

OH 280
RECOLLECTIONS OF REFUGEEES
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
STEFFI STEINBERG
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STEFFIE STEINBERG: . . . if you asked me what you asked me, I have to stop a little earlier than that. I came from Berlin. I was raised and went to school in Berlin. In 1938 my mother and I followed my father, who had left already in '36, into Italy where he had established himself in a new and different business. We went there to stay, that was our destination out of Germany. But no sooner were we there, about three months after Mussolini came out with the laws against the Jews. He had to give up his business and we had to give up the apartment, etc. Then we were . . . by that time it was 1939. And in 1940 the war broke out. We were then sort of in limbo, trying to go either to England or to America, but we had no sponsor.

So in 1940, June 10th, the war broke out in Italy and on June 18th they came to get my father and put him in jail like all the other Jewish people from either Germany, Poland, Austria, etc. For four weeks he was in the regular prison in Turin, where we lived, and from there he was transferred to an internment camp – if you can call it that – in Italy. It was not to be confounded in any way or sort to a German concentration camp. This was an internment camp and they used all kinds of . . . he came to a castle. They used also convents, hospitals, etc. He was in that location for about three months, till October.

My mother and I in the meantime were sent also away from Turin, but on our own; within a forty-eight hour limit, we had to present ourselves in the center of Italy in a province called Chieti and from there they sent us to a little village called Villa Santa Maria in that province and there we were in free internment. That means we could stay in our own place; we got a rent, furnished room, and there we stayed. As I said before, in the same year, in October my father died in his location. And we were allowed by the goodness – first of the Italian government as a whole and then by . . . under the auspices of the mayor in the little village where we were. We could travel to this other province north of us where my father had passed away as we found out when we got there.

After his funeral we came back to Villa Santa Maria and stayed there for the next three-and-a-half years. Treated extremely well by the local people, who were all very lovely, very simple, but had never even heard of the word “Jew”, didn’t know what a Jew was. And when they said, “Well, what are you?” And we said, “We are German”. They said, “Oh, well then, we are friends. [Yo amo?] amici”.

So as I said, from the mayor on down, everybody was very kind and very nice, and we had . . . as far as that was concerned, no problem, but we had no home, anymore; we had no husband or

father anymore. We stayed there under primitive circumstances, very cold in the winter; I had a lot of frostbite and all that.

Then in '43, about October '43, the Germans who had come up from the southern part of Italy occupied the very village we were in and then we were in the greatest danger. We hid with an Italian family for two months or so, and finally the mayor who had protected us up to this point . . . when the Germans had asked about the internees, he said, "I don't know where they are, they disappeared on the day of the armistice". He happened to come to the Municipio, or town hall there, and said to my mother, "Maybe you better find the Allies because I'm not sure and I can protect you any longer. We don't know".

The Germans had by then blown up the bridges and were gone but they kept coming back at night in very unpredictable ways and did all kinds of mischief, in some ways very, very bad things. In our village, as I said, nobody was found. Some ran away that night and the rest of us were hidden. But the next village over, a lot of internees were found and were transported to concentration camps. Then we . . . as soon as the mayor said that, you know, me and my mother were nervous wrecks throughout the whole thing, and I was [?].

And so we packed the few clothes we had which was all, and rented a mule accompanied by his master, a farmer who led us through the no-man's-land which had all been mined but which we heard the Italians had detected the mines and had blown them up, or whatever. So we walked through there for seven-and-a-half hours through the mountains, until we got to the place where there was the Allied military government. We stayed there overnight, totally exhausted, in some school, on the floor, and then the next day they transported us first by flatbed trucks, then by railroad, to the Allies, finally in Bari, B-A-R-I.

And there was a receiving camp, refugee; I don't know what they called it. For all kinds, Yugoslavs, partisans, whoever had run away, from wherever. It was under British, governed by the British. And there we stayed maybe a month, but we were free to move out if we wanted to, and we moved into town. My mother and myself worked for the British officers because we spoke Italian and they didn't and we were interpreters and clerical help, etc. And then one day, what was the name of the . . . you know better probably by now?

