

OH 270

Oswego County Oral History Program

Fort Ontario Refugee Project – Tape 1 of 2 #270

Interviewer: A Young Woman

Interviewees: Ruth Gruber, Jack Bass, Amanda Bass, and Manya Breur

Date Transcribed: August 2003

Length: 1 hour

Transcriber: L. Holland

Editing: J. Cook. Editorial notes are italicized

Ruth Gruber: You want me to start now . . . ?

Interviewer – woman: Yep

RG: Well, how I felt about going to Italy, was that I had been so frustrated learning what was going on in Europe. Though I didn't know everything that was going on. None of us really, on my level knew. We knew a little more than the rest of the country. But not much more. We knew and we didn't know. We believed and we didn't believe and when I read that Roosevelt had finally decided to circumvent these restrictionist's quotas and announce that the United States would take in 1,000 refugees and they would be put in this camp in Oswego, New York, under Harold *Ickes*. I thought, at last! We're really going to do something! We're going to open our arms, we are going to open America, we're going to save refugees. And I rushed to the office and I made an appointment to see *Ickes*, who was my boss and I said, "At last!" What's made Roosevelt do it? Is it a humanitarian gesture? What is it?

And he said that thousands were pouring into Italy and the army is on his back. "The army said that he has to get them out of the way, in Italy. They'll *clog* the roads, they'll get in the way of our tanks and our troops and our jeeps". And so Roosevelt asked other countries to open havens and the boys in the Treasury Department finally went to him and said, "Why don't we cut open the *Gordian* knot. Why don't we open havens in America? We're an empty country".

And Roosevelt said, "Alright. We'll take in one thousand".

It's a mystic number; you always hear – one thousand. It was his decision to take in one thousand and he said we'll put them in an old abandoned army camp and they'll be under the *War Relocation Authority*, which was running the Japanese internment camps. And therefore, they'll be under *Ickes*, because Roosevelt had just given that agency to *Ickes* along with all the others in that grab bag Interior Department. And *Ickes* said, um . . . that the President was asking other countries, you know . . . and he said, "I even suggested that it should be somewhere in the Caribbean, because if *they're* coming from Italy, they won't be able to stand the cold. But it was decided that they should go

to Oswego, New York. And I said, "Mr. Secretary, someone has to hold their hand. They'll be traumatized; they'll be terrified. Someone has to over and prepare them for America.

He said, "You're right". He said, "I'm going to send you. You're a young woman. You're Jewish, you speak German, you speak Yiddish. And I think this will mean as much to you, as it does to me".

I said, "Mr. Secretary, this is the most important assignment of my life".

Then he said, "We're going to make you a general".

I said, "Me? A general?"

He said, "Yes. We'll make you a simulated general, because if the Nazi's shoot you down as a civilian, they'll kill you as a spy. But if you're a general, they'll have to keep you alive".

So, I flew to Europe in an Air Force plane with real generals and they kept saying, "What are you doing on this plane?" And I had been warned I mustn't tell anyone, not even my family, what I was going abroad for. And I told them, I couldn't tell them. One of them said, "Are you Lily Pons?" [Laughs] She was singing for the troops then. I said, "No, no. I can't sing".

Well you know, it took a long time in those days to get anywhere, because planes could only fly for a few hours at a time, so it took days to reach Italy; where the refugees had already been selected. And I use that hideous word selective, very selectively, because Adolph *Eichmann* had begun selecting Jews in Hungary in April 1944. Now it was July 1944 and he had already selected five hundred fifty thousand Jews for death at *Auschwitz*. And we were selecting one thousand for life in America. And the man who had been sent over to select them had a breakdown. He said, "I can't go on playing God". So, they had to give the job to several other people. And the thousand were selected, carefully, because Roosevelt had wanted it to be a mixture. It wasn't to be only just Jews. It was to show the world that there were other refugees and indeed there were, besides Jews. And he wanted them selected so that they could run the camp if possible, by themselves. So, various skills had to be taken into account. And *families* had to be kept in tact and then anybody with a contagious or communicable disease was kept out. And I thought that a cold was pretty obnoxious. That was another word that they used; an obnoxious disease. And so they were selected and they were put on this army troop ship, the Henry Gibbons, with a thousand wounded soldiers from Anzio and Casino and they waited in the bay of Naples for a convoy. A huge convoy to develop; of war ships and then word came out that Roosevelt wanted to be sure that if we were attacked coming to America, cause the waters were full of submarines and the air was full of Nazi war planes, that the whole convoy was to protect our ship first, since we were bringing the only refugees the United States was actually inviting to America as a group. And they were also protecting two ships carrying Nazi prisoners of war. And all of World War II we took in these one thousand, but we took in over a hundred and seventy thousand *Axix* prisoners of war, outside the quota's

Finally, the day came when the convoy was ready to sail. I hadn't been allowed on the ship because then I would have had to get off. [Pauses and then corrects herself.] Would not be allowed to get off. So that morning, I still had diplomatic cause, so I dressed the way we dressed in those days. I wore a hat. You know a big red straw hat and white suit and white kid gloves. And they put me in a navy launch to take me out to the ship and the navy's lieutenant said, "You can't climb a Jacob's Ladder in that outfit; not with a thousand refugees and a thousand wounded soldiers". He said to one of the sailors, "Go below and take off your pants". They gave me the sailor's pants and I pulled them on over the white suit. Climbed the Jacob's Ladder and the refugees took one look and said, "Oh! It's Eleanor Roosevelt". [Laughs] Who else in the middle of the war?

Well, there they were. In their rags. Some of them still in the pajamas of prison camps and concentration camps. Many without shoes; they had their feet wrapped in newspaper. Some of the women looked as if they had been in the same housedress for months. They'd slept in them, walked in them and come on the ship in it. And after a while, and we go to know each other, I said to them, "You have to tell me what you've been through. Because America and the world doesn't know yet; what's happened. You're the first witnesses coming into America".

And some of the men said, "We can't tell you. What they did to us was so obscene and you're a woman".

I said, "Forget if you can, that I'm a woman. Remember only that through you, the world will learn at last the truth of Hitler's crimes". So they talked. And morning and night, we walked up and down that deck, and they told me stories of courage, of terror, of risking their own lives to save other lives, of running from one border to the other only to be just ahead of the Nazi armies. Of hiding in sewers and caves, of finally reaching Italy -- Why Italy? They went to Italy for two reasons. One we knew; one we didn't know. The one we knew was that every refugee wanted to reach the allied armies and we were just beginning to move up the boot of Italy. The other that we didn't know, was that refugees through their own underground, knew that Italian people would save them. That they would risk their own lives and save them. And so they all wanted to get into Italy. Some of them crossed the Alps for three days and three nights. There were twelve hundred people who fled from one village on the Riviera when Mussolini fell. Because the Italians at first controlled the Riviera section and the Maritimes, and they learned when Mussolini fell that the Nazi's were coming right in and of course they would have been destroyed. So, twelve hundred climbed the Alps. People, who had been crippled at *Bergen* and Dachau and *Belsen* and somehow had managed to escape, took their crutches and walked. Women who were nursing babies told me that they nursed their babies; and when their milk ran out, the babies suckled blood. There was a woman in the last stages of labor. She gave birth to a baby that first night in the Alps; carried the baby and they continued walking for three days and three nights, until they reached what they hoped was safety.

