

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

OH 275

FORT ONTARIO REFUGEE PROJECT, Reel #6

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Interviewee: Walter Greenberg

Interviewer: Laurie Baron

Laurie Baron: O.K., actually they're not going to hear me, so it doesn't much matter. I know, before I start, if there are things you don't want to talk about, let me know.

Walter Greenberg: I'm fairly open. It's all right, I've been closed for many, many years, but if something would make me uncomfortable I will tell you, but I do not think that will be the case.

LB: The hardest questions will be at the beginning.

WG: O.K.

LB: Just really went on before Oswego, before Italy, where you were born, what experiences you had between '39, '44. Really, what eventually brought you to the camp in Italy?

WG: O.K. I can briefly tell you that I was born in Northern Italy, Fuime, which is on the Adriatic. After we were through, we went back to Yugoslavia. My father came from Austria, my mother from Yugoslavia, and when Austrian Jews were being persecuted, they fled into Northern Italy, and my father smuggled them at night into Yugoslavia thinking that it would be better for them there. Unfortunately, we know that Yugoslavia was one of the bad countries. He was caught, put in jail. My parents owned a little hotel in Fuime, and after he was released, he was told that it wasn't safe for him anymore and that we should leave. At that point already, Jewish children couldn't go to school; subsequently, my only formal education before I came to this country was a few months in kindergarten. Jews couldn't hire Gentiles which made it impossible to operate a business and my parents were lucky in the fact that they bought a visa to enter China, and I still have the passport with the Chinese visa, and that was our exit out of Italy. We went from there to North Africa to Benghazi and there we paid passage for a boat to take us to Israel. The boat never showed up. The guy just took our money and ran. Italy entered the war formally. We were put in a concentration camp in North Africa, and were there for six months, and then we went back to Italy. We stayed in a jail called [?] in Naples. The accommodations were not so nice, but the view was magnificent and we

stayed there for 21 days, and men were separated from women and children. After we were reunited, my mother asked me to run to my father and I hadn't recognized him; he had aged that much.

From there we went to the first concentration camp in Italy. The reason we were put in jail was that the camp wasn't ready yet. We were sent to a camp called Ferramonte, which is in Calabria, and we were there for about two years. My mother got malaria there, which had stayed with her for many, many years. She doesn't have it now. It would come back, usually around Rosh Hashanah, every year, and we got out of the camp and went to a place which was about 100 kilometers south of Rome, and we were part of a program which was very unique, which was called "Liberi Confini" which actually means (it's an enigma) because Liberi is Free, and Confini is Confinement, so you can't be one or the other, but it really was a program where you weren't allowed to work, earn money, and you reported to the authorities twice a day.

I must say that the Italian people were very kind as a whole, and that the camp, as a concentration camp, it can't compare to the other ones. Not that people didn't die there, not that there wasn't suffering, but there wasn't a mass program of extermination. When Italy capitulated and Germany took over, there were 13 Jews living in this village called [Carsoli?] which was on the main road to Rome. The Mayor, who knew we were Jewish, had asked my father to interpret for the German Commandant who had come in, and he had asked my father how come he spoke German, and my father said he was educated in Austria, which he was. He was a pastry chef and that he was staying in [Carsoli?] because of the bombardments in Rome. One of the questions asked of him was if there were any Jews in the village. Of course, the answer was "No." With German efficiency, he told my father to be there early next morning to go to Rome. He wanted to see his pastry shop, which of course, didn't exist. So that night all of us got together and we escaped into the mountains, near Abruzzi, the land of [?] and the Commandant, on finding out that a Jew had outwitted him, had made a vendetta and they tried to find us. We were on the go for quite a while, for about a month I would say, maybe longer. It's hard to really trace. I remember the periods in blocks of seasons really, and not in years – but mostly seasons, that's my framework. When we finally felt that it was safe, we stayed in one place, and the Italian peasants were very kind, they were very good to us, and a number of times they helped us, not just with food and shelter – I will give you one example. Two Carabinieri had caught my father and he had no I.D. on him and it was obvious that he was Jewish. They told him "we are going in for a hair cut and when we come out, we don't want to see you." They really gave him his life because at that time, any Jew that was caught, had to be turned over to the Germans, and they were sent to the extermination camps. And, so I think that when we say, that rather when people say we followed orders, we had to follow orders. I will even buy that, but sometimes people have to follow orders, but not 24 hours a day, seven days a week for four years, or five years. There are times that people can be kind.

