

## ORAL HISTORY 271, two audiotapes

SAFE HAVEN: OSWEGO REUNION, AUGUST 1984

[Held at Joseph Papp's Theater in New York City]

[Applause]

RUTH GRUBER: Poobah, we call called him Poobah, not [Morice?]. And Joe, and all of you who spoke and sang and played so magnificently and all of you here today. I think this is a day that certainly I will never forget and I think most of us here will never forget. Walter just spoke about the 40 years it took the Jews to cross the desert. Forty is kind of a mystic number and I think that this being the fortieth reunion has a very special significance for us. Many of the reporters have said to me, "What's so unique about this group?" And I said, "It's unique in many ways".

It's unique because this was the only group that the President of the United States invited to the United States in the middle of a way, while war and Holocaust raged in Europe, and invited them here as his own guests. And when I read in the *Washington Post* that the President had at last circumvented those hideous, stringent quotas which were keeping refugees out of this country; that he was going to bring in a thousand. We thought it was the beginning of a mass, life-saving rescue. And then the paper said they would be sent to Fort Ontario, an old Army camp in Oswego, New York, and they would promise to go back to Europe when the war was over.

And then the President did as he did so often, he dropped the whole thing into Harold Ickes lap. You all remember Ickes? The Secretary of the Interior? [Scattered applause] Right. He was the most passionate of all the Cabinet members in trying to break through those quotas, and the angriest that refugees that were not allowed in. Ickes had never met a Jew until he was 16, but he had a Jewish mystique. Ickes felt if you were Jew, ipso facto you were smarter than anybody else. Ickes was a *mensch*. I was his special assistant and his field representative for Alaska. How much further from Jews could you get?

And I went to see him and I said, "Mr. Secretary, this is the first time the United States is doing this in history. Is the President doing this for humanitarian reasons?" And he said, "Yes, for humanitarian reasons, for political reasons, and also because there are thousands of refugees pouring into Italy from all the countries that Hitler over-run".

And they came into Italy for two reasons: one we knew, one we didn't know. The one we knew is that every refugee wanted to get to Allied troops and the Allies were beginning to move up the boot of Italy. The one we didn't know was that the refugees through their own underground

sources knew that the Italians would hide them. We know about the Polish Anti-Semites, the Ukrainian Anti-Semites, the Ustaše in Yugoslavia. What we didn't know was about the Vichy French who were just as vicious as all the others. And many of you were in France when the Vichy French tried their best to kill you or to deport you.

Ickes said, "Roosevelt is worried because the Army keeps pressuring him. They're afraid that more and more thousands will come into Italy; they'll get in the way of our tanks and our troops and our jeeps and we have to do something about it". They asked Roosevelt to open havens in other countries. So Roosevelt asked Egypt, he asked Libya, of all countries; he asked the Moroccans, "Please open havens". [Blank tape] . . . and so Roosevelt learning about these secret cables and knowing the problems in Italy, announced that we would open a haven in Oswego, New York.

And I said to Ickes, learning now why Roosevelt had done it, "These refugees are going to be traumatized, terrified. Somebody has to hold their hand".

He said, "You're right". He said, "I'm gonna send you. You're a young woman, you're Jewish, you speak Yiddish, you speak German, and 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". And it was. Then he said, "We're going to make you a general". I said, "Me, a general?" He said, "Yes, a simulated general". He said, "Because if the Nazis shoot you down, as a civilian they'll kill you as a spy. But if you're a general according to the Geneva Convention they'll have to keep you alive".

I flew to Europe in an Air Force plane with real generals who kept saying, "What are you doing on this plane?" I couldn't tell them, the mission was so secret. One of them said, "Are you Lily Pons?" [Laughter] I assured him I couldn't sing.

It took days and days to get to Italy; in those days planes couldn't fly the way they do now. In Italy, the thousand, of whom so many are here today, had already been selected, and I use that hideous word *selected* very selectively, because in Hungary – and so many are here from Hungary, too – Adolph Eichmann had begun the selection in April, 1944, and now it was the middle of July, 1944, and he had already selected five hundred fifty thousand Jews for death in Auschwitz and we were selecting one thousand for life in America.

And they were put aboard this Army troop ship with a thousand wounded soldiers from Anzio and Cassino, boys without legs, without arms, their heads bandaged, battle shocked. And they waited in the Bay of Naples for a huge convoy to assemble. Warships. Battleships. Word had come from Roosevelt, "If you're attacked, you must protect the one ship carrying the only refugees we're invited to America". And they also were to protect two ships carrying Nazi prisoners of war. In all

of World War II we took in one thousand refugees, but we took in one hundred seventy thousand Axis prisoners of war, outside the Holy Quotas.

Finally the day came when the convoy was ready to sail. And I still had diplomatic calls to make; letters Ickes had given me that I had to deliver, so I dressed the way we dressed in those days. I wore a hat, remember? I wore a big red straw hat and a white suit and white kid gloves. And when I finished all my calls they put me in a launch and took me out to the *Henry Gibbons*. The Navy Lieutenant looked at me and 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, take off your pants". They gave me the sailor's pants, I pulled them over the suit, climbed the Jacob's ladder, the refugees took one look and said, "It's Eleanor Roosevelt!" [Laughter] Who else in the middle of the war?

On that ship, I who had been born a Jew, in a shtetl called Brooklyn, and my mother's here now, my ninety-seven year old mother [applause], who did her best to prevent me from going, did her best. She said, "What kind of meshuga did you get into now? Your brother's a Captain in the Army . . . "and my brother's here with his family and Mike's daughter and son are here today. This is our family, isn't it, all of us.

On that ship, I became a Jew. I think there's a moment in our lives when we become Jews. I've seen it happen when people first arrive in Israel and suddenly they remember their Jewish roots and they want to kiss the soil of Israel. I've seen it happen when some go to the Wall. For me it happened aboard that ship, because I said to the people, "You'll have to tell me what you've been through. As soon as I get back to Washington I will have to report to Ickes and through him to Roosevelt. And the world must know what you have gone through; you are the first witnesses coming into America".

