Leo Diamantstein

00:00:15

>> Interviewer: Please tell us your full name.

>> Diamantstein: Okay. Well, Leo Diamantstein. I was born Josef, but I don't use that name.

>> Interviewer: Where and when were you born?

>> Diamantstein: When -- are you ready? Are you asking me --

>> Interviewer: Yes.

>> Diamantstein: -- where and when I was born? I was born in Germany in Heidelberg, beautiful city, on December 1, 1924.

>> Interviewer: Tell us about your parents and what your family life was like then.

>> Diamantstein: All right. My parents had emigrated from Poland, both of them. My mother was from a small town -- not that small town, according to her -- called Tarnobrzeg, and that was part, before World War I and during, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And Father was from another town which is now part of the Soviet Union, or maybe the Ukraine now. And Father, as a youngster, had gone to Budapest and had learned a trade there of quilt-making, and at 18 or so, he was inducted in the Austrian army of the time, and World War I was on, and Father spoke four or five languages; that is, he spoke Russian -- he was fluent -- and he knew Hungarian and a few other Slavic languages plus German. So he became an interpreter, and he did relatively well in surviving World War I. But things -- the past experiences for Jews after the war was over -- to making this part brief -- led him to want to leave when the war was over.

Where mother came from, on and off the Russians had invaded, and they had suffered pogroms, and the Cossacks had come, and it was very bad, so they decided to immigrate to Germany. And father

started his quilting business there, and he did quite well. The first child died of pneumonia or something after a few months. Then, my oldest brother was born a year or so later, Adolph, and then my sister, and then my other brother, and I was -- I came a few years later. So I was the youngest, and I was and still am.

And so Father was a very skilled person. He was not only skilled. He was also a brilliant person. He was an expert chess player and had played, in the club in Heidelberg, some of the world champions in chess. And his business prospered, and everything went well until ’28, ’29, when the Great Depression hit Germany as well. And that destroyed, bankrupted all of Germany, including my father, so the family had to move from Heidelberg -- or Father decided so. I mean, I was too little to know what was going on really. All I remember is his big studio and his owl that stood on his desk and so forth. And then we moved to a little town called Frankenbach, and Father became sort of a travelling salesman. And there, too, he did well. Pretty soon we had -- he was able to have an automobile that we only saw on weekends when he came home and he took us for rides.

Some of our experiences with the population were not terribly pleasant. Especially as a child, I remember the other children were taking us for rides in the country, and they were harassing us and beating us up. There are some episodes I don’t think I was telling, and I remember there was a farm across the street, and I was put on a horse the first time, and it was so high up for me that I didn’t think I would ever go again.

After one year there, we moved to Frankfurt am Main. Frankfurt, a big city; it’s one of the biggest today in Germany. And that was a whole new world, and of course, Frankfurt had a large Jewish community. Frankfurt at that time had about half a million inhabitants, of whom there were about 50,000 Jews, about 10 percent of the population. And there were some marvelous synagogues, old synagogues, and we became part of that Jewish community. Father did his business and did relatively well. And

after some initial struggles, struggles of which -- some of them I wasn't aware of, being still small child, I remember -- excuse me -- I went to a kindergarten there and then to school, to first grade and so forth, and those were all Jewish schools. Ninety-five percent of the Jews went to Jewish schools. They were through all the grades through high school, and they were all basically financed by the Rothschilds, who were the family, the rich family from Frankfurt, and they sponsored all these schools, and we had marvelous schools, and there I made friends, especially two other children, Aaron (phonetic) and Jonas.

Aaron Horowitz (phonetic) was the son of the chief rabbi in Frankfurt who had come to Frankfurt from Hungary originally. He had 11 children, and he was one of them somewhere -- or 12. And he was a very dear friend, and so was Jonas Alster. Jonas may still be alive. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for the Horowitz family. When the time came, I was told -- because at that point, we were no longer in Germany -- but I was told by Jonas, who managed to immigrate to the same place we did later, that he was offered free passage to what then Palestine, where he had visited once before and he was elated about it, but he refused to leave. He wanted to stay with his flock, and he, his 11 children, and wife all died in the gas chambers, unfortunately. It's a very sad thought for me because we were very close.

All went relatively well until 1933. That was, of course, the turning point. That was the year that Hitler came to power. He came to power actually fair and square, winning an election. There were a number of other right-wing parties who supported him. It wasn't just the Nazi party who thought the person who stood for law and order was their man. And he was elected, and law and order came about. I remember distinctly there were, oh, disorders. You would see a group of demonstrators, other group of demonstrators. They clashed, and the police came and so forth and so forth. And anyway, what was maybe the model democracy in Germany, what used to be called the Weimar Republic, had come to

an end when Hitler, shortly after he came to power. Little by little, he took over. The parliament was dissolved, and he created his own puppet parliament, and things started to be very bad already for us.