And so we stayed in these mountains which were very hard, very harsh, peasants were very poor, and we existed on chestnuts, grapes and polenta, which is cornmeal. My mother's favorite story which she repeats numerous amounts of times, is that, she would send me "go and see so and so and ask for me." It was at supper time and they would say "sit down with us" and my mother would come in and say "is my son here?" and they

would say to please sit down, and then my father would come in, and they knew what we were doing, and we knew what they were doing, but it was a very humane way of saying “Come sit and eat with us.” So, my memory of the people there, although it was a very sad time, it was good to realize that there was kindness in human beings.

What happened is the mountains were so high that the allied armies couldn't conquer them so they actually went around them. Subsequently, Rome was liberated before we were. We heard at night, the bombardments of Monte Cassino, which we went on the way to Naples to come to this country, and we saw that the place was devastated. There weren't any buildings that were really standing, and my mother had heard on the radio, which she wasn't supposed to hear, that Rome was liberated, so we knew we were free. It was too dangerous because there were German deserters running around and all kinds of people. We walked and hitch-hiked down to the main road and American soldiers in trucks took us to Rome. My mother went to [?] to register and to find out about her brother who she thought had perished in Yugoslavia. She found someone there who knew of my uncle and we were reunited that day, and he said “by the way, there is a list that you can put your name on and they are taking a thousand people to stay for the duration of the war to America.” My parents put their names on the list, and two weeks later, we were on the S. S. Gibbons, on the way to Oswego.

LB: You remember if they had signed the famous paper?

WG: Oh sure, everybody signed it, and we were sure we would only come here for the duration of the war, and then we would go back.

LB: What was your initial reaction, or their initial reaction at the prospect of going to America under the conditions of having to return?

WG: I thought about that a lot, and when you are asking me these questions, in all fairness, if you had interviewed me a few years ago, it would have been really an independent opinion but I interviewed people myself and I have listened to so many stories, I can't, in all honesty, tell you it is my independent thought or feeling. I think, because this question has been in my mind a great deal, what kind of a person would after all those years of persecution take the risk and come over, and then again, what risk was it. O.K., we had nothing in Italy, we had no homes, it was starting anew, and I think that coming to this country meant that at least for the duration of the war there would be food and shelter and, hopefully, school and the normalities of life, and I think that's why they came. That's why my parents made the decision, I think, and this is my opinion, I think that it took people that had – they were wanderers. I think they were maybe willing to take the chance and I think it took a special, a different kind of a person to make that decision. I remember being on the boat and I didn't have any shoes. We had come to Rome with almost absolutely nothing, and it really was, for me as a child, it was starting life. I think for my parents, it was soaking in the sun and being able to rest, not physically, because they wanted to work, but being able to rest

mentally, and sort of decompress maybe. I think they were maybe willing to take the chance and I think it took a special, a different kind of a person to make that decision.

I think that Fort Ontario afforded that because it was with other people. It was a group experience, and I think that survival, almost any level has to be, in order to survive, has to be through a group, with a group. I think the unit of family of my mother, my father, and myself, and the other ten Jews that we lived with in this little village and how we supported each other, and when we did escape into the mountains - we didn't know where anybody else was. There was only one man, Professor Radler, who was my teacher. He taught me Math. He was a Mathematics Professor and he taught me enough that I was able to go to school in Oswego and hold my own with other children. He was the only one that knew where everybody else was, and the reason for this was that he was a bachelor, and a group decision was made that if he gets caught and would be tortured, it would be least likely for him to divulge where the others were, as opposed to somebody with a family.

Getting back to Oswego, I think that going to school with other children, with people – I can't say they were my friends because we had just met, but forgive the pun, we were in the same boat. I couldn't get myself to speak about Oswego for many, many years, and I still can't come to grips why. When we had the reunion, which was a very, very wonderful experience for me, again, it was important as a group we went back as a group, and we saw it as a group. Lake Ontario wasn't really a lake, it was an ocean that separated the culture and the turmoil from where we came into the new world, America, which did give us all the bounty that this land can give, the freedom, the opportunity to study and to work, but yet there was something about it that made me uncomfortable, for the lack of a better word.