LB: *The Henry Gibbons?*

SS: That was the boat. But the Captain in Bari - - I know it from the book; it'll come to me - made an announcement in the camp that whoever wanted to register to come to the United States, there was this invitation by Roosevelt for a thousand people to come over. And someone, a friend of ours, brought us this news, so my mother registered herself and myself for this action, invitation by the

President. Eight days later she went back and she was told we were accepted because we had no longer any relatives in Europe and I had no father and nobody, just my mother and myself, so we were accepted for this. My mother asked . . . said “just for the duration of the war?” My mother asked that officer, “Well what would happen to us after the war?” And the officer in charge said, “Well, you’ll be returned to your home country”. And my mother said, “I have no home country anymore”. And he said, “Well, that’ll all be different after the war. Not to worry”.

So we signed the document that we understood this, that we were coming for the duration of the war. And we were again gathered back in the camp and eventually came over on the *Henry Gibbons*, the story of which you, I’m sure, you know already.

LB: Do you have any stories in particular that you remember when you were on the ship, in passage?

SS: No, I remember the night when we were all fogged in, because of U-boat activity; no, it wasn’t even night, I think it was during the day. I know my mother was seasick throughout and was stretched out on this cot that we had, which [?] of cots and she was lying there eating lemons in order to keep herself from being too seasick. I, on the other hand, was up on deck and we had these little English lessons by Ruth Gruber and socialized among ourselves as best we could. We didn’t have much to wear, it was hot. And before the trip started we were about five days in the harbor before it started out, and people got very restless, worried what would happen, and why are we not moving, and did we do the right thing in coming, in accepting the invitation. But then we got moving, and I think the whole thing, including those five days, I believe we were seventeen days on the ship.

I do remember one little story. It doesn’t concern myself so much. There was a family with twin boys, their name was Flatau. They came for their food; it was mess hall style. The first one came and got his portion of food and the next one came a few people later and the guy looked at him and he said, “You just were here”. And he slapped his face and it was his brother, you know. That was one of the little stories.

Well, it was far from comfortable; it was a rough trip. Fortunately, for some of us [?] And we arrived in New York and we were put on smaller ships, which I believe went over to Hoboken where we . . . next day or same day, I don’t know. No, I think we spent a night on the big ship and then we were transported in the smaller boats. There we had the event of the delousing process and then after that . . . which was very unpleasant and many people had their clothes burned, etc. . . . we got onto the Lackawanna Railroad which was like [?] and traveled to Oswego. And I remember getting off the train and it was sunshine, it was August, and everything. Some people saw the fence and they said, “What, we are getting into a fenced-in situation here?”; got quite upset. I, of course,

was very young and the whole thing was very adventuresome. So we got locked into the camp and there was much activity, *Life* photographers, etc.

Then the first thing was that we were handed out sheets, I think, and towels and assigned to our respective barracks and rooms, which was a very, very good thing because already on the boat there was discussions about who would room together with whom in which barracks. Should we go by nationalities or by friendships, etc., but it was all prearranged which took away all the squabbles and any difficulties that would have been.

And we had a nice two little rooms in this barracks which we arranged as best we could. It got heat, outside was cold, and in the winter the icicles were hanging from the roof, etc. But this was, of course, summer. We ate in the mess hall.

The somewhere, it must have been late August, early September, Mr. Faust, the principal of the high school, came over and started to speak to some of us young people and encouraged us to come to the high school. I hadn't been to any, having left Germany in '38 – this was now '44, I hadn't gone to school in six years. It had never occurred to me that I would ever go to school again, although when I came to Italy I was of school age and it was natural for me to go on. But as things developed there I couldn't. So in the meantime I had a couple of girlfriends and we all decided despite the fact that we were a couple years older than high school age, we accepted the principal's invitation, which was a very gracious action on his part. We entered the high school and he must have had a hell of a job trying to integrate us into this high school which only now I realize what difficulty he must have gone through but he did.

We had a very lovely experience there. We got right into the various classes, all the subjects that were compulsory: English, Social Studies, arithmetic, I think I took business arithmetic, and then we could take business subjects. And all the teachers were lovely, and I enjoyed it tremendously. We went there in the morning and at lunchtime the local children went home but we stayed because the trip back to the camp would have been too much, so all of us from Fort Ontario stayed in the classrooms. Thereby we were always sort of together, whereas in the classes we were all mixed up throughout the school.

LB: Did you have any friendships with the American students?

SS: Yes, I had a friend there whose name was Virginia Page, who, I think, became an actress, a very lovely girl. And then there was a girl, called I think Elaine Gargas, who also was very nice. And my girlfriend from the camp, who unfortunately is no longer living, and I went to visit in her house; I think they owned the very nice coffee shop called Savas on the main street in Oswego where occasionally we indulged in banana splits and such. They were all very nice, the girls, and there

probably were others whose names escape me now. They were friendly, we had no complaints; we enjoyed it here very much.