Some of the men, and some of them are here today, like Abe Forman, said to me, "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 every morning and every night we paced that deck. And they told me stories of Jewish courage, of Jewish terror; of hiding in caves, of hiding in sewers, of running from one border to another as Hitler's armies moved across Europe, of coming finally to Italy. A whole group, including Adam Munz and Manya, climbed the Alps for three days and three nights, fleeing from Free France. Which first it was under the Italians, when Mussolini finally attacked the French, Hitler as a present said to him, "You can have the Maritimes, the Riviera".

So, many of the Jews like Adam and Manya and many of you here, fled from Vichy France to Nice and the Riviera, then Mussolini fell and the Germans came. Twelve-hundred of them climbed the Alps. A woman, who was in the last stages of labor climbed, gave birth to a baby the first night and continued climbing. A rabbi climbed with a baby in one arm and a Torah in the other. Adam would stop to help older people and take children from them. They were trying to get to Italy because they were sure the Italian peasants would save them. They got to those Italian peasants only to have the Nazi's right on their heels. And five hundred were immediately rounded up and sent to Auschwitz. The rest were saved and many of them were on our ship.

You heard Manya sing; you heard Leon play. We put on performances on that ship for those wounded soldiers who . . . some of them had never heard opera stars. We had an opera star who unfortunately is in Brazil or he would have been here. You all remember him; Mirkovic who sang *Figaro* every single day; we would all sing *Figaro, Figaro, Figaro*. He's visiting his oldest brother. Mirkovic is about eighty-five but he's visiting his oldest brother in Brazil or he would be here today.

The soldiers . . . [*skipped some and is blank*] . . . played every single musical instrument. She would sing so that you thought you were listening to a mandolin, and a trumpet and a saxophone. She could sing from soprano to almost bass. She could sing opera. She was an incredible singer.

We had beautiful young women; some had been nightclub singers in Paris. And they really helped these soldiers who were terrified when we had a real air raid around one-thirty; planes flew over us. And these people, these wonderful people sitting here, helped those soldiers find some kind of comfort as we continued sailing into New York harbor.

And then when we came to the camp, you've heard about the fence? But what you didn't hear was that the people of Oswego opened their arms to our children and all of the children went to the schools; well, Walter talked about it and Adam, too, so you did hear about it. This was the most wonderful thing that could have happened because, children like Walter and Sonia [*Raben?*] who's here, some of them had never been in schools. Sonia had been running since 1933 when Hitler first came to be Germany; she was 15 years old she had never sat in a classroom. She didn't think she would live to be 15, she didn't think she would ever go to school, and now she went to school.

And others, like Joe Langnas, who's here from Detroit, Joe was our first *bar mitzvah* boy. Joe went to the junior high in Oswego and became the president of class seven B1, and Joe's mother who's here now and came from Montreal, said to me, "In Vienna, Joe couldn't even go to school. In America, he's President". [Laughter]

I wish I would tell you about everybody here, I wish I could. Here's International Harry. Do you know who International Harry is? Olga Maurer, who's sitting here, was in the last stages of

pregnancy and they allowed her to come on this trip, in a jeep bringing Olga and a whole caravan from Bari to Naples. Olga was put into a jeep so she'd be comfortable. Olga began to feel that she was going to give birth. And they had to stop the jeep and they had to stop the whole convoy. So the GI's named him International Harry, what else? And they predicted that International Harry would be a Brigadier General.

Well, on the ship, Olga didn't trust any of the doctors, Leon didn't think the piano was tuned – it sounded fine to me – on the ship we had very good doctors but Olga didn't trust any of them. She said, "I'm not going to let butchers circumcise International Harry". She waited till we got to the camp, and of course were no people there who could perform, you know, a Brit Mila. We had to bring one from New York and everybody in the camp wanted to see how it's done in America and I said to Olga after, "Well, how is our Brigadier General doing?" And Olga, who had already been in America three or four days said, "What Brigadier General? He's going to be a doctor". Well he's not a doctor; he's a computer expert who's worked with NASA, with our space agency. Now he's in Canada, he's here with his wife and children.

There's Doctor David Hendel here, who was a fifteen-year old. The ones who went to the Oswego High School are all jewels in the crown of Oswego because they have turned into such success stories. The principal of the high school, Ralph Faust, who is still a great friend of ours and whom I am in constant touch with, said, "They not only changed the climate of the high school, they changed the climate of the whole town. They were so hungry for education and learning that they absorbed everything we gave them". Well, David Hendel was on the ship, he was one of the boys who helped get the food out of the huge refrigerators for the thousand wounded soldiers and for our refugees. Today David is one of the leading dentists in New York, and a wonderful human being.

Fred Baum, you all remember Fred. Fred's here today. Fred was the multi-lingual translator on the ship and in the camp. And whenever we had problems with any of the nationality groups, we still had all the nationality groups at the beginning because it was a little . . . a microcosm of Europe. They came from eighteen countries [*that Hitler over-ran?*] and Fred would sit with each of the groups, he'd sit at the side with Joe Smart, translating from Serbo-Croatian, I don't know all the languages. Fred, you have to take a bow. I haven't asked anybody else, but everybody knows Fred Baum and loves him. Fred, where are you? [Applause]

I don't know how many of you know that one of our college students, who later went to Harvard Medical School, is considered one of the leading radiologists in the country, maybe the world, Alex Margulis, who helped develop the CAT scan. Now he is working on this nuclear magnet device where they will detect our illnesses without invading our bodies.

One of the high school students who went to high school with David was Ralph Manfred. And Ralph is one of the fathers of the Polaris missile, the Minuteman missile. Now he has turned his back, as I hope all of us do, on all these instruments of death and is promoting a coal slurry process that is already being tried out, not only all over America but, in Sweden, in Norway and Denmark. It's a process where coal will be refined so it will flow like latex, through our oil burners, and may help get the Arabs off our throats.