When we were in Syracuse before we went to Fort Ontario for the dedication, I had always remembered the fence being a barbed wire fence, and the other people said that it wasn't barbed wire, it was chicken mesh. Ruth Gruber said the same thing. When we got to Fort Ontario, obviously the barracks were gone and it was changed considerably but there was a little bit of the old fence there, a chicken mesh fence but on top of it was barbed wire, so I as a child, felt it being barbed wire from the ground up, and I think in retrospect, it's very hard to tell you how I felt as a 13 or 12 year old. This is many years afterwards now, but I feel that when I was in captivity, I adjusted and I knew how to survive, and when I had freedom, I knew how to dwell within the freedom that was given me. But, I think that the 18 months in Oswego, although I went to school and I had lovely teachers and the people were kind, and I had doctors to take care of me when I was sick, to me, it was a period of being in limbo. I still felt that I was different from other children and I couldn't comprehend because I didn't understand the complexities of what was going on, and I think that...I would like to tell you a little episode which has nothing to do with this. When the Iranian hostages were able to, for Christmas- as a Christmas present, were allowed to give some messages via television to their loved ones, one father told his son "and don't forget to feed the wild birds." To me that was so beautiful because here was a man in captivity, unjustly, not knowing tomorrow if he was going to live, and he told his son to feed the wild birds. I think that if someone were to ask me – what is the difference between how I feel, as opposed to how somebody else who didn't experience those years of probably the most vicious brutality recorded in

history, that man did to man is – that if you take an animal, if you take a bird and you cage that bird for one day, that bird will never, ever, be the same as the bird that went free all their lives. And, I think that one adjusts to the pain of what happened or what didn't happen or what one should have done and didn't do, the guilt of why did I survive as opposed to when somebody else didn't. I think that the crux of it is that one day you're free and you can lead a normal life, and the next day, you're a slave. And, I can be a hundred years old, I will always remember it, and I think that's what makes me different.

LB: Passover must be a holiday that always has a deeper significance after you had that experience.

WG: Well, I – the first – when were in [Casoli?], somehow my mother made Matzo ball soup. There was some Matzo and it was good, from Rome. I don't know how, but I must confess that the first thought I felt it's only a soup, and it's only Matzo. It's the first religious rite, the first thing that I had ever done in my life as a Jew, because, especially at that time, my name was Nino Montaverdi; I spoke Italian.

To speak German, which I speak, would have meant death. The whole point was we were hiding, we were Italian, very few people knew that we were Jewish and to get Matzo during the war. By the way, when we were hiding in the mountains, my parents sent me to Rome to pass an examination and it was one of the few times that I was away from my parents and it was a very scary experience, but education was so important that it took on a very unusual route during the war. I stayed with children that were orphans at an orphanage home, and my parents had friends in Rome, a couple that had no children, they had two dogs, and their dogs ate better than most people at that time. They took me out on a Sunday and they gave me a wonderful meal, and when I came back, I told the other boys that I had eaten, and the older one said "well, this isn't your lucky day, because if you had gone another day, we had a meal that was unbelievable." He started explaining the meal, and through the middle of it, I understood that it didn't exist, that he was just telling me that, and that's the first time I understood what the word embarrassment meant. It wasn't a nice way to learn it. When Rome was liberated, we did get back; unfortunately, the orphanage had taken a direct hit and probably most of the children died.

LB: Are there any particular incidents or encounters you had in Oswego, that stands out in your mind, or things that happened to your parents, whether they were between yourselves, townspeople, in the school, or with government authorities who ran the camp?

WG: Yes, I think there was a number of them. First, the children in the school received us well. There was an occasion when we left the camp in the beginning, kids would make snowballs out of ice and throw them, but I think no more than kids would over here. I know that my teachers were very kind to us, and I was sick once, I had the mumps in the camp, and my teacher came and she brought me a present and inquired how I felt, and she talked to my parents. When I got better, she invited us. She was a lady that wasn't married and was living with her parents,

and we were invited to their home and I remember they served me tomato juice. It was the first time I tasted American tomato juice, or any tomato juice. My parents were served probably liquor or beer, and we spent a lovely afternoon there and it was an unbelievable experience for my parents and for me, because to be invited by – she represented, as a teacher, not only represented Americans, but she represented authority because a teacher, to my parents, was a teacher, she commanded respect, and it was a nice experience.