The Italian side of the Alps and the Italian villages. Only to have the Nazi's right on their heels. And 500 were immediately rounded up and sent to Auschwitz. And the others were hidden out. Some went with the partisans, some hid in monasteries and convents, in peasant's home and of that group that was left, we had about a hundred, I think, on our ship. We had quite a few who had made that trip. And each one had a story; each one. I had learned not only about the anti-Semitism that I knew existed in Poland and in the Ukraine. In Yugoslavia, the Ustaše were terrible. Many of our people lost their families in the Yugoslav concentration camps and certainly I had never heard of them until then. But what I didn't know was how brutal the Vichy-French were. And that every single Jew that was sent to Auschwitz had to go through the Vichy – French police.

So, all of these things, you know, were new and I was writing in all down. And I would say to some of them, "Do you mind if I write this? Cause you know, I write in long, short-long hand".

And some of them said, "Mind? You have to write it down. The world must know. What do you as a young American know about what happened to us? How can you understand what happened to us? You must write in down".

And some of them would begin to cry and here the tears would fall on my notebooks. But I would go on listening because I felt that every word was so important. And this was what was happening on the ship. The language we used was mostly German. Since most of them spoke German or Yiddish. Some spoke English. But many didn't speak any of those languages and I felt it was a babble. And how could I reach them? And then I thought, maybe if I teach them English? So, I asked the bosun if he would put up a blackboard. And they put it up over the hatch and I thought that a few people would come. Hundreds came! And I began by saying, "How do you feel?" The first banal thing, but it's the first thing that comes to your mind. And I wrote it on the blackboard and some of them who knew English said, "Fine". So I wrote, I feel fine. And that became our catechism. The poor people would be leaning over the rail; they'd be so seasick and they'd be saying to each other, "How do you feel? I feel fine". [Laughs] And then one day when we were having one of our English classes, one of the um . . . mates came to tell them when they reach New York they must not tell what port they sailed from and the name of the ship is secret. So again, I wrote on the blackboard. We came from the North Pole. Where else would we come from? And the name of the ship is secret. To this day [Laughs as she remembers] many of them think that the name of the Henry Gibbons is Secret. And that became another part of the catechism. We'd walk up and down on this crowded deck repeating, how do you feel? In all dialects. I feel fine. The name of the ship, you know, is Secret. We came from the North Pole. But it was a very emotional trip. We had an air raid alarm. We had a submarine alarm and I often wondered, what do you do when you're facing death? Because when thirty planes flew over us, I was sharing a cabin with two nurses and one of them said, "I've been through this so often, that if they're gonna get us, they'll get me

while I'm sleeping just as well as if I am awake". So, she wouldn't get out of bed. She'd lay there in her little brief underwear and her bra and just slept and the other one said, "If they torpedo us, we're finished". And in the next cabin, the nurse was writing her will.

And I said, "What do you take right before you think you're going to die? Do you take your passport; that's ridiculous. Do you take your camera? Useless. Do you take your notebooks?" Because by then my notebooks were so precious to me. And I realized that the only thing you take is yourself and the people you want to save. So I rushed downstairs and down the steps of the ship. And there were the refugees lying absolutely still. They'd been through so much, through so many bombings, so many raids, that this was just one more step in all the raids. And even the babies were still. Then I went back up and went to where the wounded soldiers were and they were panic stricken. They too, had come through so much and they were lying there with legs cut off or in casts and their arms cut off and their heads bandaged and they kept saying, "We survived Anzio; we survived Casino. We survived the worst battles and now we're going to drown". But we didn't drown. And we came through it. And um . . . then I realized that we had to do something for those soldiers. So I got all our artists. We had wonderful singers, musicians; we had beautiful young women. Some had been nightclub singers and I asked them if they would entertain the soldiers. Well, they were thrilled. So we put on a big show. And we went to the soldiers because they were separated. The soldiers were not allowed to fraternize with the refugees. But we took them over; the captain allowed it and we had a loud speaker and we had the run of the ship then and to see those soldiers with these girls singing songs like, "You Are My Sunshine" and "Sorrento" and we had a famous opera singer from Zagreb singing *Figaro* and some of these boys had never heard of *Figaro* and they kept whistling and shouting.

And we had a singer named Eva Bass, who could imitate all kinds of instruments. Trumpet and saxophone and mandolin. She was an Edith Piaf type. She had really come up off the streets and she had two children and she was pregnant with her third. She had walked with those two children for ninety kilometers through Nazi lines to reach the Allies in *Bari*. And she sang and the soldiers just went wild! That voice singing those songs.

And then we reached New York Harbor and as we sailed past the mythic mother, the Statue of Liberty, one of the rabbis's asked me if he could say a prayer and I said of course. So, we made a little space for him on that crowded deck and he bent down and he kissed the deck. And then he said, "Now that we have reached the land of freedom, we must never believe the lies the Nazi's tell about us; that wherever we go, we bring evil. It is not true. Wherever we go, we bring the blessings of the Torah and we bring truth and now that we are here, we must speak with one voice, with one heart, and we must be filled not with hatred, but with love". Then we went by train . . .

Interviewer: (Faintly in the background she asks) Where did the refugees sleep on their first night in America?

RG: They stayed on the ship overnight and in the morning . . . It was the era of DDT. And everybody would get DDT'd. And everything was put through not only this white powder, which we now know is so dangerous, but then you know, even in army planes we would be DDT'd before we were allowed out of a plane. But they were all DDT'd there and then they were separated on the dock and their clothes were all taken off them and put through a . . . they called it a gas chamber. It was disinfestations. And their poor clothes were ruined finally. So what little they had was destroyed. Anything of leather just was absolutely wrecked. And many things became holes and then they were taken to Hoboken. In army ships, harbor boats and from Hoboken, we went to the camp. We had a press conference in Hoboken that was wild, because the press was dying to see the first refugees the United States was saving. And this was now August 3rd, 1944. So we already knew quite a lot about what was happening. And the press wanted to hear their stories. So I chose ten of them and typed up their case histories, so the press knew what to ask them. And then we got into the trains and the train went overnight to Oswego. And when we go to Oswego, they were as stunned as I was, to find that they were going to be put into a camp behind a fence and barbwire. And some of the men turned on me. And by that time, they were calling me Mother Ruth and some of them were eighty.

And they said, "But how could you? How could you bring us to a camp with barbwire? And I tried to tell them that all army camps in America had fences and barbed wire. But it was very hard. Then some of the others said to me, "Don't let them upset you. It's all right. We feel secure this way".