One of them – I think she's here today, her mother's in the hospital so I hope she's here today – Edith Semjen, you all remember Edith, she was called the Blonde Bombshell. We had some beautiful women but Edith was gorgeous. When *Life* magazine ran its lead article with pictures of all our women, our girls, our men. Edith looked like a cross between Ingrid Bergman and Greta Garbo. She was there in her partisan Yugoslav uniform. She got hundreds of marriage proposals from all over.

Edith was trained in the camp to be a beauty parlor operator because every Jewish organization came, and they're all here today; the National Council of Jewish Women came, HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] came, everybody came. I was their liaison. I was given the jail to meet with them and they would come into my little office with the bars, and ask, "What can we do?" And because they weren't all Jews, there were Catholics, Protestants, Greek Orthodox. All the organizations came. Cardinal Spellman sent Catholics up, the Protestant churches came, the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox, everybody wanted to do something for this one group of refugees, the only ones the United States had saved.

So ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training) came and trained them. And Edith became a beauty parlor operator. And she opened a little shop on Broadway, in our Upper West Side, became the most successful beauty parlor operator on the Upper West Side, with eighteen employees, decided that is was too much already, closed her shop and gave all her equipment to the prisoners of Ryker's Island. Edith said, "America gave me a new life; I want to give these prisoners the chance for a new life".

You're all here; I wish I could tell what each of you does. Think if we had saved not only these psychologists, and composers, and film directors, and a translator for the Olympics and all of the other wonderful successes that you've had. If we had saved not a thousand but a hundred thousand, five hundred thousand, a million, we could have done it. We were an empty country, but we did save a thousand, and we are, really, the lucky ones. You are the chosen, the survivors. And because you took whatever America had to give you with such relish, with such enthusiasm, with such a sense of survivors, you in turn have given back to America the genius that all of us now are

aware of. I wish – now that we are a family that made itself a family in the camp that lost itself and now has found itself, because every week new ones turn up.

Once I started writing *Haven*, I had to find more and more. And after the hardcover came out, so many read the hardcover and called me, and I said, “Fine, when the paperback comes out I’ll put your stories in”. So I put all their new stories in the paper. Now more and more have turned up. Every week I get a call. A few weeks ago I got a call from Simon Krauthamer who said, “I understand you’re having this reunion. I’m supposed to fly away on August 2, should I delay my trip?” I said, “Of course you should delay your trip”. Hadn’t given me his name yet. I said, “Who are you?” He said, “I was one of your *bar mitzva*b boys, but now I am one of the Vice Presidents of the American Stock Exchange”. He’s here.

John Hunter is here, who has 250 employees; he was a nine-year old in the camp. Jolanda is here; I went to see her in Minneapolis. Of all the people I was looking for, I wanted mostly – I wanted to find everybody – but I was haunted by Eva Bass. That voice you know, once you heard it you never forgot. And I kept saying, “Where is Eva? Did she go back to Paris? Where are her children?”

And then not long ago the phone rang and a man said, “I’m calling you from Minneapolis. Somebody in my office brought us your book. My wife and I haven’t slept for a whole week, we’re so emotional”. And I said, “Who’s your wife?” And he said, “She was Jolanda Bass”. And here is Jolanda now, who didn’t know her own story, because her mother found it too painful.

And many of you, I know, found it too painful to tell your children the trauma of your lives. I hope this reunion will be a healing. I hope it will be a tying together of that which was broken apart. Because talking is so important. Many of your children are here, and many have come and told me that now you’re beginning to ask, “What it was like in the war? Tell us what you went through. Tell us how you hid out. Tell us how you saved yourself. Tell us about our families; do we have a family?”

It’s happening now. And I want, if I can, to keep it alive. When you go out, we’d like each of you to sign a register. Morice’s daughter, Katherine, who many of you may have seen – she’s an actress on *All My Children* – you remember the girl who got pregnant, was in love with her music teacher? That’s Katherine Kamhi, anyway, Katherine, this beautiful young girl who never got pregnant, who’s a doll. Katherine is at the door with several others and they’re gonna have tables and we’re gonna have notebooks and guest books. And we want each of you to print – because we can’t always read writing – your name, and address, and anything you want to say. And then maybe, Jolanda has offered to write a newsletter, to keep us all informed of what we’re all doing, what are

children are doing, what are grandchildren are doing. [Applause] What shall we do about stamps? What'll we do about that? We'll find out, we'll find a way. Maybe somebody will come up with a good idea. What?

ADAM: Do we have a forger in our midst?

RUTH: What? Adam wants to know if we have a forger. Is that what you said?

ADAM: That's what I said.

RUTH: So sign your names. As you know, Mr. Papp is having us as his guest tonight at the Shakespeare in the Park for the opening night of *The Golum* and he's dedicating it to us. He's given us a whole block of seats. There will be people at the door; I think again it is Morice's two children, three – two sons and a daughter have the tickets – and anybody who wants to help. You get the tickets as you go out. But remember we want you to sign your names and your addresses, because this is too precious to lose. We . . . there's so much love here; there's so much coming together again. Somebody came up to me before and said, "Why don't you start a resolution that we should have a meeting like this every five years?"

Well, I don't know, what do you think, should we have it every five years? [Applause] All right. If we have your names and your addresses and anything else you want to tell us and your children's names, we'll try to put it together and we'll try to keep it together. And I think, just as I remembers Rabbi Tzechoval saying, "We must be filled not with hatred, but with love". I think that, after these forty years, we are a family truly filled with love. Thank you. [Applause]

[MALE VOICE, possibly Moric Kamhi] We'd like to thank Barbara [Comy ?] for accompanying us on piano. [Applause] Barbara [Comy ?] is an Oswego refugee by marriage. Above all, we'd like to thank you for coming to this reunion. If it's been as enjoyable for you as it's been for us, then it's been a great success. May we have many more and may we see you all there in good health. Bless you and Shalom.

[Applause, background conversions, general hubbub.]