I have some -- a few clear memories. One was once walking down the Bleichstraße, the street in Frankfurt, and a group -- I think I was with Maurice, with my brother -- a group of Nazis in Nazi uniform. They wore either brown shirts or black shirts at that time. These were the SS black shirts, and they marched as beautifully and orderly as they did, and they were singing a song. The song was *"Köpfe rollen. Juden heulen,"* which translates, "The heads are rolling. The Jews are crying." I have very vivid memory of that, a very vivid memory because I was shivering. How can anybody say something like that? I was still -- I was at that point maybe seven years old, and I remember that very distinctly. And things became worse. Jewish people were beaten, were mistreated. I think the only bright side of all that, I had -- a little -- youngster from the Hitler *jugend* befriended us as kids. We thought, Well, if he's a nice kid, why not? He seemed to know so much, and he had this beautiful knife, hunting knife and so forth. Until one day he got mad with us and he started cursing us and said we all will be killed eventually and so on. So we got in a fight, and it was the only time that I had a physical confrontation, and he was two years older, much stronger than I am, but I did overpower him. And he was laying on the ground, and it was the only good memory I had. And he jumped up and ran off and used all kinds of epithets about us, swine, Jews, and so forth.

That incident didn't repeat itself, but it was common practice when we saw a bunch of kids, to go to the other side of the street because there was always a good chance they would attack us, and there were always more of them than us, and they all were carrying the [indistinct], Hitler *jugend* uniforms, and so forth, so life became quite miserable. I remember when Adolph, my brother, was bar mitzvahed when he was 13 to become a member

of the community. We belonged to this Börneplatzsynagoge, and he was in the choir, and so was Maurice. I was too young, or maybe my voice wasn't good enough. At any rate, we had to kind of hush-rush in and out and not be seen and quickly go home, you know, and it was a large synagogue with a large group of people.

Well, in 1934, my father decided that this is no life, and in fact, we had a sister of my mother that lived in Frankfurt, and Father talked to him, and he talked about leaving, and Father said, "I want to leave. I don't want to stay here. There is no future here for us, and this is something, who knows how long this lasts?" Well, most of our friends, including the ones who were the owners of the house where we lived in Heidelberg -- we maintained a friendship. They owned several houses. And we kept telling them -- Father and Mother kept telling them, "There's no future here," and they said, "Well, this is to pass. Nothing like that -- people like the Germans are not going to stand for Hitler." So -- he had lost a leg in World War I fighting for Germany. He was proud of his Iron Cross, and he said, "They would never touch me." Well, he found out different, unfortunately.

But Father pursued, and he decided to leave. He didn't know where, so he decided whoever lets us in, that's where we are going to go. And I still remember, we had already our things packed to go to France, and at the last moment, the French decided they didn't want any more Jews, and they wouldn't let us in. Father had a Polish passport, having been born in Poland. In Germany, it wasn't even enough to be born there as we were born. We were not considered German. You have to be like, I don't know, third generation before you could become a German. So anyway, he looked around. We had everything already. We had packed, we were going to go to France, and, well, it didn't materialize, so Father started to inquire with other countries, and the only country that would let us in was Italy. They had no questions. They didn't even require a visa. They said, "If you

want to immigrate to Italy, we'll give you the stamp of approval and you can come." So Father said, "To Italy, we go."

So in June of 1934, we packed. The condition the Nazis put on us leaving is -- and that was in most cases the case and started to be more so -- they said you can leave, but you have to leave everything behind. You were not allowed to take anything with you, but you could go. So Father decided whatever he had, he had to abandon there, but he just had, I guess, in retrospect, the right idea. And so we went. I still remember we were singing and kind of happy about long train trip. We went through Switzerland, and they gave us the okay just to pass through, of course, not to stay, and we went to Milan in Italy.

And Milan was a beautiful -- and still is -- a beautiful, large city. And of course, we arrived without a penny, without anything. So Father immediately started to look for some way to make a living, and it was very hard. I'm not that sure of all the things he tried to do and did. He couldn't start the factory. He didn't have the means to do that, so he tried to sell and to do whatever he could. We were near a park near the Giardini Publicci, public gardens, that had a zoo in it, and it was heaven for us kids. We didn't mind at all, and the kids didn't have -- and to the contrary, we were afraid. We stayed away from the other kids. We didn't really know what to expect, and the other kids, the Italian kids, were just marvelous. They were all curious: "Who are you? What are you? What language do you speak?" So we talked to them, and they taught us Italian. Since it was June, middle-June or so, it was vacation time. They have pretty much the same system here as far as months, you know. Between June and September, there are no schools. By the time September came along, we knew Italian, of course, as kids -- or at least to speak, you know.