And I realized that a fence has very different psychological meanings. For some it was a reminder of everything that they had escaped from. To others, it meant security because the enemy was outside. And they lived in the camp for eighteen months. They were not even allowed to leave Oswego. Even Syracuse, thirty miles away, was out of bounds. They could get a pass for *six hours* to go to Oswego, even though the camp was part of Oswego but the best thing that happened was that the schools opened their doors to our children. And some of the children had never been to schools. Some of them . . . now it was '44, some of them had left Germany in '33 and have never been in school. Some of them hadn't been in school in six years. They were so hungry for education. That when they were able to go to the Elementary School, the Junior High, the High School, the ultimately the College, they brought this hunger for education into the schools and changed the whole climate in the schools and in the town. The principal of *High School*, who is still a dear friend of mine, Ralph Faust, a wonderful human being, (pause) felt that this was a great unique

experiment in American history and he wanted all his students in Oswego to benefit from this new group coming in. And the truth is, that they turned into wonderful human beings, because of what that high school did for them.

Well, they were there for eighteen months and they were in limbo. The United States government could never decide whether they were in America or not in America. We had, I think, 23 children born. I think the only place in the world where children born on part of American soil were not yet considered American citizens. You could have a baby in a freighter in the South China Sea and it was an American. But if you had a baby as *Manya Breuer* did . . . *Manya* was our first bride. *Manya* was gorgeous! And her husband was gorgeous. It looked like a Hollywood movie. He looked like a swashbuckling buccaneer and *Manya* was this tall, [] blonde. She had been in five concentration camps and had been kicked in the back by a Nazi soldier and was now getting married. And, of course, she didn't have anything to wear, so I called my mother in Brooklyn and I said, "Come right up! And bring up one of my dresses that I left there. A cocktail dress and some pearls and a veil because she has to have a veil". So, my mother crocheted a beautiful white silk veil in the train and came to the camp and gave *Manya* away outdoors. You know, under the sun, overlooking Lake Ontario. It was a beautiful wedding. And the Oswego Palladium Times wrote it up as if it were a Junior League wedding. They said the bride wore a gown of lace and silk. A veil of Venetian lace and my mother said, "What kind of Venetian lace! I finished crocheting it just as I got to Oswego!" [Laughs] Well, *Manya* gave birth to one of our first babies born in the camp. And the lawyers in Washington couldn't decide whether that baby was an American citizen. And this went on for eighteen months. The battle went on. And you know, the war ended in Europe; in the Far East. But the war in Washington, among the bureaucracies was at white heat. The State Department said every one of them had signed a paper that they would return to Europe when the war was over. That was how Roosevelt circumvented the quotas.

The Justice Department said, "They have to go back". They had no status. Nazi prisoners of war had status. They were enemy aliens. But these refugees, guests of President Roosevelt, had no status. They were on a planet somewhere, swimming somewhere up in space.

And the Interior Department kept saying that, "How can a country of 137 million, which was all we had then, not take in one thousand refugees?"

Finally, President Truman, who was becoming aware of the DP problem, the displaced persons problem in Europe, decided to overrule the bureaucracies. He had sent Earl Harrison to Germany, to the DP camps to look into the problem of the refugees who were now filling these former concentration camps, which became DP camps. And Truman had asked Ernest Bevens and Clement Atlee, who had just been elected to the New Labor Government, to allow 100,000 DP'S to enter Palestine. How could he ask them to take in a hundred thousand and the United States

couldn't take in one thousand? So, he decided he would make them the first DP's to enter the United States. And on Christmas, as a present, he made this wonderful speech and I can still see him you know, [laughing] because he would rehearse his speeches all the time. I can see him making that speech. He said, "We were so aware of what was happening to the survivors of this terrible tragedy in Europe. And the United States would take in 3,900 a month, because that was inside the quotas. Because you know the quotas were carved in stone. The holy quotas. And the first of those 3,900 would be the 1,000 refugees at Oswego. So, they were allowed to go by bus to Buffalo. They crossed the Rainbow Bridge, and they went to Canada. They shook the hand of the American consul, because in those days, you couldn't enter America without leaving it. So they left and they went to Canada and then they came back and they applied for citizenship. And seventy communities across the country opened their doors to them. Found them housing, got their children into the schools, helped them find jobs, gave them free loans.

Most of them of course, wanted to come to New York. I'd meet some people in the subway and I'd say "Hey! I thought you were living in Pittsburgh".

And they'd say, "Oh, we couldn't live in the provinces".

And those who came to New York, just couldn't find housing. Almost all of them, save for a few who had relatives who took them in right away, all of them went to the highest shelter which was the former Astor Library; the Astor landmark building, down on Astor place. And they were wonderfully treated. All the private *agencies* were really wonderful. Even when they were in the camp, because the Jewish agencies all came. The Catholic agency – Cardinal Spellman was very much involved with the Catholics. The protestant agencies were involved. The Quakers, the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox. So, when they came to New York, and again, all the agencies helped us to take care of them, and some of them stayed in that highest shelter for six months. They had ping-pong tables for the children, they had kosher kitchens, and they had a synagogue in that shelter. And then they found apartments for them and it was very, very rough finding them. Most of them were sent to tenements, cold-water flats; they walked up five or six floors. But they were in New York, or they were in Milwaukee. They were in Detroit or someplace in Minneapolis. They were all over the country and they were determined to make it here. And because they were survivors and because they had come through so much trauma, I think they had such a will to accept everything that America had to give them. And in turn, they contributed their unique gifts to America. The success stories of these thousand, I think are unprecedented in America. I don't know of another refugee group of one thousand that has done what this group has done.

One of them is considered, I think, to be one of the greatest radiologists in America, if not in the country or the world. He helped develop the CAT scan. Now he's working on this nuclear magnetic device, where they will detect our illnesses without invading our bodies.

One of them is one of the father's of the Polaris missile; the minute-man missile. Now he's turned his back on all these instruments of death and he has created . . . he has worked and is finding places that are willing to try it out and try to out very successfully; a coal *slurry* process. A process where coal is refined so it flows like latex. Right in our oil burners.

One of them, Adam Munz, who was a seventeen year old in the camp, a great ping-pong player. So handsome; all of the girls were in love with him, Adam is now head of Psychological Services at St. Luke's Hospital, in New York City. Adam was one of those who climbed the Alps, helping carry babies and helping old people.

One of them is a beautician. Because ORT, one of the organizations for rehabilitations and training, came and trained them. Men who had been department store owners and Zagreb in Budapest. [Lapse in time] they were willing to become carpenters and furniture repairers and upholsterers. And ORT trained this beautiful blonde, whose name was Edith Semjen – we all called her the blonde bombshell. Her picture was in Life Magazine made her look like a cross between Greta Garbo and Ingrid Bergman in "For Whom the Bell Tolls". She got hundreds of marriage proposals from soldiers and officers! Well, Edith learned to become a beautician in the camp and is today a very successful hairdresser with hands of gold. She owns, I think, the most successful beauty parlor in the Upper West Side of New York. She had eighteen employees and when she got tired of that, she gave all her equipment to the prisoners on Riker's Island. She said, "America gave me a chance for a new life, I want to give those prisoners a chance at a new life". I could go on . . . all across the country.