It turned out to be year. We skipped from . . . I and five others went through the subjects in a very quick way and then in 1945, in June, Mr. Faust made it possible for us to take the Regents examination by having language exams come from Albany that we could take in order to give us the sufficient number of points. Of course we all had very good previous education which helped us a great deal, plus the languages we spoke. So we took these language exams plus all the other subjects that we had taken in school and we passed the Regents, six of us, then graduated from Oswego High School and participated in the graduation exercise which all a very wonderful and lovely experience. Throughout the whole thing Mr. Faust was just – was and is – a wonderful man who really put himself out without any personal gain to himself in any kind of a way. He really is unique. We had lovely, lovely teachers. One was Miss Baker who everybody remembers; unfortunately she also has passed away since then. Mr. Riley and Miss Riley who taught us typing and Miss Powers. And everybody was just very, very nice.

And in Oswego in the afternoon we went back and did our homework; I can only speak of myself. My mother worked in the camp, first she . . . at the beginning she was a secretary to one of the American officials who administered the camp. Then later on . . . then course, the refugees themselves took over the administration; and there were other jobs and she was a so-called quote-unquote house leader of our barracks. I have a little piece of paper which shows that she was “elected” by common consent. So that kept her busy. Once a month, I think, we all had kitchen duty – peeling potatoes primarily I remember, and other such chores. It was cold, as I said before, the wind blew like the dickens.

But for us young people it was a good experience because we were involved in our school. We were away the better part of the day from the camp and therefore, not involved in the little political things that went on in a community such as this. I personally . . . I knew of some of the things that went on and so on, but I had a good experience there. In the evening every so often, they had dances and socials and little plays put on, which was all very pleasant. There was some professional people there and amateur people who sang or acted, etc. That was part of the fun.

LB: How did your mother adjust to camp life?

SS: My mother, well she adjusted. She became friendly with other people, most Yugoslavs, Germans and Austrians; she also took some of these classes which I believe were organized by [ORT?]. She took a beauty culture course; she took a shorthand course. You know, she was a perfect secretary in

Germany so she took easily to that. She took some kind of a business course; I'm not sure what it was.

Well, of course, after a while there was much unrest because we didn't know what was becoming of us. And this insecurity after a while, started to weigh on people, not knowing would we be sent back or what because that was really the agreement. Some people, of course, had sons who were in the American Army or other relatives who lived in the states. And nobody, except for a few Yugoslavs who went back, really wanted to go back. So there was much upsetness after maybe half a year or so; what was really going to happen to us. The [deal?] was, we were going to be sent back.

LB: Do you remember when Roosevelt died?

SS: Yes, yes, that was extremely upsetting, extremely upsetting. It was a sad, sad, day, although he was ailing at the end. It was a tremendous blow.

LB: Did you every feel differently? Walter Greenberg mentioned that now that he knows what he knows he feels very differently about Roosevelt.

SS: Yes, I think as good as it was to get this invitation and to come over here – I mean, we all signed this paper but still hoping against hope actually that it wouldn't be so. You do certain things . . . we were at this point liberated; we had liberated ourselves at that point. We were not in physical danger anymore except for maybe bombing by the part of the Germans, but as far as immediate danger to us physically or of being deported that no longer existed. I felt like . . . I was in Italy but I was liberated. As it turns out . . . I don't know had Roosevelt lived how he would have extricated himself out of the commitment he made to Congress of the State Department, etc.

But now Truman took over . . . and, oh, there was a committee formed by the resignation . . . I neglected to mention him before . . . the Director of the camp, Mr. Smart, Joseph Smart, who was a lovely, lovely man. Everybody sees it from their little angle, from their point of view, from their little niche. Mine was different than my mother's, or a hundred other people – thousands – that had totally other objectives, were older and as I said, spent the whole day there. And had different contacts with the townspeople than I had. So I suppose if you interview different people, everybody has their own angle on those whole thing,

LB: Going back, you were talking about Truman . . .

SS: Yes, all I know is that Truman came to power, I guess, right away after Roosevelt had passed away, and I also know that this committee was formed headed by Mr. Smart and lot of the people in town also became members of it, such as Mr. Faust and others. After a while it seemed they with their petition to the government and their paper that they wrote on this – which I also have somewhere – it was pushed through Congress that we could now immigrate as regular immigrants. It came through, as far as I remember, in early December of '43 [*Could she mean 1945?*]. It didn't take very long after that the immigration officials arrived in the camp and set up offices.