So, well, for the first three, four months, Father -- we had rented one room. We all slept on the floor in one room. I know that Mother was very perturbed, but it didn't bother us kids. I

know also she was looking out the window. That meant she was looking for Father to come home to bring enough money so we would have food on the table the next day. That, too, I must say, wasn't that much of a hardship, especially for me. My brothers, especially Maurice, loved to eat, and Mother used to call me *hungerik kinstler,* an artist for hunger, because I never seemed to care whether I was eating or not.

And so life went on. We start to get used to people. We met friends, and we met some other people, the [indistinct] that had just arrived from Germany or from other places; mostly Germany at that point. And we made friends, and for the first year, I went to -- there was a Jewish school there in Via Eupili that's still now, again, part of the Jewish community. And I wasn't too happy there for a number of reasons that would take too long to explain, but it was very far. We lived on the other end of town, and we had to take tramways to get there, and we often walked just to save the 50 cents so we could do something with other children. So then after the second year, we went to public schools that were only walking distance to where we lived. There we had a very nice -- we ended up to have a very nice apartment. Father was progressing, and at that point, started out -- found a way of starting again a quilting business. Father being a lot more advanced than the Italian industry was in that field, eventually went to Paris, made a trip to Paris to buy some new machinery that did a lot of things that were still done by hand in Italy. So he had efficient production. And Father, as I said, was quite a skillful person. He used to make the quilts and make the designs without drawing, just at eye, running that sort of machine, and did relatively well in gradually building up a business. And about a year later, Jonas, this friend of mine, they moved to Italy, and we found each other, and we were very happy. It was he who told me at that time what happened to the Horowitz family. And he -- we were happy to be together because it was a very old friendship, I mean, relatively speaking. And so our life went -- improved, our lot improved.

Eventually, my oldest brother helped father in the factory. I was too young for that. I was going to school, and I was absorbed in reading. As the years went by, I was really intrigued, when it got to be 1937, ’38, with history, and this became a lifetime passion with me, the study of history and cultures. And the reason was quite simple: When I left Germany, from the first few grades in school, I found out who the heroes and who the villains were. The heroes were the German types, and the heroes were the people like Barbarossa and others that actually had plundered Italy and destroyed Milano at one point and killed everybody therein. When I found that out in Italy, all of a sudden, Barbarossa became a villain. In Germany there were monuments to him, and here he was a terrible villain. So I started to wonder, I said, What is going on here? How can so many people be good and bad, and now all of a sudden, everything is reversed? Naturally, in Italian history, Roman history, you turn up -- you hear about the Romans bringing civilization to the world, right? Bringing laws, bringing doctors, et cetera, while the Germans were just barbarians to them. So the Teutonic types, I was really a little confused, and I said, Where is the truth?

So I started looking for other books to find out what’s really happening, and I was quite taken by this subject, as I said, of culture, and I never left German culture. It’s a funny thing. I’m just reading a book in German now by Werfel, Franz Werfel, and he talks -- and his subjects are stories of Polish refugees in France, and he said, “I cannot detach myself from the German culture.” And I guess I can’t, and I guess I’m proud to say that I didn’t because so there is so much, from Thomas Mann to innumerable -- to Hermann Hesse and many other marvelous people.

So, well, in 1938, again came a new turning point. That is when Germany and Italy formed an alliance. It was called the Axis, Mussolini and Hitler, mainly, Mussolini who, at first, was much against Hitler. The first time he threatened Austria, he sent 50,000 troops to the Italian-Austrian border, and Germany

withdrew from the idea of occupying. But by ’38, Hitler had become very powerful and it seemed, obviously, to Mussolini, the thing to do, to side with him. And at that time, in order to be in line with the Germans, a law was passed, the first law against Jews, and we just couldn’t believe it. We had so many Italian friends, and we just considered them like part of our lives. We just couldn’t conceive -- neither did any of these friends. They stayed our friends till the last. And when that law was passed, it was terrible timing. We had just -- well, we had just given the landlord the notice that Father wanted to get a nicer, bigger apartment when this law came out, and this law was to take effect within 1939; in other words, it said within 1939, all foreign Jews must leave Italy.

Now, at that point, we were not that sure -- we had nowhere to go. We were not determined we were not going to leave no matter what. And it was really never enforced, but we couldn’t find a place to rent. Nobody wanted us because they were afraid, you know, it would be short-term. And not only that, Father, on top of everything, plus having a big family to support, was a very generous person, so new refugees came in, and Father says, “We have a big house” -- big apartment; it wasn’t a house -- so they were sleeping in our house. Mother wasn’t too happy with all that, naturally, and I’ll never forget one very dear friend I made. Her name was Lucia (phonetic), and she came from somewhere -- she came from, from -- she came in Italy to study medicine. She was going to Bologna, and at this point, all projects were, of course, off. They wouldn’t let Jews into the universities anymore. And Lucia would take me to movies, you know, and it was so much fun. I saw “Eskimo,” a very lovely movie. I still remember that. We became good friends, and she stayed with us for a while. Then, she rented a place with someone else, and about six months later, she couldn’t cope. She committed suicide. She couldn’t cope. She was a very dear friend to me. And things got so bad, when the time our lease -- we finally had to leave the house, we had to move in a one-room rented