There's Eva Bass who had this incredible voice and she had at least two children. And Eva would go to Greenwich Village and sing with her guitar and hundreds of people would come and listen to her, because it was the kind of voice that you never forgot once you heard it. Walter Greenberg, who was our last Bar Mitzvah boy in the camp, who had come through very traumatic experiences for a thirteen year old. It was rough to be a child in the camp when they came to America. Walter is now a filmmaker and documentary maker and Moric Kamhi who was saved by an Italian sergeant, is now an actor, a playwright. He works in the New York City Department of Human Resource Administration. *They're* incredible people who show what Americans can do when they bring in refugees and show what they want to give to America. There's a love for America that's simply marvelous. Jack Bass, Eva's son, said to me one night, "I love America more than anything in my life". He has a fleet of limousines. He said, "When strangers come in from out of town, [Ruth's remarks are cut off, as side 1 of tape runs out.]

[Side 2 of tape. Ruth Gruber]

There were some that didn't make it. *There* were even some who committed suicide. But that would have happened in any group of a thousand. But by and large, I think that this is a unique story in American history.

Interviewer: If you had to pick one memory; one story about the experience in Oswego, what would that be?

RG: Well, I would have to say the Bass family. I loved Eva so, and every time that I would go back to the camp from Washington, because I was always going back and forth, I would go to visit her talk with her. And find out the incredible things in her past. So, I think of that little family. Um . . . there were others who had just . . . you know they lived in these barracks. All they had was what the GI's had. Though there were rumors that were started in Oswego, were by and the large the people were really marvelous to them. But there were some who were good anti-Semites who said, "Oh, every one of those refugees has a refrigerator and a sofa and a bathroom". And the truth was that all they had was a table and a bed and a chair and a place to hang some clothes. They had very little clothes. And yet, some of them turned those rooms into miniatures of what they had had in the countries that they came from. Visitors would be coming to the camp all the time. When Eleanor Roosevelt came, the people went wild! They all went out picking flowers and everybody handed her the flowers and they handed her things that they had saved in all these years of trekking and running and they wanted her to have it. And then they put on a performance for her, with the same kind of singers and entertainers that had performed on the ship. And she wrote in her column, "My Day" that this was one of the most beautiful days in her life. And then she spoke to them and most of them didn't understand one word that she was saying, but they understood her meaning. And the waves of love just washed over that auditorium, to her and back. And she felt it. And she became their friend. They would write her letters all the time. She would send the letters to me. She tried to, she was really the one who got the college open so that our young people who were already of college age, could go to the college. She was wonderful. [This closes Ruth Gruber's interview]

[Interview with Jack Bass, eleven year old refugee in 1944]

Interviewer: How old were you when you entered the camp? What do you remember about the trip over here? What were your first impressions? Were you angry?

Jack Bass: Well, I was just a little bit over eleven when I got to the camp. Um . . . I think I was too young to be angry. And I was certainly glad. I think even at that age, I was able to cope and handle the fact that I was taken from something that may have made me angry and *into* something that did not. I think that the thing that made me more comfortable than anything else in the camp at first was the people themselves. The American people. The American *personnel* and the Oswego habitants who welcomed us; who came to the surrounding fence of the camp itself. I think that no one could have said it better than the people themselves. I don't think that President Roosevelt if he had come there, could have done a better job. I think the looks of the people, the feelings of the people and the expressions of the people of Oswego basically told it all.

Interviewer: Do you remember any specific incidents?

JB: The incidents weren't that important. The impact of the landing and the arrival at the camp took preference in my eyes, as opposed to any individual incident. This was just an overwhelming, emotional experience for an eleven year old boy to have to go through. To be taken from a situation where there was total darkness, sirens and bombs and soldiers, to all of a sudden you see people smiling at you. [Laughs] Well, what does one think, even at eleven.

Interviewer: What was your day-to-day life like?

JB: My day-to-day life was basically being involved and getting to know what the American people were like. Because my only confrontation with American people up to that point, was the mingling with the American soldiers in Europe and on the ship, on the way here. Uh, on the ship I liked the idea of the existence of chewing gum and the way it was given to me. And on the other side, prior to coming in here, I think that the average GI Joe was a very warm kind of guy, a guy that you could take to, the kind of guy that would pick up a stray dog or stray cat. In this case, it was a stray eleven year old kid.

Interviewer: Do you remember before you got to Italy? Can you tell me what you remember about leaving with your mother and sister?

JB: Um, I can go back as far as a little town, a little place about a hundred miles south of Naples. A place called Osw. . . [Excuses himself] A place called Potenza, Italy. Okay. Now, we spent a considerable amount of time in Potenza, Italy. And, um, upon the Anzio invasion – the retreat of the German army came to be. We, my mom, myself and my grandmother went into our own retreat and we started hiking towards the North, which was in this case towards Naples. At one stage of that, we were left in the woods by my mother to wait for help. The thing that overwhelmed me at that point, the thing that I remember the best about all that, was the total, total giving by the Italian peasants. *In that countryside.* There was nothing that they would not do for us. They sheltered us, they gave us their food, their blankets and their roof. People of a city origin, Naples origin. Just the Italian farmer himself. I think that I would have to say that basically they are responsible for my being here and talking to you.

Interviewer – speaking now to Jack Bass's younger sister, Jolanda. *Much background noise*] Do you have any memories, because you were so young then?

Jolanda Bass: *You're right, I was very young.*

Interviewer: Then what would you say is your earliest memory?

Jolanda Bass: Well, the earliest I can remember is about when I was three or four, I remember being in an apartment, in a three floor walk up. It was a very old tenement and um . . . I can remember feeling that I was very new and strange to this place that we were. Even though at the time I was too young to understand why. I knew that it was a big change. I felt it. And I remember a lot of struggles going on, because it was a very old building and my mother was very weak from her experiences during the war. It was very difficult for her to climb the stairs, three floors up to our apartment. And um . . . I remember the language being Yiddish. And I remember hearing English around me. I remember that as a struggle, trying to start the process of becoming an American.

Interviewer: Jack at that time what language did you speak?

Jolanda Bass: I was able at that time to speak French, Italian, German and um . . . Yiddish. Being Jewish, my grandparents constantly spoke Yiddish. But my mom spoke to me in French and in Italian. So, I remember that and a little bit of German.

Interviewer: What problems *that you heard* as children and actually being survivors in your own right.

JB: Go ahead, you're the woman. You go first.

Jolanda Bass: Well, uh, I guess the main problem I can remember as a young child was feeling completely isolated. Feeling like I didn't have any family outside of my mother, my brother and myself. Feeling that there was a whole world out there and somehow, something seemed to be missing; in my world. And I remember everything being very serious and very uh . . . there didn't seem to be a lot of relaxation around the house. There wasn't a sense of a, you know, taking life as it comes, one day at a time. There was always a sense of something's going to happen. You know, something's going to happen. And I don't know how I remember that, I just do.

