowded when you have 25 people in one room, one bed next to the other, it's naturally overcrowded. And you had to be very careful because you had so little to eat. People would steal a little piece of bread that you had. You had to be careful that somebody didn't get hold of it because that sometimes was the only thing you had to eat for

hours.

How did you manage to keep it hidden?

Well, sometimes you carried it with you if you went somewhere else.

Did you decide any punishments for those who stole?

I don't think so. Nothing was ever done to anybody. Some people just didn't get along. They kept away from each other as much as possible. There was one big room, which was the dining room, which was a big room. We had this long, long table there, and that's where we were eating our water soup.

Did you find that there were people or instances of people being especially kind or helpful?

This pianist from Vienna, she was a very nice person, very kind. For a while, for a short while, I shared a room with her where there were only two beds, and that was the best time. But the unfortunate thing was that there were lots of mice, and they ate up everything. She had a lot of music. The music was all eaten up by the mice.

I had one dress, wool dress, which was a warm dress, and the mice had eaten a big hole into it. I can remember myself one time, standing on the bed with something, I don't know what it was, trying to chase the mice away because they were just all over.

And since this was in Italy, you have that very often on hills that the villages are kind of-- the houses are built on the downward toward the-- when you looked out of the window on the roofs below, you could see big rats. Rats like as big as cats running around. It was very, very frightening because those really attacked people.

But this woman was particularly kind or helpful?

She was a very nice person, yes. One time, we found a nest of mice in the kitchen. You know, they had the things where you used to cook with fire, not the fireplace, but on like a range, and one of them the mice had made a nest, and there were these dozen little tiny little things.

Were you able to wash your clothing and your bedding yourself? Were you able to wash your own clothing and bedding to keep clean?

We didn't wash the bedding.

No.

We had to take care of our own things.

You could wash, though? You could wash your clothes?

Well, you did the best you could. There wasn't that much water. You had to find a way to do it. Usually, we had those little containers where we washed ourself in. We got some water in there, and we washed as best that we could. And we hung it up the best we could.

You said that the doctor was rather dirty. But what kind of medical care did you have for something so serious?

Oh, he came in once in a while to look, but he never did anything. He never helped anything. He never gave any medication or anything at all.

Were there any cases that needed serious attention that you know of?

Well, I don't remember. Mostly, people had emotional problems.

Mhm.

There was one woman, she was always embracing the fireplace, which there was no fire in it, because she wanted a man. She was completely hysterical.

Was anybody ever suicidal?

The only one that I know that committed suicide was that woman who was evicted. She was sent somewhere else, and we found out that she had committed suicide. What happened to the woman with the baby nobody knows because she disappeared. Nobody knows what happened to her.

Was she the only one who gave birth that you know of?

Yeah, she's the only one that I know.

OK, I'd like to stop now. It feels like a convenient time, and maybe next time, begin with the time of liberation. Unless you have anything further that you can think of right now that you want to talk about?

Well, we could even next time, before we get into the liberation situation, I could maybe mention a few things that I omitted this time from the German occupation.

Oh, fine. Or if you want to, even now.

Whatever, you know, I think you are anxious to go, aren't you? It's 4 o'clock now.

Let's take the time now whilst it's in your mind.

Well, can I put on my glasses?

Sure.

The liberation we will do next time.

Yes.

So I won't mention anything about that. One thing that I didn't say was that the Germans in Rome had their torture chamber in Rome, in Via Tasso. And whenever they picked up somebody who was suspect, they would take them there. And the people were tortured terribly.

This young man, my friend's cousin, he had been there too. He'd been taken before he was sent to the prison, and people were hearing screams in that street. It was a place that remains in the memory of everybody thinking of that time.

Did you ever talk personally with someone who had come back about their experiences?

I have not. But I have talked to people who have, and they were saying how terrible it was. They took people in there, and they tried to find out names of others. Many times, they ended up dying right there.