apartment because as desperate as Father looked, we couldn't find a place, and that was a terrible, terrible place. Prostitutes -- it was very colorful people that, you know, that were really at loose ends were staying in this apartment house. It was modeled after an American apartment, this one-room apartment. The reason I say American because the owners had lived in the United States, and both of them had come back with a bad habit because they were obviously here during Prohibition. They were both alcoholics, and once in a while, it always sounded like the house was coming down when they had arguments. We stayed there for a while, and it was a very bad experience. There were bugs, and it was a very old house in a very bad part of town, and I have only bad memories from that time.

Fortunately, a while later, Father, through friends of ours, found an apartment on the other side of town. It was a very nice place, and I'd like to add that, very briefly, I met some fabulous people -- I talked about Lucia -- other people that stayed with us. Some of them remained lifetime friends. Anyway, at this point, we moved in this apartment. I still don't know how Father, how he did this, but it worked out all right. It was a lovely place, but our stay there was short-lived. Before we moved from there, a cousin of ours came from Poland to visit. He was about 18 or 19, and he stayed a while, and when these laws came out, and the way that things looked -- very bad in Poland. You know, Hitler was already threatening, and it wasn't too far before the war broke out. And we begged him to stay, and he wouldn't. He died with the rest of the family in Auschwitz. He wanted to be with them. We told him -- we already knew a lot of things that were going on that most people, other people didn't want to know, and he never came out there.

So anyway, at that point, we lived in this rather nice apartment, and everything went relatively well. I continued my studies. Maurice find a place to work where they would accept him, in spite of laws prohibiting the Italians to do so. Italians were -- never, never treated us as enemies, at no time.

I think I remember, when Jonas first came to Italy, and we were walking down the street, and all of sudden a bunch of kids would come. He said, “Let’s go to the other side.” I said, “Jonas, you don’t have to go to the other side.” He said, “But let’s be safe.” I said, “Jonas, just watch me. We are no longer in Germany. Italian kids would never even dream of” -- and of course, they didn’t. Of course, also in Germany, they could tell us a little bit by our Mediterranean appearance whether they were Jews, you know. They could be Italians or others, and they would also not have a very good fate for they were not distinguishing that much. But in Italy, you couldn’t tell us from the rest of the people, but even if you did, it didn’t matter to them.

Anyway, the war broke out in ’39, in September of ’39, and it wasn’t but a month later that -- that’s when they started arresting Jewish people in Italy. The order was out. Jewish people, not Italian Jews, but foreign Jews were the target, and so they came. In the middle of the night, the bell rang, and two agents were there, and they were very apologetic, but that was the order. We never know how they found out where the people were because they were not that thorough, but apparently they did find out. So -- and they took my father and my oldest brother, Adolph. They took Adolph away. I mean, old -- he wasn’t old then. He was quite young. So -- this is in ’39, so he was only about -- maybe not quite 19 yet, 18 or so. And him and Father were taken to San Vittore, which is the biggest prison -- still is -- in Milano. It’s a huge place, like a city almost, walled place. And we were shocked, and we didn’t know what, and Mother was desperate and so forth. But -- of course, we didn’t think that he was in danger of his life, but still, I still remember us going to visit him every -- once a week we were allowed to visit, and it was a big mess. It was very unpleasant. Father, on the other hand, made friends in prison, too, and he managed to take some bread and make chess pieces out of it, and

he taught the other people in the cell how to play chess and so forth.

Well, this went on for about three weeks. Then they were shipped to the -- not the only, but the only large what could be called a concentration camp in Italy, and that was in Calabria. If you know Italy, it's made like a boot. This is at the bottom of the boot, just before you cross over to Sicily. And this was in the middle of a malaric valley where nothing grew, and Father and Adolph were there, and we were corresponding, and we left -- we had to give up that apartment, and we found a much smaller one, where we stayed. My sister was very ill for a while. She recuperated, and anyway, a short while later, that same -- let me see. That would be in the winter of that same year, 1940, they came eventually and picked us up in this place we were staying now, and we were -- while mother thought maybe she would -- it would be nice to be together with Father, the letters he wrote, he said, "The climate is bad, but we are not mistreated here," and that, of course, is true. However, Father had managed -- he had some problems with his lungs. He had managed to be transferred to a small village in the mountains of -- in free interment in the mountains of Calabria, where he became sort of a number-one figure in town. Made good friends with the priest, who always tried to convert him. According to my father, he had almost converted him to Judaism, which -- anyway, Father -- the whole town because friends with Father. He was the only person in this very small village -- I've never been there, but we were sent, also, to Ferramonti.