Interviewer asks Jack: Did you feel that way, too?

JB: Well, I was a little older than my sister, I uh . . . I believed that after we arrived in New York and we wound up in this tenement house. I remember an experience. There was a large attended *Yeshiva*, a religious Orthodox school, about a couple of blocks from this tenements where we were placed and two members of that congregation came to speak to my mother about the possibility about enrolling me in that school. And we were on the third floor at the time and that particular tenement house, like all the other tenement houses, had fire escapes. Well, needless to say, when these two guys came in and I took *one* look at these two guys and I said to myself, "No way," I mean I just couldn't. I was Jewish and I was very proud to be Jewish, but I didn't think that that was for me. So, I ran down a fire escape. I went into an empty lot and I went to play softball, and I disappeared for a day and a half. And I came back, like a dirty cat, and my mother and I agreed that I should go to Hebrew School after American public school. And then I became extremely Americanized. The lower east side, which of course was a Mecca for immigrants, also had a lot of kids who probably were as lost as I was. Except that they came from a different element. So, somewhere along the line, we found each other. And um . . . the baseball games and the softball games in the school and the gangs and the music followed afterwards. And I became a survivor. I took to the streets. I learned things in the street that probably no university in the world could teach me. I don't think there's a course for survival. I think that there are still people today, people who have all kinds of degrees and if one day they found themselves in a position where those degrees didn't do them any good, they just wouldn't be able to survive. So, I'm sort of glad that I was forced into being a survivor, because it stuck with me.

Interviewer: So, tell me about what you remember about your mother's voice. Everyone always talks about her singing. Her voice and . . .

JB: I remember being in Paris when I was a little boy, very little, maybe about 3. And my mother put a blue sailor's suit on me. I had blonde curly hair and I was singing and people were watching me. And my mother used to sing to me. My Momma had a nice voice, the kind of voice that you would probably learn to love. And I didn't hear that voice again throughout the war. I didn't think that she had any reason to sing. But my mother was multi-talented.

Interviewer: Do you remember your mother's singing in Oswego?

JB: To be honest with you, I didn't recall her. She may have played the guitar once or twice but she was pretty physically worn out from the war. But I heard recordings of her voice. I think my sister uh . . . heard her sing more in this country than I did.

Interviewer: Jolanda, tell us about that.

Jolanda Bass: Well, that's the one bright spot in my memory. And that's my mother's music and her outlet and in her way, her heritage because she would sing in all the different languages. She had been in many different countries before and during *and after* the war. So she sang . . . she did Swiss yodeling, she sang in Italian, she sang in French, she sang in German, she sang in Yiddish. And she was very proud when she could sing in English. And it was the one thing that I could rely on, to determine whether or not she was doing okay. She was in a good mood when she was singing; which she did quite often. And she would go to *Greenwich* Village, which is in lower Manhattan, and she would go there on Sunday afternoons with people half her age. Folksingers. And that was in the late fifties, early sixties. She would entertain mobs of people who refused to leave and made her continue on and on. And it would really exhaust her, because as I've said before, she was very physically exhausted already upon her arrival to this country. And yet the music gave her energy and I think that the music provided her with happiness.

Interviewer: Jack, do you remember the trek to the Nazi zone.

JB: We were in a place called, if I remember correctly, we were in a place called Ferramonti, which was a displaced person's camp, run by the Italians under German supervision. I remember going from there to Bari, Italy. And then, um . . . coming here. I did not experience any atrocities.

Interviewer: They say your mother walked. Your mother walked with the two of you . . .

JB: Okay. You're talking about the walk on Potenza to Naples. Well, we were alone. We were in the woods. We had help from the farmers, as I've mentioned before. We were scarred from the war but we were alive. That part of Europe at that time, did not endure the experiences that people endured, for example, in places like Dachau. Uh, it was bad enough. But it was the better of two evils. [This concludes the Bass family interview.]

[Interviewer now speaking with Manya Hartmeyer Breuer] Manya, tell me about your experiences before your rescue. Tell me about yourself. How old were you, if you were a teenager or whatever . . .

Manya Breuer: Okay. I was born in Berlin, Germany. From Polish parents. And um, I . . . we lived there until Hitler came to power. And um . . . and when it started to become very dangerous for us, my parents were desperate to get out of Germany, which was a very difficult task at the time. I remember that they tried to get visas, also throughout South American countries, even China. I remember that my father had in his passport, visas to *Shanghai*, to Paraguay, to *Uruguay* and other countries. Which, uh, we were not allowed to go to. We were not allowed to leave, but we could get the visas. And, um, one day it became very, very difficult for my parents, so my father started to break us up to stay in Germany. We left, I believe it was 1936, to go to Poland. So being as the situation was in Berlin in 1936, I was very young and all that I remember was that my mother and us children, left Berlin to go to Poland.

It was near the border, somewhere in Kattowitz. I remember that. My father tried to join us, and it became extremely difficult. In fact, we had to somehow go back over the border to Poland, because it was very difficult to leave Germany. My father tried to join us. I don't know the reason or what happened. All we knew was that it was impossible for my mother and us children to stay at that city in Kattowitz. So, my father tried to somehow get together with us. And we did get together. But we had to leave Poland, go back to Germany, join my father and in the meantime it was after 1936 and we got affidavits from America, from my uncle David, my father's uncle, to come to the United States. However, the quotas at that time was filled, which meant that there was no quota issued to anybody and somehow my father got us together again and because he was trying to get us to the United States and in the meantime, we were issued an affidavit at the American Embassy to go to the United States. However, the quota was filled. We were standing, I remember

the times when we were standing *in front of* the American Consul ant and it was hundreds and hundreds of people day and night lined up; not even bothering to go home, to wait for their line, for their turn to receive an affidavit. A quota to actually be able to enter the United States. But we were not that lucky. We were not issued a visa because the quota was filled.

And my parents in desperation, in the meantime, so as time went on, the year was 1938, I remember that. 1938. [Kinstienoff?] The year a young Jewish boy shot a German official on the consul ant and as a reprisal, Hitler rounded up all the foreign Jews, males, which in this case was Polish Jews who were from Czechoslovakia, Romania and Hungary.