[LAWRENCE BARON] OK. I'm at the Oswego reunion and I'm interviewing Adam Munz, who was a teenager. Right?

ADAM MUNZ: Right. Exactly right.

LB: Could you tell me a little bit about your experiences before you came to Oswego? How you ended up in Italy?

AM: Originally, we lived in Belgium until the war broke out; the second part of the war broke out in May of 1940. Being Jews and having heard what Hitler was doing in the occupied areas, we picked up and fled, went to France, and remained in France, in hiding, much of the time under forced residence conditions some of the time, and eventually when Mussolini abdicated in September of 1943. We heard rumors of the Allies having landed in Italy we worked our way across the Alps, we got as far south as Rome, when the Germans occupied the city, and we were forced to go underground until the Allies liberated the city.

LB: As I recall from Ruth's book that was a fairly perilous journey. Could you . . .

AM: Across the Alps?

LB: . . . describe that for us?

AM: Yes, roughly 1200 people undertook the trek crossing the Alps on foot, having staked out the territory a few weeks before that. Men, women, children and all the luggage they could carry, the food we could muster, undertook to cross the Alps, possibly repeating a journey that Hannibal had undertaken centuries earlier. It was a perilous journey and it was one into the unknown, but there was no way of turning back or staying where we were, because that was certain death, and so we went. And eventually met the Germans once again, they had occupied the vacuum that Mussolini's abdication had created and they were in Italy as occupying forces this time.

LB: Let me ask you something for later on, this is not for the radio show. Were you in the Boy Scout troop?

AM: Yes. In the camp?

LB: Yes.

AM: No, not in the camp. I think Walter . . .

LB: Walter was.

AM: I was not.

LB: I worked with the Oswego people, and I have copies of a thing . . . what Harold Clark drew up about that experience. I want to give to people who were in the Boy Scouts.

AM: I was very active in the Zionist group in the camp and one of the leaders there. Very much interested in what was happening at the time to Palestine and the whole issue of a Jewish homeland and that's where my efforts were.

LB: What was your first response on hearing that you were going to America and your impressions of both the trip and then your arrival in Oswego?

AM: It was double-edged for me. One of the reasons we presented ourselves to come to the States was that my mother had a goiter, a hyperthyroid condition, in very advanced stages which was literally choking her off, and she required an operation in very short order. There were no facilities available at the time, medicines and whatever she needed, and we were strongly advised that unless the operation was done soon she might not survive – she was literally choking slowly. And that was one reason why we came. The other, of course, is there was nowhere to go. Europe had been devastated, we had no real country to go to and the United States was the Promised Land. And so from both these points of view, were delighted that we could leave all that behind and take care of mother's throat.

LB: How did you feel . . . I know from talking to Walter there was some ambivalence about being interned. Did you feel similarly? What was your experience?

AM: Yes, we did not expect to be as curtailed in our movements as we were. The first period was the quarantine; the gate was around the camp; we needed special passes and so on. I understand it now much better than I did then. Then it was difficult to fathom why a land that prides itself on total freedom felt the need to restrict movements of a group of harmless people. Eventually we were allowed to leave the camp to go to school and so on. It wasn't that bad. Some, however, likened the experience of being surrounded by a fence and living in Army barracks to concentration camps. The similarities stopped, however, there.

LB: With your experience . . . you must have been of high school age?

AM: Yes.

LB: What was your experience, I guess first with . . .

[SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE]

AM: . . . by and large. The authorities in the school made every special effort to accommodate to us. After all we didn't speak the language very well; many of us didn't speak it at all. They made special arrangements of all kinds, made it as easy as one could make entry into a foreign culture, into a school system that was alien to us. Some of the townspeople were very pleasant too; others looked on us as strange animals, looked at us as intruders. After all, 982 people invading a small town like Oswego must have been a cataclysmic event. I'm sure some regarded it as a mixed blessing.

LB: Do you remember . . . I don't know if you were one of the people who testified at the Dickstein . . .

AM: Yes, I did, absolutely.

LB: Describe the Dickstein hearings and the background.

AM: I must tell you parenthetically that I only very recently, through Ruth Gruber, discovered the existence of the *Congressional Record* in which the testimony appeared. And I, of course, made it a point to own a copy of it which I have at home.

It was a very emotionally-filled experience for many of us – addressing the Senators, addressing the politicians. At the same time, knowing that whatever we said had tremendous import in terms of our destiny so it was a very awesome experience for many of us. And re-reading the *Record*, I recaptured some of that feeling. It still gives me goose pimples.

LB: Do you remember what you felt upon hearing that Truman had made the decision to . . . ?

AM: Sheer, unadulterated joy. That's all I remember about it. It was the thing that we had been waiting for. The Millennium had arrived.

LB: And what did you and your parents do immediately afterward?

AM: Well, yes. Hello, I'm sorry I'm not getting up. I'm hooked up to . . .

WOMAN'S VOICE: I'm Rose [?] from Syracuse . . .

LB: You once spoke to me.

AM: Two, three minutes, I'll be right up. How are you? I haven't seen her . . .

LB: What was your first experience coming out, the resettlement process that occurred to you?

AM: It was not a completely smooth process. It meant a complete change of life. My father couldn't ply his own business here, although we had many friends. It was again the tremendous unknown. But I want to tell you what I did. I registered for the draft board around the corner from this building. I was in the building for eleven days when the draft call came. I got transported to Fort Monmouth, and eventually, in the South. I become the first refugee to wear the American uniform, eleven days after we got [?]. I served a short time, got my GI Bill of Rights out of it, and then decided the only thing I could carry with me throughout life is what I have in my head, so I began to study, something I had postponed for many years. [Much background noise]

LB: And today you are a . . .

AM: I'm a psychologist, psychoanalyst. I'm Director of the Psychology Department of New York. I'm a consultant for the University and I have an Associate Professorship at Columbia.

LB: Do you think what Sharon was saying is true, that a lot of people did go into helping professions because of their experiences?