At this point, Maurice, I, and my sister and Mother, and the women -- the way the camp was, there was barracks, like military barracks, and the women were on one side of the camp. The men were on the other. There were about, roughly -- eventually about 2,000 people there. The Italian guards never mistreated us. However, we were in a concentration camp, and this -- I still remember the summer. It was tar coming from the roof, and it would fall on us, and I was just melting, you know, everything.

It must have been maybe 120 or 130 degrees. And I remember I was -- for someone I was selling newspapers, going around from place to place when somebody had a thing -- was getting the papers every day, and the Italian papers, there was a specific -- “Corriere della Sera” always had -- you could read between the lines what was really going on. And a little while later, we knew even better because somebody had built a radio so we could listen to Radio London, you know. And that, of course, they didn’t know, the guards, and I was, I was unhappy because I didn’t like the environment. We were not mistreated, but to be in a camp and to be separated from the world and from everything I had grown to love, including many Italian friends, it was, it was hard, and the food was a mixed bag. It sometime was rotten potatoes and sometime it was okay.

Though within the camp, we had a soccer team. The commander had a lot vanity. He was quite happy that like when there was a soccer game, the moment he arrived, the referee would blow his whistle, and everybody would stop to salute him, and he would stand up in the car and shake his head. He was a rather interesting person. He had some military rank -- I don’t know what -- and one day he called us all together and gave a speech. I still remember that, and in that speech, he said, “Somebody wrote a letter that we censored,” he says, “and said” -- and he read the letter -- “we are being beaten, mistreated, and so forth.” And he said, he said, “Just think of it. Someday, suppose I am the prisoner and you are out. How would you feel about that?” He says, “Now you know how I feel.” He said, “Please don’t do that anymore, and you know it’s not true.” And he was right, you know, and we all applauded him.

And we had, oh, in 2,000 people, we had three or four chamber music groups. We had a symphony orchestra, and some -- a few singers who later became famous in the United States after the war, and we had all kinds of cultural activities. And there were all kinds of things going on. It was a very lively -- culturally, a very lively environment. I was in the barrack of

all adults. Most of them were from Bologna, where they went -- had come from Poland to study medicine, and they were a very interesting bunch of people. There are many, many episodes I could tell of things that happened there, but I don't want to take all that time.

In the -- let's see. In the following year -- well, in the summer -- that's right. In the summer of '41, the war with the Soviet Union -- the Germans started to invade Soviet Union, and we were elated. This was the pivotal point to us. We decided now, this is going to be the end of Hitler. We decided there's no way he can face both, you know, all the fronts and everything. So we were just delighted, and we were celebrating all over, and the *Lagerleiter,* the head of the camp, was very upset about that. We were not even supposed to know about all these things, but we had the radio now, and, of course, news travelled. And of course, the Italian paper carried it, too, but anyway, we were elated and very hopeful. Of course, that was dimmed a little bit by the initial victories, but we all hoped that eventually he would end as Napoleon did. And it's rather peculiar. I was reading "War and Peace" at the time. We had a marvelous library because everybody who had books brought books with them that they didn't want to sell, so we formed a library, and I was very avidly reading, and in that sense, I had a marvelous time because there was a marvelous choice of books.

Well, the -- in the, in the -- after the winter was over, we were transferred as a family to free internment. The reason -- we didn't know that. They started to transfer families, uniting them and letting them go while -- there was possibly some intervention by some prelates and other people, and we were once visited by a cardinal. I don't know whether that -- I know one of the determining factors was that a large group of refugees -- see, while the Italians were fighting and while we were there, Jews were still pouring into Italy because wherever border they Jews came, if they meant -- either clandestinely they came across or the Italians couldn't see why they shouldn't let them

go because they looked around and said, “You look like me. Why should I not let you?” So, so the population grew of refugees from Yugoslavia, from other parts, wherever they could get out, and they needed a space. So they knew this -- the people we were, and these were new people, most of them, and they let us go to a small town where we would have to report to the police. The biggest contingent, and this is an episode that I don’t know how many people know about, there was a group, and there were over 800, like 800 Jews on a ship. It had managed to get out through the Danube into the Mediterranean and was now in the Mediterranean, I don’t know for how long, and they were running out of food, and they had tried -- they were stopped by a British cruiser, and they begged them to take them, and they wouldn’t. And they said, “We don’t have the facilities,” and so forth. But they said, “We might die.” They said, “Well, we can’t help you.” And they finally came across an Italian ship. At this point, the people were just at the very end. And the Italian says, “We can’t let these people die here,” and so they took them on and brought them in, and all those people were sent to Ferramonti, so they needed that room. So we were transferred.