And for some reason, he chose to deport them all out of the city of Berlin. And through some miracle, my father escaped this. My mother was hiding him. And they came into the apartment looking for my father. She had hid him in the bedroom and they came in and they could not find him. That day when the action was over, my father was very, very disturbed and upset that they would do a reprisal on us. So, he went off to the policed department the next day to let them know that he is ready to be deported. And my mother would not part from him so she accompanied him to the police station with my father and us children. We were decided that as a family, we'd not separate, even if they killed us. We didn't know what happened to our uncles, my father's brothers, my mother's brothers, our cousins, our uncles. Our family that was very large and all the men were gone from one night to the other. We didn't even know where. All we knew was they were bringing our people to Poland. On a *border* somewhere in *Spungeon*, a camp which we found out later. As I said before, my father was spared through the action of my mother's heroic act. And when he went back, he was hiding at a German's house, German – Jewish people were not touched at the time. But he decided to go and so we all went to the police. And as luck pointed out, one of the police officers in the police department in Berlin recognized my father. He was a customer of his and knew him many years. So, he ushered him to the side and tried to help him and he said don't sleep at home and he would try to have him sent to where the action is, because they'll never say they don't have enough trucks to ship you out. And that saved my father's life. And we could not believe. We walked down the stairs of the Presidium near *Berlin*. It was called *Bahnhof Berea* that was the district where we lived. We walked out of the police department, my father, my mother, and us children crying and hugging each other and that same night my father escaped to Belgium.

He contacted smugglers in Cologne and he made it over the border and he had us come out the following year. In 1939, in February, my momma and us three children *trotted* over the German border. And it's all such a long story in which if I went into detail, it would cover a long time. But we really didn't all make it together. We were separated on the border *through an* incident. My mother and one of my brothers made it; I and my younger brother did not. We stayed behind in Germany and my papa was in Belgium waiting for us and my mother arrived with my older brother

Zigi, but *Willie* and I were left behind in Cologne. That was our first separation, in 1939 in February. And then I sent my brother to a children's place where they accept children in *Herbistar* on the border of Cologne where the Red Cross let children under twelve years pass. And I was told by Jewish people that it would be very safe for my younger brother to go there. So I contacted some Jewish people, a committee that gave us the money for the ticket to send *Willie* to *Herbistar*, where the Red Cross ushered him over to the Belgium authorities and eventually into the hands of my parents. But I was left alone. I was a young girl and a family by the name of Mooshard helped me to remember a way to cross the border and I had to memorize the way, how to get across the border in Cologne. It was February 1939 when I set out on my journey, all by myself. I remembered the way to cross the German border, to not fall into the hands of the German patrol, which I did not succeed in. I was sent back. And I did it again and finally succeeded. There is a lot of details which I'm not going into, but the final outcome was that I made it across, all by myself, a young girl, without money, without anybody. Entering Belgium, there was a lot of danger. A woman was hiding me by the border when I reached Belgium and then when she contacted my father, he sent a smuggler to smuggle me in directly, because the Belgium police would pick up Jewish people, too, and send them back. But through this smuggler I was smuggled out from the borderline and made it over Lititz. I was put on a train and in the middle of the night, I arrived at Antwerp all alone and I found my way back to my parents.

That was 1939. In 1940, the war broke out in Belgium and we fled again to France. A lot of refugees in Belgium fled to Antwerp and so did my parents and us children. And we ended up in southern France, where we were interred into camps. They were transports to go all over; to Germany, to Poland. But for some reason or other, we were always escaping the last actions, through my parents clever maneuvering. However, we were not too successful towards the end. The war started to become very dangerous. We ended up in camp de Gurs. That was my mother and I. My father was deported and my brother . . .

[This interview with *Manya Breuer* is concluded on tape 2]

[Interview with *Manya Hartmeyer Breuer* concluded.] Tape 2 of 2.

I was in five camps. My mother swears that I was in six, but I don't remember the 6th one. We were all separated and um . . . I ended up with my momma in Camp de Gurs in the Pyrenees, where I was freed out of the camp and put into an orphanage by several children were given permission to leave the camp and I understood that it was paid by a lot of people that got together to free us and bring

us to this orphanage. By Jewish people, like to *Rothchild's*. I believe, and some others, who tried to save us because the camp was evacuated to Germany in the next few days and my mother had contracted typhoid fever and I found out after the war that a French nurse had saved her life from the Nazis. So, I was in the orphanage. I didn't know where my father was or where my parents were or where my brothers were. Then one day I had a postal card and, to my surprise, it was from my own papa. And he told me that the Germans would come into this town in the department of *Cantal* in France where the orphanage was and he said, "Monyela, you'd better get out of there quick and come to join us in *Nice*. *Nice* is on the *Cot d'Acur*. It is near the Italian border where I was finding my papa back and my two brothers, however, my momma was still in Girtz, or so we thought. In the camp. And I was finally making it, with a lot of *horrible* incidents till I reached the place by myself on a train, checked by Germans, hiding here and there. I found my way to my father and my two brothers again, only to be interred by the Italians.

The Italians were very kind to us. They permitted us to stay in *Saint Martin Vésubie*, sixty kilometers from *Nice*. Very close to the famous coat of *Nice*, where Monte Carlo joins the *Cot d'Acur*. It's beautiful. And we were hiding, actually being interred by the Italians in a little town called *Saint Martin Vésubie*. Where we had to declare ourselves twice a day by the Italians. Just sign our name in but they would not harm us. In fact, we felt very protected with them, because at least they didn't deport us or separate our family. In the meantime, we didn't know what happened to momma. And one day the Italian's occupation forces told us that they are going to leave the next day over the mountains of Italy. It was then that we also found out that the German army has retreated and found their way into *Nice*, into the surrounding areas with tanks. And I imagine that it was the troops that had come back from Africa, of the army that stopped in Italy. Once again, danger was very, very close; nearness. We had to escape in order not to fall into the Nazi hands again. So my father took us children out of the little house where we lived. And when I faced the Alps momentarily in front of me, I said, "Papa, are we going?" and he said, "Yes, *Meinchen*. We have to". I had city clothes on. We had no blankets, no food, no provisions. Not any equipment to get over these Alps. Which I thought was incredible. Impossible to even go near. But we made it over these Alps and the book *Haven* gives a description of that. I'm just putting all in a nutshell, of course. But for some miracle, I am here today to tell you that.

[Interviewer] Tell me about when you were running.

Manya: We managed to somehow get off the Alps and my father tried to join the Partisans, a group of Italian Partisans. At one point, we reached high up in the wilderness to this group of Italian Partisans and my father, my brothers and myself, and my later husband, Ernest Breuer and his sister

Lisa, found these Partisans and begged them to let us fight with them. But they would not accept us for two reasons. One was that they didn't have enough food and ammunition to share with us and we were not able to speak Italian. So only my sister-in-law Lisa Breuer spoke Italian. And she said that they wouldn't take us so we had to go and leave that part and finally I ended up in Rome in the convent. In a Catholic convent and the reason we picked this one was because it was a French convent. It was called Notre Dame Dioscion. And it was in the Via Garibaldi. And [it was the year 1938?]. I will never forget that. This beautiful convent was this big French order. In fact, a French noblewoman was the head of this convent and they took us in. Lisa and myself, and her brother Ernest, who was later my husband.