And three of us girls, I and two of my girlfriends who all had gone – after we had graduated from the high school we went to the business school in town, called Rochester Business Institute, where we had continued our studies for business purposes. I had been accepted by the State Teachers College in Oswego but discussing it with my girlfriends we decided we better get ready for life, if we come out of here and settle in the states, so we opted to go to the business school instead. So we had acquired good skills, knowledge, and so on, so we became the secretaries to these immigration officials who came in. Everybody was interviewed there and papers were drawn up for immigration purposes.

LB: Do you remember your response upon first hearing that Truman had made the announcement?

SS: Well, of course, it was tremendous. Everybody was very, very happy that this was now a reality and that we could stay or re-immigrate, whichever way you want to express it. It certainly was a great victory and a wonderful thing. Again, as in the beginning, the government acted very swiftly and well in getting us out then as soon as possible. It worked very smoothly; every couple of days three buses left and went via Buffalo to Niagara Falls, Canada, where we went through the formality of expressing our desire to immigrate to the United States.

LB: What sort of plans had you or your mother made for after being let into the United States? Did you have any relatives here?

SS: My mother had some cousins, a couple of cousins, an aunt and some friends, primarily in New York. You're asking me what plans we had made, when?

LB: From the time you heard Truman's announcement to the time that you were going to be crossing the border to Niagara Falls?

SS: Well, you knew you were coming to New York. We corresponded with this one cousin of my mother's . . .

[End of Side 1]

SS: We figured somehow . . . we had no idea what things would be like. She had acquired this beauty culture knowledge and I had secretarial knowledge. . . and so on. So we came and this cousin of my mother's picked us up in Grand Central Station as we arrived and a very old school friend of mine from Berlin found a room for us, a furnished room in Flushing. My mother did take a job in Brooklyn in a hairdresser's place but she found out this was not for her. She soon gave it up, within a week. Then she started to work in a glove factory; subsequently that made dolls where she painted the faces of dolls and so, until she got an office job eventually through a former official from Oswego who lives in New Jersey. By the way, I don't know if you heard of him: Ed Huberman. I cannot tell you exactly his title or his particular function was, but he was one of the officials. And I and my friend Edith Weiss were very friendly with him, his wife and his children. We babysat for him in the camp. I still exchange Christmas greeting with them to this day. And through him my mother got a job in a large office, which now by the way exists two minutes from here but at that time was on Twenty-Sixth Street and Charles Avenue in New York. [?] a local operation which manufactures the ingredients for ice cream, Popsicles. And she worked there seventeen years.

And I, very soon, got a job as a secretary. In the first summer my mother and I, we went to a bungalow colony where we helped in the kitchen and I helped serving behind the ice cream counter, etc.

LB: Ruth Gruber quotes you as saying, "Oswego prepared me completely for life".

SS: Well, it's true. It started really in the high school where we had excellent instructions in business subjects, with very good teachers. I perfected my English; I knew English I had had it in school in Berlin, several years, but of course no fluent speaking, etc. So there I learned the business subjects, then I continued in the business school. To this day I am working as a secretary in a large importing office now, on a part-time basis.

LB: Any other story or anecdote which in particular stands out in your mind? Then I will . . .

SS: In Oswego . . . well, the beginning of course, when the townspeople came to the fence there and so on. I don't remember myself going to that fence. I don't. I know whoever I was in contact with . . . which really was mainly the school people, was nothing but good. Everybody was kind and

friendly and we felt really at home in that school. It was to me a perfectly good experience which . . . very, very positive feelings about it. As far as Oswego; shops were nice, I had no . . . the shopkeepers or whoever we knew, other than that I had my friendships were also the school.

LB: Your article talks about you “dressing American”.

SS: Oh, yes, yes, yes, we had to have the matching socks, right? [Laughing] In those days, the long sweaters were very much en vogue and the socks had to match the sweater exactly and that kind of thing. Of course we were very impressed by all that and enjoyed being part of it.

LB: OK, thank you very much. Just listening . . . I told Walter this too yesterday . . .

[End of interview, about one-eighth of side 2]

Transcribed by jCook. Fall 2005
Transcriptionist editorial notes are seen in italics