LB: Do you remember her name?

WG: Her name was Sullivan, Miss Sullivan.

LB: As I say, a couple of women who I interviewed were teachers who had people back, they couldn't get over how when people in the camp came in their house, just the notion of being in someone's house after not having lived in a house so long, describing how people would just relish going through the rooms.

WG: That's right. I think, not for me, because I really didn't remember. I left Fuime when I was six, so I really didn't remember what normal life was. I, for me, normal life was living in the desert in North Africa, living in Abruzzi, which was a very high cold mountain chain, and in Central Italy. I really wasn't civilized as one would, what the word means, but for my parents, I think it was relearning of what normal life really could be, and what it was.

When we were hiding once in the mountains, the Germans usually came most often very early in the morning, and all the villagers in the Abruzzo, very small, tiny little villages with cobblestone main roads, with houses on either side, and what the Germans would do was march at night, get there before sunrise, place a few machine gun nests around it and come in, and everybody had to stay in their house, and whoever went out was just gunned down. At that time there were a lot of American and British soldiers that had escaped from the prison of war camps after Italy capitulated, and Jews who had escaped and were wandering around the mountains. But this one time they came in the afternoon, and we were living in a stable, it was a converted stable and we were upstairs in the hayloft, and we were very, very quiet. It was my parents, myself, and another couple, and my father out of fear, (we were eating some bread and jam) and he continued eating because I think he was so afraid that he just couldn't stop eating. We heard one soldier call another one "Hans, [German] Hans I have here one." To this day I don't know what he had, he could have had a chicken he could have had a little pig, he could have had an old man to torture, he could have had a woman to rape. He could have had anybody. "I have one" meant that in those days, it didn't mean much. Human life and anything else were the same. So, getting back to being invited, O.K., only maybe a few months later or half a year later, to somebody's house, the juxtaposition is enormous, and there were simple acts of kindness, but they were very important.

LB: Do you have specific memories of the Boy Scout Troop?

WG: Oh sure, oh sure.

LB: Any stories.

WG: Well, I didn't realize until recently how it influenced me as a person. First of all, I was part of a Boy Scout Troop; I was also a leader in the Cub Scouts. I was very active, I was very proud of my uniform coming from a kind of place where uniforms meant terror. To have my uniform which meant goodness, be prepared, help others, don't cheat, and all the values that the Boy Scouts, the love of nature which I liked. Our Boy Scout leader was a very kind man. He used to come around with his two children sometimes, and I think, to put in a nut shell, I think that he was, in a way, a father to us, the way our parents or fathers couldn't perform. Not that they didn't perform well, but on a different level, because he had lived his normal life in a free society, and he was fun to be with. It was a good, happy time. I remember we had to go on a hike and a friend of mine had to go. We were told, I don't remember whether it was two miles or five miles (it's not important), and he said if anybody wants to pick you up, you are not allowed to hitch-hike. We were Boy Scouts and in order to get a badge whatever task, you have to walk, and this car stopped and he asked us to come in. We were very indignant and we said "no, we can't, we have to do the right thing" and I think that stayed with me to do the right thing. When I got back to Oswego at the reunion, we went with two cars because I had crew and equipment and my friends who had volunteered their labor to do this project were with me in one car with my son, my wife and I. [long gap] the equipment were in the first car. As I got to Fort Ontario, I started to cry. I don't know why. I really don't know. It felt good, but nevertheless there were tears and maybe it was remembering we were so different at that time. I mean, most people can say "I was born in this place, in that house, my grandparents lived in this house, I went summer vacation in this camp, I went to see my uncles." For us, there wasn't any of that, and I think that possibly, the camp encompassed all these human feelings that one has.

LB: Do you remember what your quarters were like in the camp?