Now, Ernest organized a hiding for the men that were a few of the Partisans from the Yugoslavian countries. One was an officer from *Nive* right there with us, hiding. And Ernest organized for the men to go into the cellar and heavy furniture was pushed against the wall where the opening was so that the Germans wouldn't find the men, and us women, we were brought in the dormitory where the nuns had these little cells. Listle [Lisa's nickname] and I had one cell and the nun gave us their garments. They gave us nightgowns. They knitted socks for us. It was very cold in that convent because it was not heated and there was a lot of marble in there. I was a very sick girl. Physically and mentally. I was terribly down. The nuns took care of me. The Sister Veronica from the infirmary, we had no medicine and I became very ill and I had an infected tonsil. My tonsils were terrible and I had to go to the hospital and have an operation. And there was no medicine. Not even aspirin to give me, but never the less, it had to be done. Otherwise, it endangered my life because they were infected. So, they had to come out. They put me in a chair and they were cutting on me without anything, taking them out. The nuns as innocent as they were, were given my real name, which I hadn't heard in years. I had been using a false name. Myna Bershe, I had said was my name. But in the convent, they knew my real name was *Manya* Hartmeyer and the nuns gave them my name when they entered the hospital with me. And after the operation, the fascists came and they saw my name. Born in Berlin. They wanted to know what I was doing in this hospital. And of course, they put two and two together and they came up to try to take me away. And one of the nuns said, because I was covered with icepacks, and they said that I couldn't even talk. But I remember seeing them in front of the bed in their black uniforms and I knew that my last moment had come. I really felt that it was the last moment because he came to my bed and he said, "*Manya* Hartmeyer! Native Berlino!" They told me all this in Italian. What was I doing lying there. In other words, why are you saying you're Myna Bershe, when your real name is *Manya* Hartmeyer?

Why are you saying your name is Myna Bershe? And you were born in Berlin? What's all this supposed to be?" And they wanted to take me out of there, but the nuns somehow convinced

them. She said, "Don't you see? She can't even answer you. Come back tomorrow morning and she will talk to you. We will help you to get all the information you want". So they left the hospital that evening and at the same moment that they left, the nuns took me out of there and hid me somewhere. I don't remember where. I think I was unconscious after that and I woke up and I remember that I was back in the convent. That was later. And soon it was the 5th of June 1944. The Allied troops had landed in Anzio Casino in Caserno and they came in and the liberation of Rome took place. Finally, we were liberated and I went to the synagogue to pray. I thought it was closed, but to my surprise, I found it open. And it was near the Coliseum where so many years before the Christians were hunted with lions in that very coliseum and I went by there and I knew exactly how they must have felt because that was the way I felt in Rome. And I went to the synagogue to pray and give thanks and to pray that I could find my family back. I did. And I was told by people that I give my name to the American authorities that they would help me to come to America. Of course, I didn't believe it, and I gave my name anyway. And a few days later I found myself on an American truck, an army truck that took me out of hell. [Sobbing and finding it difficult to continue.] And I joined the rest of the refugees on the Henry Gibbons.

Interviewer: Why don't you tell me about the trip to Oswego?

[A woman in the background suggests shutting off the tape as *Manya* composes herself.]

Manya: I'm sorry.

Interviewer: You don't have to be sorry. When you came to Oswego . . .

Manya: All of a sudden, I was brought back to the sun, to sunshine and life. And I faced the beautiful country that took me in, which I was forever grateful. We were brought to Oswego, New York, by train and when we entered the camp I had Ernest and Lisa Breuer with me and the first day we were issued towels and soap, which we hadn't seen in so long. I have to tell you; my first breakfast consisted by seven eggs. I ate all the bananas that I could find. [Crying again.] And food was so precious to me and the freedom too. Freedom to look up and not be scared or afraid that someone was going to pick you up and kill you. The first day in Fort Ontario the refugees lined up, I remember that very well. We were in a long line; and we were almost at the end of the line. And I see a man sitting on a chair with a camera in front of him. He didn't take any pictures, but when I came into the camera and focused, he starts snapping my picture. I thought he was a tourist. It turned out later on that it was Alfred Eisenstaedt who took our pictures for Life Magazine, later on.

Uh, how can I describe to you our feelings? We had come a long way and I was young enough and old enough to remember and to compare how lucky indeed I was to be in Fort Ontario, in this camp. Although it was not exactly as we thought it would be, it was another camp, but I didn't mind that at all. I was just, as I said before, starting to live again.

We didn't want to get married, Ernest and I. We were very much in love but we didn't get the permission right away from the government. Since we were under a very special *quota*, status in the camp. My husband said, "How can we not get married? We are here, in America. There is nothing that can hold us back. Why is it that we can't do that?" And we would ask Ruth Gruber and Ruth would do everything. She would call Washington, she would try to get us the permission to leave the camp, the army camp at Fort Ontario, to go to the city hall to do procedures of getting a marriage license, which finally we got. And the happy day arrived and we were given a Jewish traditional chuppah. I had no clothes. I came with my father's shirt he gave me in the camp before he was departed, so I should keep warm. I was in this shirt and I said to Ruth, "Do you think it's okay to get married like this?" And she said, "Don't worry, don't worry!" She had her mother bring a dress of her own and I put it on and somehow it fit and I got married in Ruth's dress. Her mother crochets a veil for me to wear and we picked flowers from the lawn in the camp and we were put under the chuppah and we had three rabbis. We had two *European* rabbis. Rabbi *Czechoval* from Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia and then we had another one, also from Yugoslavia and then we had an American rabbi who came as an honor and gave us away at the wedding. And as you know, it is shown in the book Haven.

Interviewer: Tell me about what happened when you had your child.

Manya: Well, we stayed in the camp about . . . how long did we stay there? About eighteen months. I got married and I expected a baby and we always hoped that we would be going out everyday now, from Fort Ontario. We were very eager to work and to start a new life again because we saw life all around us. We saw how American people lived and how kind they were to us and how beautiful. So, we were very, very eager to get out and do our thing and live again and show the people that we can really make a life of our own. But it took about eighteen months till we left Fort Ontario to make a new life.

Interviewer: Tell us about them declaring your daughter an American citizen.

Manya: Okay. My daughter Diane was born in Oswego, New York. In that very camp where we were brought. And at that time, since we were only in that camp during the war, we were in a limbo,

so to speak. Because we didn't know if we were going to be sent back after the war is over or if *he* would *give* the permission to stay, which we knew was not told us. We were told after the war, we have to go back but of course nobody in their heart believed that they would send us back again. To hell. So, we were all hoping and praying that we would stay. And in the meantime, this was also true for the baby born there, my daughter. We didn't know if she was an American citizen or not. So, I was told that they had a session in the House to decide on the status of citizenship for my daughter. Of course at the end she was an American, you know. But a . . . that also took quite a while, but we were safe and we were looking forward to get out and start our new life.

Interviewer: And you did a great job.

Manya: Thank you. [Pause.] Lucky me.

End of interview.

[Interview with Walter Greenberg, former child refugee.]

Interviewer: Walter, why don't you tell us about how old you were when you got into Fort Ontario and your very first memories of Fort Ontario.