AM: Yes, I think so. I don't think it's accidental. Statistically alone, it would make any sense. Yes, I think many people either directly went into the helping professions, or certainly stayed close or married people [?] or their children. The refugee group also, I think, tended to gravitate in that direction. I think she's absolutely right..

LB: Thank you. I don't want to keep you from meeting all your friends. Let me just unhook you.

AM: You're welcome.

LB: I'm at the Oswego reunion and I'm interviewing Mrs. [?] And I'd like to know a little bit about your experience before you came to Oswego, what brought you to Italy. And what your responses were to being brought here. But first, what were your experiences in Europe?

LIANA BROWN: In Europe? We come from Milan, I was born in Milan, and during the war the Jews were sent out of the big cities and we were sent to [Basni-M??]. [Too many people and background noise.] Then toward the end of the war, there was rumor they're going to bring over a thousand refugees, we just heard about it, and my mother signed up and that's how we came on the boat, that's how we came to America. We were only supposed to stay for a year and a half, and they were supposed to send us back because Roosevelt didn't grant us a visa, but he died and Truman granted us a visa, that's how we stayed. My father was here; we were separated because of the war. They didn't let me in I was just born, and American wouldn't grant me a visa. So we were stuck in Italy. My mother also has two other children that she adopted; they were her nieces and nephews that she brought over from Poland. And they were left in Italy; they're still in Italy. They're married; they have grandchildren. I don't know what else you . . . My mother originally came from Poland; then she went to Belgium.

LB: This was all during the war?

LIANA BROWN: No, my mother lived in Italy around twenty years before the war. But she grew up in Belgium; after she was in Poland she went to Belgium, she went to [?] she had a sister and a brother-in-law and three children. But they were killed during the wartime. And she has another sister who lives now in Brussels; her husband was killed. I have a cousin who still lives in Brussels with her family; they have a son who was just here. Now this other sister I have in Italy, her younger brother and sister who were left in Poland. See my mother had a plan; she wanted to bring over the whole family from Poland to save them. It took a long time. So meanwhile, the war broke out so they were stuck in Poland. The two younger children they were in concentration camps but they were saved, the parents were killed, but they were saved. And the brother is now living in Toronto, the sister in Israel.

LB: But your father was here? He had gotten a visa earlier?

LIANA BROWN: Yes, because at that time Mussolini was only taking the men. So we thought . . . Then they changed, things changed.

LB: And you were not able to . . . what was it like, could he visit you in the camp?

LIANA BROWN: In the camp. A few months we were isolated because a lot of people had a lot of diseases. After a while . . . I remember the first time I saw my father. Even though I was so young, like I said, I have very vivid memories of the camp. In fact, I recognized myself in the book, you know, that Ruth Gruber wrote. I found myself on the cover and my mother, I found the picture, I have the book here. I wrote to Ruth, through Hadassah, because I had written – I'm a Hadassah member too – and she sent me the original copy. And then she asked when it comes out in paperback could she include my story. And when the paperback came my picture is right in the front of the cover.

LB: That's great.

LIANA BROWN: That's really a fantastic thing. My mother, I recognize her. And when we were coming to America we took a picture, I saw my mother and she's right there, looking at the Statue of Liberty.

LB: What is your name, please?

LIANA BROWN: My name? Is Liana, L.i.i.a.n..a Brown.

LB: And your mother is?

LIANA BROWN: Rifka Kramer.

LB: That would be R?

LIANA BROWN: L..f..k..a.

LB: Thank you for helping me.

[Too much background noise, too many people talking at once.]

LB: I was going to ask you – you're Fred Baum?

FRED BAUM: Yes.

LB: I wanted to ask you – first if you could tell me a little bit about your experiences before . . .

FB: Coming to America?

LB: Coming to America. In Europe and how you got to Italy and were among the group of refugees.

FB: I was born in Yugoslavia, Zagreb. [Much background noise, then brief interruption by others] In 1941, Yugoslavia was invaded by the Germans. Beginning of 1942, we fled to Italy, the whole family. I told you once, mother, father and sister. [A female voice asking questions.] We were in Italy; we were taken to a camp in southern Italy. I won't call it a concentration camp; don't call it, because it wasn't. We were treated very well, we had no problems whatsoever with the Italians. And

then in 1944 when southern Italy was liberated we had this business with Roosevelt wanting to bring a thousand refugees to America, so we were selected. I don't know on what basis we were selected. And then we came here.

[Female asking questions, too much background noise to hear them] what did you do when you left the camp?

FB: What I did, I started working for the United Nations. I went to Europe. I worked for UNRRA, U..R..R..A. [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration] I was there for a year and then I came back to America and then I got a job here.

[FEMALE INTERVIEWER]: [???] What sort of job?

FB: What sort of job where, in America?

[FEMALE INTERVIEWER]: Here, what you did here.

FB: Here, or for UNRRA?

[FEMALE INTERVIEWER]: Here.

FB: A corporate executive.

[FEMALE INTERVIEWER]: And where do you live now?

FB: In Hillsdale, New Jersey.

LAWRENCE BARON: Could you talk a little bit about your experiences in Oswego? Were you of high school age then?

FB: No. I finished high school in Europe. I was twenty-four years old when I came to Oswego.

LB: So what was life in the camp like for you?



FB: For me life in the camp was good being I spoke about seven or eight languages. I was working in the administration building. I was an Administrative Assistant to the Director of the camp.

LB: What sort of reception do you feel was accorded to you by the people of Oswego?

FB: Well, in the beginning they were still [??] we were fenced in. It was an Army camp; we had a wire mesh fence. The Oswegonians or whatever you call them, they stood on one side of the wire, we stood on the other and talked to each other, those that could speak English. We had no problem, at least I never had any problem. Life in camp was . . . how are you? [Female saying, "How are you?" He answers, "Nice to see you".] And life in camp for me and my family was quite comfortable, with no problems.

LB: Do you remember, can you recall, what your reaction was when you heard that Truman was going to allow you out?

FB: Well we were all very happy about it, but I never had any doubt that we would stay in America.