WG: Yes, we lived in barracks. We had 2 ½ rooms, we had a little kitchen, and a bedroom for my parents and a bedroom for myself. We had a bathroom out in the hall and showers. I liked my room, I was very happy in my room. I used to listen to the radio and the night programs I wasn't supposed to. It was comfortable. I wouldn't think it being comfortable now, but it was very comfortable then, I think there was a hunger. I think we hungered so much to learn about America and I think that the teachers were able to satisfy this hunger to learn about American history and the four freedoms, and the Civil War. It was just a wonderful experience and it was something to really dig one's feet into and learn as much as possible.

LB: You never thought about the possibility that you might be going back to Italy?

WG: Yes, I thought of it, and I was afraid of it in a way, but I couldn't comprehend really where I would be going back to, because there was no way to go back. There is no way to go back ever in life to begin with, because everything changes and when we go back to the same place we remember it in a totally different way, but where would we go, we had no home, no country. I mean Italy wasn't my country, Yugoslavia wasn't my country, Austria wasn't my country, North Africa wasn't my country. There was really no place to go back to, besides, I really couldn't visualize that, and maybe because I couldn't, it wasn't such a terrible feeling. If I could mentally visualize for myself, I'm going to go back to the Abruzzo, I'm going to go back to Fuime, but Fuime I really didn't remember, so it really didn't bother me that much.

LB: Do you remember what your reaction was when Roosevelt died?

WG: Yes, I was very, very sad because Roosevelt was a hero. His favorite song was "Home on the Range Where the Deer and the Antelope Play" and I was very sad. I realized all the adults around me were very sad, and I would be sad too, because our friend had passed away, and now there was more uncertainty as to what would happen to us. I must confess that there is bitterness within me and it is this sad awakening that when I later learned of how little was done and how we were a "token shipment", and how we were no more than- at the Vietnam War, when we brought in some orphans to cleanse our conscience as a country, that other countries didn't do it. I don't buy that, America has always been, before and after, we brought in immigrants, tortured souls from so many different situations and I just, it's perplexing, because a beggar shouldn't curse the person that puts a quarter in his cup. On the other hand, not that we were beggars, but on one hand, we were brought into this country and we were allowed to stay and we all did well. And, I mean well, not necessarily from a material point of view.

I think, getting back to the Boy Scouts, maybe learning that one has to give to the society and not just take, so I think we learned that lesson well, collectively. On one hand how can I be angry or bitter or criticize if I personally benefited so much, but on the other hand, it was so little and so many could have been saved. I even resent the fact that it was publicized that the Roosevelt administration had saved 1,000 Jews. Nobody saved us but ourselves. O.K., for us, the war was over. Yes there were bombs falling and the allied armies had just taken Rome, and there was a long road from Rome to Berlin, and a lot of people died after that. But, from what we went through, the few bombs that were falling and the few things that were happening, it was a big difference. If they had advertised that we were coming here to receive shelter and food and rehabilitation, yes, but not that they saved us.

LB: do you remember what your reaction was when you heard Truman's announcement that you would be given the possibility of immigration to the United States?

WG: I don't remember too much what went through my mind. I remember that everybody was rejoicing and that something wonderful had happened and that it would have a great meaning for the rest of our lives. Personally, I don't know what went through my mind. It was very, very quick.

I was the last boy that was Bar Mitzvah and the following few days after my Bar Mitzvah, the busses rolled to Canada and we passed the Rainbow Bridge and there was a hotel in which we stayed. It was a transitory hotel, and in fact, I had received a used Brownie Eastman Kodak camera as my Bar Mitzvah present and the first pictures that I took were of us immigrants arriving at the hotel. I have the pictures and I have a replica of the camera. My camera was lost but I managed to get one in an antique shop, which was exactly the same, and that is what got me interested in photography.

The hotel was a hotel that was supposed to be for a day or two, and then move on to destinations which we had chosen, where people had relatives, whichever cities we wanted to go to. When the owners of the hotel found out that my father was a professional chef and pastry chef, and my mother was a professional cook, they were hired the same day and we stayed in Buffalo for six months. I didn't particularly like Buffalo because I had no friends there, but I think as to what America can offer, and if one has the desire, they actually were hired the same day that they officially came in. It really happened very, very quickly.