So eventually -- my sister didn’t come with us because she found someone there that she married, so she decided to stay. And the rest of us -- and Adolph, his -- various things happened. My father was in this village, and Adolph was somewhere else. He injured his leg, and they let him go to a small island near Trieste to be cured for it, and he was free interned there, but he was free, really, called Grado. Anyway, so actually, right there, there was my mother, Maurice, and I, okay. Father was in this other town. But we already knew that Father would join us, and we had a point of encounter in -- I think it was in Ancona, and that’s on the Adriatic Coast. So my mother, the two of us, and Father, we met there, and of course, you can imagine it was quite an emotional reunion.

And from then on, we went together to this new place. This new place where we were free interned is called Arsiero. It’s a

small town of about 5,000, 6,000 inhabitants. And that's then where -- that became a big chapter in my life and in the life of our family. We found an apartment. It was a small house. There was a young Italian couple and us, and it was just like heaven -- I mean, we were right at the foot of the Alps -- to me, you know, and there were hills all around us, and Maurice and I immediately went hiking, and it was just -- to us, it was just like being in heaven, and we were free. We had, theoretically, to report once a week to the *marescíallo,* the head of the local police, of the *Carabinieri,* which we never did, and he never asked us to. He had an adjutant who was a real SOB. He hated -- he had checked on us and this and the other, and that was harassment, but the commander itself was a very nice person. I mean, you find good and bad people everywhere.

Anyway, we lived there, and Father started another business, and I had learned a trade at one time, in the fur trade, I learned some parts of that, and so he decided -- well, the first thing, Father immediately went in business. He didn't have a machine, so he went -- next door to us was a carpenter, and he had him build a frame that he could stretch the material on and make quilts by hand. He made his own designs, he made quilts, and whenever he had one made, it was exchanged for food from the farmers around us that were delighted. He never had any trouble, and immediately, Father, within a few months, had friends in the merchants and everywhere, and we had friends. And it was just -- it was relatively great considering the times we lived in.

Once a week we would get together with the others, and we were in all eight Jewish families coming from different places. They didn't all come from this camp. Some of them were interned there directly. And there was one family, the -- that -- Rimalovas (phonetic) was a husband and wife. We called him the Colonel because he walked like straight, you know, like -- and it was husband and wife. And their Italian, well, it was fairly good. And then there were the Riesenfelds (phonetic). They were from Breslau, from Germany, and he was a watchmaker. And then there

were the Kleins (phonetic), husband and wife. The Riesenfelds had a son. The Kleins didn't. It was a husband and wife, and he was an artist, and he did carvings, any form, whether wood or gold or whatever. He soon started getting a few tools, and he was doing his thing. There were the Goldsteins (phonetic). The Goldsteins came from Yugoslavia, and the Weisses (phonetic) came from Zagreb, Yugoslavia. The Weisses had a sister and a wife, and the -- and his sister had a daughter with them. And the Goldsteins came through a very perilous way to Italy. They were picked up by the Ustase. The Ustase were the Croatian Nazis, and they were ferocious. They had interned him in a camp from where maybe not even 1 percent came out alive. Everybody was killed there. It was a terrible place to be. His life was saved by the Italians because he worked for the Adriatic Insurance, which is the largest insurance company in Italy. It's the only one that at that time was known all over Italy, and they intervened on his behalf. They said, "He's a member of our group. He's a member. He's part Italian," which wasn't true. Anyway, they got him out. So him, his wife, and two children, they were there. And then there were the Landmanns (phonetic), who were from German. The man was Jewish. His wife was not. She was German-German, and they had two kids, if I remember right. So there were -- oh, and then there were the Stapholtz (phonetic), an elderly Jewish couple who didn't speak one work of Italian. To this day, I don't know even how they got to Italy. They were an elderly couple. He prayed every day. He was a very religious person and didn't speak one word and was kind of a helpless person. I still remember I felt very bad for him.

Anyway, we met girls, and we had a great time. You know, we made friends and enjoyed it. At one point, Father said, "To start a business," he said, "I need some machines." He said, "And the only one that is young enough to get by with traveling" -- because sere not allowed to leave. We had a special permit -- permission to go to Vicenza, which it like the province capital of the area, if you needed to go and see a special doctor or do

something special. But we couldn't get a permit -- because officially, we were not supposed to work at all. We were getting a small subsidy from the government which wouldn't be enough for one person to live. So everybody had to do something. They figured, as the Italians do, they'll find a way, you know. And sure enough, we did, but the problem was, Father needed some machines, and for that he decided that I was the only way that could get away it because I'm young and so forth. You know, the older ones may be stopped to check them for the military service and so forth. So I took the train, and this -- his helper of this thing, he was after me because he knew I had travelled to Vicenza lots of times illegally, and he was always trying to catch me. And he tried to catch me that time, but he didn't see me. He always would be at the railroad station in the morning. It was a small railroad station. I managed to avoid him. I went to Milano, and on the way to Milano, when we were about halfway, they came to check the documents on the train, and of course, my heart was pounding. And when they came to me, they said, "What do you have for documents?" "Well, I don't have anything except for this," and I showed them -- I had a subscription for the tramway system in Milano, and that's a document with my name on it, and I gave it to him, and he handed it back to me and said, "That's not enough." And I made believe I didn't hear him, and I said, "Thank you," and I put it away. And he said, "But it's not enough." I said, "Thank you," and he walked on, as Italians are not that thorough. I mean, not every Italian is that way. Like I said, I was lucky, but often, you had to count on things like that.