LB: Talking to some other people, like Walter Greenberg, some people feel some ambivalence toward the nature of the internment. You didn't feel that at all?

FB: We signed that we would stay there and be in a shelter. We were in a shelter. Being ambivalent is one thing but no need for it because we knew what we were getting ourselves into.

LB: OK, thank you very much.

FB: Thank you. Hi, how are you?

LB: I'm speaking to Julius Krauthamer, who was in Oswego and I'd like to know a little bit about your experiences and what brought you to Italy before you . . .

JULIUS KRAUTHAMER: Well, we lived in a small town [?] in occupied Italy, [it was planned?] and when Italy surrendered we moved to Italy and from Italy we moved down to Rome.

LB: During that time what were the conditions that you lived in, mostly in hiding?

JK: We lived in a convent, to be honest with you. In the [?] convent. My sister in one convent; my mother, my father and I in another convent.

LB: The nuns knew that they were practically hiding you?

JK: Yes.

LB: And what was your response to being brought here by Roosevelt?

JK: I was a child; I didn't know too much about it. I only was eleven years old.

LB: Do you remember what your parents felt?

JK: It was a little bit of ecstasy.

LB: How did they feel about coming here but then being in a camp?

JK: I really couldn't tell you.

LB: You went to school in Oswego. Do you have memories of that experience?

JK: I remember Mr. [?]

LB: Were the students generally nice to you?

JK: Fairly decent. I actually didn't talk much English so I didn't associate with them too much.

LB: Do you remember what your response was when you finally heard Truman was going to let you stay?

JK: We all were happy naturally. I was so many years ago, it's hard to remember emotions.

LB: What became . . . afterwards, where did you settle?

JK: We lived in Brooklyn. My father was in the fur business and I [worked for Goodyear?]

LB: Is that what you're doing now?

JK: Yes.

LB: I'm at the Oswego Reunion and I'm interviewing . . .

ABRAHAM FELSBIN: Rabbi Abraham Felsbin of Brooklyn.

LB: And what was your role in Oswego?

AF: I was Rabbi in Auburn, New York, not very far from Oswego, when they arrived. I was Rabbi there during 1944 when they arrived. Shortly after, I went into the service, as chaplain. When I heard of their arrival my wife and I, the very next day, scoured some stores, merchants, we loaded the car with some clothing and candy, and we drove up here. We had difficulty coming in because of security but finally persuaded the directors and we finally got in. We did with the understanding that I would not distribute those things openly, which I wouldn't dare to because they were swamped. They came with practically nothing on their backs and nothing in their baggage. In fact one man said to me, pointed to his shorts, and said that's all he had. We got him a pair of shorts and an undershirt. And he said to me in Yiddish, I remember the phrase, "[Yiddish phrase?] With these I ran climbing, crossing, fleeing through the mountains". And these are the same ones; they washed them on the ship, he wore them again. They hadn't even provided clothing.

We were told they came there and then the next day we went there several times, we loaded up with some things. We were the only ones who had come to bring them something. The place was swarming with journalists. And all the interviewing and getting stories, fascinating stories. Like a story of one man, his wife, nine children, continually been separated, and somehow they managed to come together over and over, then separated again and again, and they were all together in Oswego. I have a picture [?] [Background noise]

When we came we found that there were such poor arrangements. For one thing, they arrived on the Shabbats, the Sabbath, which already disturbed several people, not that they weren't aware [??] that they couldn't help themselves. They felt it was an affront. Then they were brought into Oswego, into a large camp which was completely surrounded by wire. One said they came from one concentration camp into another. The people in town didn't know how to react to that. It was a problem, I think you may have read about that, problems . . .

LB: I think we better move to another room, I'm having trouble hearing you. [Quieter background noise] I was unaware . . .

AF: I'll give you an example.

LB: Why was not Rabbi Bialik, from the town . . . ?

AF: I don't know. And then when I came, I remember meeting Doctor [Nogoish?] who was the editor of the [Tug?] at the time, he was going around interviewing people, going with his pad, making notes, so were others. I brought all the things that I had over to Rabbi Tzechoval's, his room that was the understanding, it was to be distributed from his place rather than just scattered haphazardly. Course, the people grabbed and it was sad to see how they just snatched everything.

My wife tells the story once in a while of the little boy who grabbed a pair of shoes and somebody said, "Why are you taking these? They won't fit you". He said, "Maybe they'll fit my sister". He ran off with them. They don't even know what kind or size they were, whether high button or low button, it didn't matter, they were just taking everything.

Then another instance – there were three or four dining halls in the place, it was a military . . . previous fort. They were military mess halls. They hadn't even arranged as to which one was to be kosher, knowing the kind of people that were coming here, including [?] Rabbi [?]. When I came, they approached me; there was a man who was one of the directors. I acted as an interpreter. They hadn't even provided a proper director to speak Yiddish. We discussed the food, and he showed me the large containers they had for different things, and I showed him which could be used and which could not be used in terms of kosher. They separated them. [Background noise level increasing] [???] Right then and there, the first day or second day they came, they designated a committee to be in charge of a kosher kitchen. They took one of the buildings and cleared it and that kitchen and

dining room was going to be kosher. And the food was kosher to be brought in there so that it settled [?] planning in advance was [?]

LB: Roosevelt didn't even want to say it was a Jewish group, though.

AF: Definitely should not be here, plenty of resistance. But he himself . . . it was strictly, it was a token thing. As I was talking to one of the reporters, I said, "You know what tokenism is?" That was it. Because that was [?] the condition of being a what? That was an understanding, that there would be no other group [?] Because I was the town Rabbi, I was mature enough to know that would be a problem. As a matter of fact about a year and a half later I was threatened with court-martial – I was in the Philippines – because of something I said on the radio about [?] Israel and Palestine, and they said unless I cut out certain things, [?] saying certain things. Anyway, that had to affect my silence.