The thing was when we went to Rome and we put our names on the list, and a few weeks later we were on a boat. It just, I think so much happened so quickly that it was natural to keep quiet about it because most people did not talk about what happened in those years. In fact, the American Japanese – I read an article not too long ago about one man who kept quiet about having lost all his possessions and being put in a camp and he felt that he was ashamed even though he hadn't done anything wrong, that he was ashamed, and he only started speaking when he realized that other Japanese Americans who were in the same position that he was in were also ashamed and silent. When it came out, 25 – 30 years later, and I think it was a very astute observation of this man, I think the same thing happened to us. I think we were eager to assimilate and to achieve and to forget, which was wrong, and I was able to talk. I lectured in Temples, Churches, schools and organizations. I have a slide of paintings that were done in a concentration camp in Terezin in Czechoslovakia, and poems that the kids wrote and I have been able to talk about this freely but I wasn't able to talk about Oswego until just recently. It feels good to be able to talk about it.

LB: When you mentioned that you were Bar Mitzvah, did your religious training – was that mostly entirely undertaken in your 16 or 18 months?

WG: Yes.

LB: Could you talk a little about that, and how rabbinical services, how religious life continued on?

WG: O.K. My friends were not religious to begin with. There were a number of synagogues in Oswego for the Jews and the *Sesardie* Jews, the *Asbkeżim* Jews, and my religious training was basically to prepare me for my Bar Mitzvah, and that was it. I remember the Synagogue was a converted barrack and I remember that I was very proud that I was able to recite my Haftarah and that I was finally called a man as according to Jewish tradition. I think I was a little boy, as any boy at age 13 but I also think I was a man in a world that I had seen so much, and experience so much. I think we all were too old for our age.

LB: I don't know if you saw that quote, I'm not sure who it was, one of your classmates, or maybe someone who went to the High School. She said something to the effect that we Americans didn't know how to relate to them.

WG: Yes, I remember that.

LB: How to be happy, and carefree like them, but they can't understand why we are the way we are, a mixture of our ages.

End of Side One

Side Two [long lead-in]

WG: I have a poem that I think says it better than anything I could say, and I think it was written by a girl. We don't know who it is, and it's part of the collection "I Will Never See Another Butterfly" from Terezin, and this little girl talks about leaving their home, and subsequently what her reflections are on it. I think that the poem, really for me, explains well how I felt then, even how I feel now, and how the words this relationship was established between us and the Oswego children, because I think it worked both ways, it was a two-way street. We wanted to be like them and they saw something in us.

LB: O.K.

WG: I would like to read to you this little poem what was written by a girl in Czechoslovakia in Terezin during World War II in 1941. She probably would have been at the time the age of from 12 – 14 – 15.

BIRD SONG

He doesn't know the world at all
Who stays in his nest and doesn't go out.
He doesn't know what birds know best,
Nor what I want to sing about,
 that the world is full of loneliness.
When dewdrops sparkle in the grass,
 and there is a flood with morning light,
 a blackbird sings upon a bush,
 to greet the dawning after night.
Then, I know how fine it is to live.
Hey, try to open your heart to beauty,
Go to the woods someday and weave a wreath of memory there.
Then if the tears obscure your way,
You will know how wonderful it is to be alive

WG: And, I think getting back to Oswego, I think that we projected this feeling to the Oswegonians of how wonderful it is to be alive, and I think they reciprocated in being kind to us.

LB: You've been working on a document. First, I want to find out a little about what happened to your parents after Oswego. Were they able – after this job in Buffalo, was your father able to establish himself in other places as a Chef, or did he end up doing something different?

WG: O.K. We stayed in Buffalo for half-a-year and then we came to New York and my father right away was able to – it wasn't a job, let me tell you what it was. There was this Irish bar that had a food concession that had a kitchen and some tables because you needed to sell food when you sell liquor, and he had nobody to operate this. It was a block away from where we live 97th St. and Amsterdam Avenue, and he told my father that if he wanted it he could have it and whatever profits he made would be his. That's what my father did. He went into business for himself right off the bat. The summer before this happened my parents worked in the country in Fleischman's, which is a resort town. They worked as Chefs, and they made a good living at it. They came back to Manhattan, opened up this food concession in the Irish bar, but then he died very quickly after we left Oswego. He died of a heart attack. My mother continued working as a Chef. When I went to Israel, she remarried to a man who owned a luncheonette on 47th St. and they had their own business of 25 – 27 years. When they closed the luncheonette, there

were articles in The New York Post, they were written up in “Underground Gourmet” so I have always been proud of the food industry, but I do it as a hobby, not as a profession.