Much of what happened from here on has to do with luck because while you had to do something, number one, when the time came, and aside from doing something, you had to be lucky because the odds were about 10,000 to 1 against us. So all this went very well until -- there's a lot more to tell, but it would take too much time -- till the -- till September. First, July -- on July 25th, on July 25th of 1943, Mussolini was toppled, okay, and

there was jubilation, and everybody, people came shake hands with us. It sounded great, but Italy was still at war. And Marshal Badoglio, who took over, said, “The war will go on, and we will fulfill our obligations.” And we all debated. We had this weekly get-together where we were all strategies. We all listened to Radio London clandestinely in homes of friends, you know. We used to play -- according to instruction, put -- Radio London said put it on a pillow so that the sound would not carry and so forth. We did all these things. Theoretically, there was a death penalty to listen to Radio London. I don’t know that they ever applied it, but every Italian state did because one day they announced purposely, very cleverly, the British announced the Italians had a big victory, which the Italians hadn’t acknowledged, in Libya, and the next day, all the flags were out, and the Italians were forced to say this never happened, but it was to show how many Italians were listening to London.

Anyway, in July -- so, I was rather -- I must say that I was pessimistic about the situation because I looked at the geography, and I said, since being a student of all that, I said, “How in the world will we get out of this?” And the theory was -- and I ended up believing in it -- there were not that many Germans in Italy. There were several divisions, but they were way down south around Salerno and things, because Sicily by that time was occupied by the American troops and the Anglo-American forces, but we had little hope for that. You know, that’s still roughly a thousand miles from where we were. That’s the bottom of the boot. And I said, “How are they going to come up all the way? What are the Germans going to do?” So we theorized -- well, we didn’t know what to say until the 8th of September, okay. On the 8th of September, Marshal Badoglio put a record on Radio Rome saying the war is over; Italy has signed an armistice with the Allies. Now the Allies are our allies, and the Germans are our enemies, a total reversal. Defend your bases and so forth. Italy was totally unprepared for that. The reason,

militarily, after many years' war, there were still Italian troops in Yugoslavia and everywhere. It was a big mess. It was an abandonment of Italy, really. He and the royal family took off. They went to Ancona and took a boat to the south nearby where the Allied troops were already and abandoned Italy completely to its destiny. The commander of Rome put -- tried to put a defense against the German troops that were in the south but couldn't and surrendered, and the nightmare began for us because now the Germans were in charge.

I remember on the 10th or 11th of September, the -- a group of people came from Trento -- near -- closer to the Austrian border -- of Italians by bus, and they told us the Germans are there. And they said -- and they told about people being killed, people being arrested, and everybody was terrorized. And in fact, it wasn't but a few days later that Vicenza was occupied by the Germans, and unfortunately, because the Italians were so totally disorganized -- there were about maybe 200 Germans. They occupied the radio station, the newspaper, city hall, and the city was under their control, the Italian soldiers confined to their barracks and to whatever their destiny was. So now we knew we were under German occupation. They were not where we were in the town. A week later, two Germans came on a motorcycle, and they stopped in front of the city hall, and my father happened to be in the square. And they talked to one of the Italians. He was the secretary of the mayor. And he said, "Does anybody speak *Deutsch,* speak German?" So he turned around and pointed to my father. He said, "He speaks German." So he talked -- he went over to my father. "He said, *"Sie sprechen Deutsch?"* Father said, *"Jawohl."* So he said -- or they asked him, "Are there any ammunition dumps? Are there any military" -- et cetera, et cetera. Father gave all the answers. They were all negative. And I don't know what went through my father's heart, and finally he said, "How come you speak so well German?" Now, Father is -- was tall, blond, and blue-eyed, so -- well, it wouldn't have mattered that much as far as -- Italians look pretty much like

the rest of us. But at any rate, this is the way it was. And he said, “How do you know -- how well do you know -- you speak German beautifully.” Father said, “Well,” he says, “I’m a businessman, and I travel a lot to Germany.” Good, quick thinking. It sounds very simple, but when you’re faced with that, you have to have an answer. And he accepted that. He did -- Father told then, the story -- he said he went up to *Municipio,* the city hall, and there was a big page -- picture of Victor Emmanuel behind the mayor’s -- in the mayor’s office, and he took a chair, he went up there, and took that picture and slammed it on the floor and destroyed that.