Then another thing they had, they asked me to please explain to the people not to use the fresh foods because food that was brought in on Thursday was not intended for Friday, it was intended for Sunday because there was no delivery on Saturday, but if they take the bread that came on Thursday and eat it on Thursday or Friday the bread that had been delivered on Wednesday could no longer be used. An example like that, so that whatever food that was brought in was not to be used that day or probably not for the next day.

LB: This was government policy?

AF: The person that asked . . .

LB: The WRA, the War Relocation Authority.

AF: Yes, I remember meeting one of the names, he may not have been the one in charge. I remember meeting Mr. Harding, he was the one you spoke to.

LB: Joe Smart who was the director, he was the one in charge.

AF: Well whoever it was. I remember one person I asked, "How come you're here, that you're in charge of this particular area?" He says, "I don't know," he says. "I worked for a kosher restaurant in

New York one time [??] They thought I know something about Jewish people, Jewishness, so they sent me up here". He himself realized the absurdity. So had I to convey to people that meat delivered on a certain day is not be used immediately. Not to be cooked for the next day's meal, but probably for two days later or three days later, particularly on the weekend.

These were some of the things for which they were completely unprepared. Ruth Gruber in the book talks about how the townspeople reacted, but there was a lot of resistance, they couldn't let the people out.

LB: That was government policy.

AF: That was government policy, because they were afraid that people might . . . did not come back, which could be understandable because by this time these people didn't trust anybody. Couldn't blame them. They didn't trust the British – certainly not – didn't trust the Germans or French or any of their hometown nationalities, whatever. Finnish – they certainly would not have trusted them. And here the United States hadn't raised a finger, hadn't bombed the railroad tracks, so that . . . My wife and I visited a number of times, and each time came with a carload of stuff. It was just thrilling.

LB: Did you know Jack Cohen, the guy from Rochester, who through B'nai B'rith, brought a lot of things down from a number of synagogues there?

AF: No, but afterwards all the others got into it.

LB: There was no planning.

AF: No planning. As I say, when we came we were told that we were the first ones and we were stopped at the gate; we had difficulty with Security, where subsequently things were arranged, but we came they didn't know what to do with us. I came to the gate; the guard is here, "What do you want to do?" "I want to come in". I identify myself. I have a load of things here I want to bring in. "You can't come in. You have a pass, you have [?]" "I come all the way here from Auburn and I'm not going to go away". I kind of fought my way in. Kids climbed all over the car, they wanted to get into the car, take a ride. Great experience for them. This was my own.

LB: Thank you. This is a story, like I said that I have not heard. I will try to include it; I think it's important.

LB: I'm at the Oswego Reunion with I'm -- what is your name?

KARL BADER: Bader, Karl Bader.

LB: Bader. Is that B..A..D..E..R?

KB: B..A..D..E..R.

LB: And what was your experience, before coming to Oswego? What was your experience before getting to the camp in Italy?

KB: Experience. We had been for three years in Italy, in a concentration camp. The camp was a good thing.

LB: Chiaramonte?

KB: Chiaramonte, yes. I can't complain about it. We had a good time. Sometimes we didn't have enough to eat. And that time, was the weather, in November, for example, it was raining and raining and it was tough. [?] didn't come in. But we came through.

LB: What were your experiences? What do you remember of the Oswego camp and of being brought there?

KB: The Oswego camp, for the first month we couldn't go out. We were interned. When we arrived we saw right away a fence and we know we are interned again. Not so bad as when we moved to Chiaramonte,. In Italy we know we had to stay in the camp. In Oswego after a month they gave us six hours or four hours in the town. But when we came back we had to report, police took our names. Food was excellent, too much food. [Background noise again] [?] I am an engineer. [?] I liked Russia.

LB: Were you an engineer before?

KB: Yes. They had a sewing machine; a sewing machine was for women who didn't know anything about sewing. I took care of the machines. The machines came from here, from the Fort, about forty machines. I took care of them. I had a good time in Oswego.

LB: Do you remember any of your meetings with townspeople, what was that like? People from Oswego?

KB: Yes, we met about sixteen families, I believe. We met.

LB: Were you invited into their homes?

KB: Not really. We met them, but I'm a handyman, too, maybe I shouldn't tell you that too. It was not allowed to work for [?] but I made the acquaintance of an American woman, she took care of the kitchen. And she introduced me to a man who had a dairy farm. And he delivered every day the mail. And one day the man came to me, recommended by that woman, and he said to me, "My son we have a bar mitzvah". And he needs somebody to help me break bread [?] So I went. Somebody saw me and will report me later on. They point me, in that direction, and say to me, "Did you work there?" I helped them out, [?] and I made so much money in a week. So I recognized right away they know everything. So said, "Yes, all right". For four weeks I couldn't go out anymore. Punishment for twenty dollars, for twenty dollars and tax, income tax, which I didn't pay. I also spent the twenty dollars. Somebody was jealous; I worked and made some money.

LB: Where did you go after you were released from Oswego?

KB: When we came first here . . .

LB: To New York City.

KB: To New York City.



[End of Tape one. Side one, Tape two]

KB: . . . in January, I don't remember the date, 1946. So we came here [?] through the Council of Jewish women. And they say, "Where do you want to go?" And we say, "We want to stay first in New York, we have a brother of my wife". And they say, "You can stay here then you can go wherever you want to". But we didn't know [?] So we stayed anyway.

LB: And you've lived here the rest of your life.

KB: For three weeks we were looking for an apartment. [?] we couldn't find one. So finally I found a cold flat on Fourth Avenue. We were living there four years. I found a shop, my wife was working, and my daughter she went right away to school. She went already Oswego to school. But we had to learn right away the language. We had to work hard and evenings I was too tired, and I came home at six, seven o'clock, and I start cooking and my wife shopping, and at eight o'clock a language course I fell asleep, I was too tired. So slowly we made it. So after four years I moved away from there, to Manhattan, I was much better off. Now today we live in Flushing, in a senior citizen home, [?], I don't know if you know it.

LB: I'm not from this area.

KB: OK, . . .