LB: And, you’ve become a film maker? Out of this one experience you mentioned, do you work independently?

WG: No, I had my own company for a while, but what I really did up to two years ago was special effects for films, which is all the tricks that are done, titling for features, documentaries, things like that. Now I am doing the same thing in Video, because Video has really taken over.

LB: Speaking of the video tapes you’re working on about Oswego, you said you have gotten so many different responses from people of what Oswego meant to them – could you talk a little bit about the variety of responses?

WG: O.K. First of all, I interviewed people of different age groups. I interviewed people of my mother’s generation, and then I interviewed people of my generation, and rather than a one-on-one interview, we sat in a living room in Syracuse. This doctor was kind enough to donate the house and there were about 8 or 10 of us, some with spouses. We really had a conversation more than an interview. I just asked a few questions to instigate and get things going. What was interesting about it was that everybody had such a different opinion of what it was. To put it in a capsule, some felt that it was comfortable, that it was beautiful, that it was heaven. Others felt that it was confinement. Some felt so strongly about it that they couldn’t talk about it. And yet, when this one lady couldn’t talk about it, her husband said that when she remembers the day we left Fort Ontario that she cried desperately because that was her home. But she just ... I am talking about intelligent people, educated people, and she just couldn’t. She works with retarded children and she just couldn’t come to grips. She just couldn’t talk about it, and I think that the truth, really, there is no one truth, I think it is a tapestry of human emotions of different people coming... We have so much in common, but yet, we came from different countries. We spoke different languages, we had each survived a totally different way and it’s only natural that we should have different feelings about it. I think when historians write about Oswego, and will write about Oswego, there will be more writing about it.

I think that ... 982 people came to this country, and we were supposed to be 1,000, but the boat had to leave and they couldn’t screen enough people. I sort of wonder who those 18 might have been. Of course, in the Jewish religion – 18 is high which is life, and somehow if one wants to play with numbers, I think that unfortunately, 18 weren’t given this new life to come to this country, but as far as how people felt, I think 982 people felt 982 different ways. I think, getting back to the people of my generation that we all have to come to grips with it, and we haven’t yet, and I don’t know if we ever will. O.K. there was this one man, his name is Adam Mentz, he is a doctor – psychologist, and he spoke at the reunion. He spoke beautifully. He briefly said of how he felt when on the cold winter morning the busses rolled in to take us to Canada and then to bring us back into this country, that the world

didn't seem so ugly and that there was hope. I think that all the people felt that hope that he spoke of. I think that some of us still can't understand why we were put behind a fence for 18 months. I can't come to grips with it. To me it would be – one would say “well, what do you have to complain about, you didn't have to fear that you would die” and, believe me, we knew what death was. Us children, when we played, we never wanted to know each other's name because some of us wouldn't be there tomorrow, and if you don't know you just played with somebody. We had food, we had medicine, we had school, we had everything in Oswego, but it wasn't normal. I think that if the fence hadn't existed, but the barracks were there, everything was there the way it was, without that fence – to me it would have been a totally different situation. I feel good in knowing there are other people that are studying about the camp and want to know what happened there, to know how we felt, how we survived within the camp, how the people in Oswego treated us, but I think that it deals more, it's not us, it's not Oswego.

I think that what's important is not to learn how those 982 people felt. Sometimes when I did my documentary, I would sometimes say “us refugees” and sometimes I would say “those” and “what happened to you people” I was using past and present, first person, third person. I just didn't know whether I was coming or going. I was in a total state of confusion. Getting back to the original question, I think it's important to study what happened, not because of us 982 refugees, but more important, historically, what happened to a country and more specifically to a world which I called “world amnesia.”

I think so much was overlooked conveniently by good people. The bad guys are easy to identify. The question is “what could the good guys have done to make it a little bit easier or more specifically, for more people to survive?” I feel if we survived on our own, where from day-to-day it was really hard to know whether we will make it, if we had some help, how many more people would have survived. I think these studies are important because we have to learn why men of good will, people of good will, cease to reason and function and perform, and that's why I think studies like these are important.

LB: Thank you.

End of Interview

Added changes by jCook, February 2006