But at any rate, we didn’t know what to do. We -- every other day we got together, said, “Should we leave now? Should we wait?” I think I leaned towards trying to find a place in the mountains behind us to hide out. We were a little bit afraid of that. We figured, well, one of days they’re going to come here, and that’s going to be the end of us. I have to add to that that initially, the head of the Italian police in Vicenza, he had a list of all the Jewish people in the towns around us, around the province. There were many. And as soon as he heard the Germans have -- are taking over, he burned that list. He figured, I’m not going -- and that saved us, saved our lives probably because then they really didn’t know. They were in a foreign country. They had no way of knowing who and where there were Jews. So that, that, you know -- I mean, it was precarious life. We had nightmares; you can imagine. At one point, a train arrived with 200 Germans, so Father -- this was so, so sudden. It was in the middle of the day, and we didn’t know what to do. We had a quick reunion, so Father said, “No matter what happens, we don’t have time to go anywhere. You kids go up in the mountains somewhere. So Maurice, Adolph, and I -- I still remember, Adolph took his mandolin and Maurice, his guitar, and we put rucksacks on, and we went across about 5 miles away, and we went up a mountain that somebody told us there’s a small community. If anything there needs to be told was this experience because whenever I

feel that there's little hope for humanity, I remember this episode because I was so touched by it. We got up to this plateau, and it was only maybe 50 yards space -- not that much. What am I saying, 50 yards? Maybe 30, and there was a small square up in the mountains, [indistinct], and it was a steep hill up, and there were six families living there, totally self-sufficient. They had one cow, and they had a fellow that had a huge work bench; made all their own tools. And they cultivated this whole side of the mountain; made step cultivations in it. And they lived there. So we told these people what our predicament was. They just couldn't understand it. They said, "What do they have against you? What did you do to them?" And we said, "We didn't do anything to them." They says, "Then why do they want" -- "Because we are Jews." They said, "What's that?" they said. So we explained it to them, and they said, "Well, why would they want to kill you?" They said, "It doesn't make sense." I said, "I know it doesn't make sense, but it's the way it is." And they said, "Well, you can stay here." So we told them, I said, "Before you, you, you let us stay here, you need to know one thing." He says, "There has been an edict published that if they find us here," he says, "they will not only kill us. They will kill you, so please," I says, "don't take us in unless you know what you're doing because you are endangering your lives." And believe it or not, for an hour they argued, not who is not going to stay but who is -- whom we are going to stay. They say, "No, let them stay with us." "No, let them stay with us."

So finally we decided we stay in a hayloft because we didn't know yet what these 200 Germans were going to do there. What would they do? It didn't make sense. And so we said, "Let's wait it out." I still remember that night Maurice and Adolph was strumming their instruments. We sit there. They fed us. They were, they were just incredibly nice. One of them told us he was in Greece. He fought in Greece, and he said, he said, "I was next to a guy that was manning a machine gun," he says, "and he

was going with that machine gun for hours," he says, "and I don't know how many Greeks he killed," he says, "and I couldn't understand it." He said -- he, too -- he said, "Why was he killing those Greeks? They didn't do anything to us." He said, "I can understand if you take my daughter away, or if you do anything to any of my family, I'll kill you," he says, "but these people didn't do anything to us." And it was a strong way of reasoning, humanitarian reasoning within all Italians in that sense -- or not all, but most.

So anyway, the next day, we found out that that train of Germans had no business here. It was a mistake. They were to go to Ascea, which is near Naples, near the front. The Italians knew that, knew that, and they misled them. The Italian railroad people said, "Oh, yeah, you need to go there." These were reinforcements for the Germans, but since the Germans didn't know one place from the other, they just send them to a dead end, you know. So within another day, they left again, okay. So the -- so we came -- went back home, but the debate went on, what to do, you know, because we knew that eventually -- I must say, I was very pessimistic. You see, we were all disillusioned because all -- our feeling was, seeing so few Germans, I said, "Two hundred took Vicenza." I said, "It wouldn't have been anything if the Allied troops would land near the Brenner Pass and stop the flow of Germans and occupy all this area." It would be easily done with 5,000 or 10,000 well-equipped troops, and we were constantly waiting for this to happen. Why? We said, "It doesn't make any sense to fight Italy inch by inch up the boot," which is what they did, and it was absurd, and others, experts will tell you today, that would have been the thing to do. They could have occupied Genoa and could have had the Germans locked in down below. You know, it was the easy thing to do. Actually, I understand there was a request or plan, but it wasn't executed because they said, "We have to save everything for the landing in France," so they didn't want to divert the forces. So this never happened, and we kept hoping that -- this was our only

hope of salvation because if the Germans would retreat, then we knew we wouldn’t stand a chance.

And in effect, they were nightmarish days. Our next-door neighbors, it so happens, were very strong Fascists, and they believed in the Germans. When those 200 Germans came, they went with flowers to greet them. So I’m not saying -- it’s not a hundred percent. There were some very bad people, as we saw, and they had Germans --

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