Can you talk more about that, of what kinds of tortures went on that you know of?

Well, I don't know. I was told that they were pulling out the nails of the fingers and the toes and physically assaulting the people to try to get them. They put them on tables and burnt parts of their body to have them confess things that maybe they didn't even know anything about.

And also, at one time, when I was hiding with a friend, she was living on the fifth floor of one of those apartment houses, and of course, the elevators didn't go. There was no electricity, and there was no water in the house. We had to go down to the street, five flights to pick up the water from the fountains in the street, and then carry them five flights up to the house.

And of course, you know, every time you wanted to wash, you had to be even careful not to use too much water. It was too difficult to get it. Sometimes these fountains in the street, there was a line of people waiting. Also, when you went to buy anything at stores, you had to stand in line for hours sometimes before you could get that little 100 gram of bread or a pound of spaghetti or whatever it was that you wanted to buy.

Yeah, I mentioned the Pope's attitude in Rome. And that maybe also belongs to later because afterwards, after the war, when I went back, in the meantime, Pope John 23rd, became Pope. And he was the most beloved Pope that ever existed. I, myself, adored the man. He was just wonderful.

One thing that was so very frustrating during the German occupation was the fact that the Allies took such a long time to arrive in Rome. They were in Anzio, for instance, already. They had landed in Anzio, which is not far from Rome. It's maybe like Napa and San Francisco. I don't know.

And it took them forever because the Germans had such a resistance that it was just incredible. It took them forever. And we've always thought we have already heard the weapons, the bombs, and everything, and still, they're not coming yet. At one time, Via Nazionale in Rome, it's a very large street, and they closed it off in two parts. And they arrested 2,000 Italians and carried them away, and nobody knows what happened to them.

This was part of that random roundup that they were doing?

Well, you see, Rome is not like most of the American cities have straight streets. There are all these little streets, and it's very easy to lock them off on each side. And the people, who are in the street, they come in with big camions and put them in, and then they drive them away.

I was talking before about the radio we were listening from London. It was called Radio Free Europe. Now, I wrote it down. I couldn't remember it. And, of course, we were not permitted to listen to it. We were always worried when I was with friends or somebody, where they had a radio, we were always sitting right near to it so that nobody would hear it.

What would happen if you got caught?

Well, the Germans would have probably sent you to Germany to a concentration camp or maybe shot you right on the place. That's what many times they did when they caught somebody that had done something. Sometimes they just shot them right then and there.

Yeah, I don't know whether that's of interest. But at that time, in Italy, there were 45,000 Jews, and 60% of them lived in Rome. So Rome, Italy, really didn't have that much of a Jewish population. So many of the Jews that were arrested and taken were refugees from other countries.

One thing also before the Hitler situation, I wanted still to go to Palestine. And one of my friends who was very wealthy deposited some money for me with a man who was going to get me there. I had been accepted at the art school in Jerusalem.

I had sent them in some samples of what I was doing, and they had accepted me. But the man disappeared with the money. And then Italy entered the war, and the whole thing went haywire again. Yeah, I think the rest will be more related to what happens when the Allies arrived.

OK.

Do you have anything more on this section that you'd like to mention?

I don't know if I covered everything that I was supposed to cover. Maybe something will come back to me yet.

I only have one question. You said that in 1939, foreign Jews in Italy were sent to jail, but you weren't sent then.

They started collecting them. You know, it wasn't all that well organized at the beginning because in Italy, there wasn't that much anti-Semitism. Hitler introduced it. Hitler brought it in, and they had to organize. And they started picking up some Jews, that maybe for one reason or another, were in their eye, and they were put in jail.

I was going to ask why you didn't get taken in that round?

I don't know why. I was just very lucky. Maybe they didn't know right away. You know, there were so many there. They probably had lists and lists, and maybe I was at the end of one of the lists. Who knows? I don't know. I never found out why I was so fortunate to not to be taken sooner.

OK, OK, let's stop.