Walter Greenberg: I was eleven years old and when you talk about memories, do you mean, how I arrived there or what happened when I arrived there?

Interviewer: What happened when you got there?

WG: Well, I remember traveling on this train and stopping at Fort Ontario. Getting out, and um . . . having lots of people to meet us. I must say that I was very shocked and surprised that there was a fence around the camp. Uh, I argued about the fence with many people, for many, many years. And before our reunion in 1981 in Syracuse, we debated whether the fence was barbwire or whether it was a different kind of a wire. And most people said it was a chicken wire fence. And I said that it was a barbwire fence. The reality was that it was really a *chicken wire* fence with *barbed* wire on top of it. For my reality and for *Walter* Greenberg's reality, for me it was a confinement and there was a fence and I was on the inside looking out and there were people on the outside looking in. Now,

Fort Ontario for me was a bittersweet experience for me. Because I had left worn-torn Italy and I had everything that I needed and wanted. I had food, clothing, doctors if I was sick. School, I may add, for the first time in my life. Wonderful people. But I felt strange. I felt deceived. But I didn't know why because I was too young to understand it. I think that it's very difficult to sit here, forty years later and to really . . . to say what you'd like to hear . . .

Interviewer: Don't tell me what you think I want to hear.

WG: No, no. Let me finish. The question was how'd it feel then, okay. It's very hard and almost impossible because that's forty years. It's years of sitting and . . . I mean, I'm a mature adult, forty years later trying to understand how I felt then. I felt wonderful and I felt terrible. Okay. That's what the camp meant to me. Uh . . . I've never put it to bed, yet. I was just talking to Maurice and some of the other people in the back. I've put many things in my life, many goals that I had and things that I wanted to do. Things that I achieved and things that I failed at. I did them and I put them to rest. I have never ever put Fort Ontario to rest, yet. I don't know why. Maybe some things in life you just can't.

Interviewer: Did you ever talk about your experiences at Fort Ontario?

WG: Yes. It took me . . . actually I never talked about. I lectured in temples and in other places about World War II and the Holocaust and about concentrations camps and about artwork that was created in concentration camps by children. And um, I was able to talk about that but I wasn't able to talk about Fort Ontario. I started to in 1981 and have been ever since, but it's . . . [Pauses] maybe it's something that I could never really understand. And I still don't understand now. Being one of the 982 people who came to this country and having been offered democracy and richness that this country has to offer and having been able to participate and become productive and useful. I have to be very thankful and grateful. That is from a personal view, from a historical point of view, I feel that this country and so many other countries did so very little and almost nothing. I don't like to use the word bitter because I'm not a bitter person but I find it strange that so little was done. And I think that we were token shipment. It was political. In fact, we were picked because we came from many different countries and we had many different professions. And it was going to be a prototype and there was going to be many other havens and there weren't. And naturally, I couldn't sense that at age eleven. I uh . . . I just . . . I felt different. I felt different than other people, than other children. Although the teachers were wonderful to us and the fellow classmates were wonderful. But I did feel different because a bus did pick me up in the morning and brought me back at the end

of the day to this camp that had a fence around it. And that fence made me feel not human. It made me feel in limbo. And um . . . that's it.

Interviewer: Tell me about your Bar Mitzvah.

WG: Well, I remember my Bar Mitzvah was the last one in the camp. I received a camera as a present which got me started into my hobby, my profession. After crossing Rainbow Bridge and getting into Buffalo I took pictures with that camera, which I still have today, of some of the refugees. I never liked the word refugees. I know it's nothing to be ashamed of but it's not a word that I particularly care for. I think we are all refugees from one thing or another. We are all seeking refuge from whatever. I like the word survivor better. But the Bar Mitzvah was a small, humble little *Bar Mitzvah*. It was a very happy occasion, because I knew then that we would have the opportunity to stay in the United States. I think that's something else that made me feel uncomfortable at the camp. I probably was very scared knowing that we might have to go back. But I couldn't visualize where. My father came from Austria, my mother came from Yugoslavia. I was born in Italy. There was just . . . I didn't have a place that I could say, "This is my home. This is where I'm going back to".

Interviewer: That was true for a lot of people, during that limbo period. They didn't know where they were going, whether they'd have to go back.

WG: Well, the assumption was that everybody signed a document saying that they would go back. And the assumption was that, I think, that everybody had hoped that finally we would be able to stay. I mean, why would people come here to begin with? I certainly didn't make the decision, my parents did. I was too young. I just followed. My parents made the decision, I suppose, to come here because there would be food and shelter and medical help and hopefully a new life.

Interviewer: Tell me about your day to day life; anything that you remember. Besides going out to the school what else do you remember?

WG: Well, I think that joining the Boy Scouts was a major part in my life at the camp. I enjoyed it immensely. There was this man from Oswego who was the Boy Scout Master and he led a troop in Oswego and he also *started* a troop at Fort Ontario. And he was very proud that he was the first scout master in the United States that had an international troop. Because of the twenty of us or so, there was many languages that were spoken and I remember having participated in collecting

newspapers; recycling newspapers to buy uniforms. I remember feeling very happy and proud of having my uniform and of being accepted by the community, also in fact, when the congressman came to the camp to decide whether we were worthy enough to stay in the United States, we were paraded with our uniforms in front of these congressmen, to show them that we can be and are good Americans. So, that was fun.

Interviewer: I liked how you said being in the Boy Scouts meant a lot to you.

WG: It did.

Interviewer: Do you remember the day you left the camp?

WG: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

[*End of side 1*]

WG: It was a very cold morning. It was almost dark still. I remember these huge buses pulling up and crowds always bothered me. The trip to Canada was not really eventful. When we got to Canada we were served doughnuts and milk and coffee and sandwiches. We stayed there for a few hours and um . . . came in. It was a happy day.

Interviewer: Did you leave the camp that day?

WG: Yeah. That specific morning that I'm talking about we left, we went to Canada. Crossed the border and went to Buffalo and my parents got jobs that same day, when we got to Buffalo. Because the hotel where we were staying found out that my parents were chefs by profession and they hired them the same day. So, we stayed in Buffalo for six months.

Interviewer: They have really cold winters. [Laughs]

WG: Cold winters, yes, but we were used to cold weather, then hot weather. I don't think that I can sit here and talk about . . . I think that whatever I felt or how I feel about Fort Ontario now, I'm sure is connected very directly with how I felt as a child growing up in Italy and North Africa, growing up

during the war. And I think that all fences were the same to me and as I child I certainly didn't understand the subtle differences. I just thought of it now as I'm sitting here. I think I was confused at the camp. I think that there were different signals. I was *reading* different signals. One signal was the fence and the confinement and the other signal was the lovely people in Oswego. The teachers and the scout master and the people who were just so warm and understanding; and to an eleven year old, that was very confusing.

[*A few minutes on side 2*]

Special Collections, Penfield Library, SUNY Oswego