[General background, woman interviewer]

WOMAN INTERVIEWER: . . . the idea, it was your idea. Tell me about that, when it hit you, when it became . . .?

[GRAFTON]: It happened almost accidentally. I'd been in Staten Island the week before. And I found that there was a free port for commodities in Staten Island. Very interesting idea. They'd let goods come in without paying duties, from anyplace. Then they manufacture them, process them within the Freeport, and when it was advantageous they'd ship them out, then they would pay duty. I said why not for people, coming without papers, at least have a place to sit down, go to the

bathroom, raise their children, then when they regularize their situation, get their papers, then they could come out. And the President liked the idea, apparently, and went on. It went on. I had hoped it would be bigger than it was.

INTERVIEWER: Who were you that you could go to the President?

[GRAFTON]: Well, I wrote a column for the *New York Post* and I ran it in about seventy other papers, and a large daily audience, about five million, I believe. It was a literal column, it ran on, and I needed a subject for tomorrow. Great to write the first column but the Thursday of the seventeenth week, you're a little bit in trouble, and I remembered the Freeport, and it just came out of nowhere the "Freeport for people". And then I wrote – the idea I heard in Washington it was catching on, it was being talked about so I kept writing columns on the subject, like throwing matches, you know, lit matches to keep it burning, and finally they did it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever go to Washington at any point, to deal with it?

[GRAFTON]: With this project? No, not on that project. I used to go to Washington quite frequently.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever go to Oswego?

[GRAFTON]: No, I never went to Oswego, that's how busy in a silly way one can be in this world. That's right, I never . . .

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever see the dynamics of the mechanics of how . . .?

[GRAFTON]: I never did, not a thing. Just threw out the idea like a little firecracker and let it go.

INTERVIEWER: And what is your contact to the survivors with the refugees over the years?

[GRAFTON]: None.

INTERVIEWER: And why did you come here today?

[GRAFTON]: Ruth Gruber was writing her book and she checked into the origins of this thing, and I gave her my original columns, and she mentioned me in her book, and then from that the refugees made contact with me.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Now before I [??] to somebody about some other political involvement that you had?

[GRAFTON]: Oh, that was then. The Freeport was my second biggest job. The biggest one was I personally – it's not an exaggeration, I personally overthrew the Italian crown, the oldest throne in Europe, dating from I think, 1230, the House of Savoy. I used to do a Saturday night radio broadcast, WOR, and we were about to make a deal with Victor Emmanuel the Second, the so-called King of Italy. I broadcast an essay which called him the Moronic King. Well, the OWI [Office of War Information] put it on world-wide radio, it made an international scandal, it broke up the negotiations, it destroyed that deal, and it destroyed the throne. Roosevelt denounced me – and we had been good friends – he denounced me quite bitterly, papers wrote editorials against me.

I got a call from the White House, "Come on down". So I came down. I was ushered into the Oval Room and there was Roosevelt and he said, "You're right he is a moron. The best I can do after a public insult is a private apology".

INTERVIEWER: So you did have some kind of a relationship with Roosevelt. How did you view him as President and . . .

[GRAFTON]: I thought he was a man of genius and a great, great leader. I really did.

INTERVIEWER: Can you comment of course in retrospect his lack of action . . .

[GRAFTON]: But he was leading a country, very different from the country today. Today we have like 45 million college graduates; I don't know what the number was then but I'll bet it was under five million. It was what Mencken called to a certain degree the booboisie. And he had to take this bitter, torn country and lead it into the struggle against Hitler. So I sympathize with the time he had to cut corners, and compromise; he did. One of the glories of the American system is that nobody has his own way, and I like that. In this case, he did a masterly job really, a masterly job, of carrying

us into this struggle against Hitler, which he knew was necessary, and it was. And in the course of that he had to make deals with local political leaders, and he had to do things about the refugees I don't think he really wanted to do. He was carrying this immense apparatus along with him, this bitter, torn – we don't remember how bad it was when isolationist and the American Firsters were almost in charge for a period.

INTERVIEWER: Ruth mentioned various reasons that he may have allowed the refugees into Oswego. Would you care to comment on that?

[GRAFTON]: He made a what?

INTERVIEWER: Various different reasons why he might have. Do you have any reason why he agreed to?

[GRAFTON]: Why he agreed to it? Well, he liked the idea. It was a good gesture and a thousand is not that many. I can understand that. It was a token, but it was a good token, certainly a great token for the thousand that made it. More than a token for them, it saved their lives. I think he wanted to do something on that side; he had stopped other shiploads of refugees from coming here. I used to have to wind myself up to forgive him once in a while. I always forgave him.

INTERVIEWER: Did you at least attack him in your columns?

[GRAFTON]: Oh yes, that was where my power lay. He used to tell me that was worth at least 35 votes in the House of Representatives. He would say to a Representative, "You do that, Grafton's going to write a piece against you".

INTERVIEWER: Larry, do you have anything . . . ?

LARRY: I was going to ask if you would care to comment about, first of all, about Truman's reluctance to reverse Roosevelt's decision. It took quite a long time and there was a lot of talk about sending the refugees back. What were the politics of that decision?

[GRAFTON]: I didn't know Truman as well as I knew Roosevelt. I had hope for him, great hope for him. It was a weird election, he squeaked through; no, this was before the second election, that's right. But I never got to know Truman as much as I did Roosevelt. Roosevelt was Eastern, liberal, had an education similar to mine; we were to a degree, simpatico

LARRY: Did you follow the Dickstein hearings, the Congressional hearings on the Oswego refugees and whether they would be . . . ?

[GRAFTON]: Yes, I read them all. But by the time I was off on ten different subjects, always traveling around the country, doing things. I really never had time to sit at a desk and follow everything through. But I did think of myself as an idea man, let other people do the dull, administrative work which has to be done.

WOMAN INTERVIEWER: What a good idea it was.

[GRAFTON]: Well, I feel really good about it and I always will. Thank you.

[End of interviews. 10 minutes of Tape 2, Side 1]

*Transcribed by jCook, September 2005*