

EI-727

**VICTOR OBERTHALER**

**BIRTHDATE: MAY 31, 1910**

**INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 15, 1996**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 85**

**RUNNING TIME: 58:10**

**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY STUDIO**

**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:**

**ITALY, 1914**

**4**

**SHIP: ROCHAMBEAU**

**PORT:**

**RESIDENCES:**

LEVINE: Today is February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1996. I'm here at the Ellis Island Oral History Studio and Mr. Victor Oberthaler is here with me. Mr. Oberthaler is eighty-five years of age today. He came to this country when he was four years of age, and he was born in Switzerland, lived his first—up until he left for America for those four years, he lived in Northern Italy.

OBERTHALER: Right.

LEVINE: And then he came to America in 1914.

OBERTHALER: Right.

LEVINE: Well, I'm delighted that you're here, Mr. Oberthaler.

OBERTHALER: Thank you very much. [Laughs]

EI-727/OBERTHALER

- LEVINE: Let's start, if you would say your birth date and where in Switzerland you were born.
- OBERTHALER: All right. My birth date is May the 31<sup>st</sup>, 1910. I was born in a small little town called Amerzweil, which is on Lake Constance, and my mother and father were working in Amerzweil as a stitcher, an embroider stitcher, my father, and my mother was a watcher, also. That's how they met, really. After they left—after they left Italy, when they went to Switzerland they both came together in Switzerland, but they both came from the same home town in Austria, see. In Italy.
- LEVINE: Okay, well, let's see. How do you spell Amerzwil?
- OBERTHALER: A-M-E-R-Z-W-I-L.
- LEVINE: Okay, and where were your mother and father from?
- OBERTHALER: From Plodn.
- LEVINE: And that's P-L-O-D-N?
- OBERTHALER: Right.
- LEVINE: Now, that's the Austrian—
- OBERTHALER: Well, it was in Austria at the time because we still speak Plot Deutsch, which is Austrian and Plodnish—we called it Plodnish, which is a language in itself. You know what I mean?
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- OBERTHALER: And I have a book home that tells you the whole thing about the whole history of all Seppada. All Seppada, which is called Plodn. In the book it's called Plodn, and they have the nomenclature of Austria spoken in Plot Deutsch and in Italian, and it makes a combination of the two.
- LEVINE: So when the town of Plodn became Italian, rather than Austrian, it was then called Seppada.
- OBERTHALER: Seppada. S-E-P-P-A-D-A.
- LEVINE: Okay. So now your mother and father were a stitcher and a watcher when they were—

OBERTHALER: A stitcher and a watcher. Well, my father actually became—was a painter over there when he went into Switzerland. House painter, and then he got colic. He was poisoned with the paint, like. So my mother had to teach him how to become a stitcher, which a Mr. Wilson from the United States had the embroidery factory over there and when my father came in, he employed him as a stitcher ,an apprentice stitcher. Apprentice, and then when my father became a good stitcher, then he got a job over there.

LEVINE: I see. Well, now, before when they were—what did they tell you about how they met in Italy?

OBERTHALER: Oh, not too much except that my father wanted to get out of Seppada. He was the first man that left Seppada to come to the United States, and he got several other people there—not relatives in any sense, but like acquaintance people, and a fellow by the name of Tabacci came to the United States with my father in 1910.

LEVINE: Right, after you were conceived but you weren't born yet?

OBERTHALER: After I—oh, I was born. I was born.

LEVINE: You were born, uh-huh.

OBERTHALER: And my mother decided that she would go to over to her mother and father in Italy, in Plodn, then, see, which later on became Seppada.

LEVINE: I see. So did your mother and father consider themselves Austrian?

OBERTHALER: No, according to the law they were Italian. Now, I don't—I can't tell you—when they were born, I can't tell you. I think they might have been Austrian, but I don't know when Garibaldi ruled the whole thing, see.

LEVINE: I see. I see. So they went to Switzerland because—why did your father—do you know why your father wanted to go to Switzerland?

OBERTHALER: He wanted to get out of Sepadda.

LEVINE: Why, do you know?

EI-727/OBERTHALER

OBERTHALER: No, not for any reason. Not—just that was a good place to go, that's all, because you could make money there, see.

LEVINE: Ah, I see. So they went—

OBERTHALER: Actually, he went to Switzerland because he was a good painter, but then he got poisoned, paint poisoning and then my mother taught him how to be—said he should become a stitcher then, an embroidery stitcher.

LEVINE: I see. Now, was it your mother who was a watcher?

OBERTHALER: Yes, my mother became a watcher. Actually, in the beginning she was a mender. She was—see, in Switzerland when they have a thing called Ets, which is like a fabric, fabric on paper which is destroyed after. It goes through a thing and only the lace comes out, see. As far as I know, she became a very good mender and she worked for Wilson and Company, too. That's how really how they met.

LEVINE: Now, Wilson and Company was in Switzerland.

OBERTHALER: Yeah, but it was a United States company.

LEVINE: I see.

OBERTHALER: Making lace. Making lace.

LEVINE: I see. So they were both from Sepadda.

OBERTHALER: Yes.

LEVINE: But they didn't meet until they working for the Wilson—

OBERTHALER: No, no, they met in Sepadda because I think what happened was—I think. I'm not sure. I think my mother and father—see, they used to have a Mardis Gras time in Italy right around Easter time, you know, before Lent, right. They used to have parties and everything there. Hoopza [PH] waltzes and everything, and my father—they made their masks in wood and carved it all out of wood and then they put it on. So my mother said to my father, who was my intended father, "Oh, I know who you are Peppe. I know who you are," you know, because of the masks at Mardis Gras time, you know. And she knew, and my father chased her up into the mountains

because he didn't want anybody to know who he was, see. [Laughs] And then my father and mother became very good friends then, see. As a matter of fact, they became engaged and everything, you know.

LEVINE: In Sepadda?

OBERTHALER: Yeah, and then they both went to Switzerland. My father had intentions of going to Switzerland to be a house painter, you know, and my mother was a sewer of material and learned how to become a mender. Then Wilson hired her as a mender. You see, how they develop mending, the machine that worked there, sometimes the thread breaks and the machine still keeps going in with no thread. Therefore, there's a space between the embroidery thing and the thing and my mother would mend that, see.

LEVINE: I see. So she'd fill in the gaps when the thread broke.

OBERTHALER: Exactly.

LEVINE: Now, what is a watcher? What does that mean?

OBERTHALER: A watcher is the person that walks up and down to find out where the emptiness in the stitching is. See. And then when the whole thing comes down, which is some are ten yards long, some are fifteen yards long, and she'd have to walk up and down, up and down, and then spot the ones where it was and then check it off, put a thing on the cloth so that when it got off, then the watcher—the mender would come and take it and find out where this was. And then she'd stitch it, see.

LEVINE: So at first your mother was a mender and then she became a watcher? Or she was a watcher and a mender?

OBERTHALER: No, my mother—was a watcher first and then became a mender.

LEVINE: Mender. I see.

OBERTHALER: She was hired as a mender, I'm sure.

LEVINE: I see. So, how long did they work then? They worked for the Wilson for—

OBERTHALER: I have no idea. No idea.

EI-727/OBERTHALER

LEVINE: And then do you know why it was that your father left for the United States?

OBERTHALER: Oh, he just had the—at the time, everything was “Go to United States. Go to United States.” That’s where the gold was in the streets here.

LEVINE: Right. Now, did you know your grandparents?

OBERTHALER: Yes, sure, I know my grandmother and grandfather, sure.

LEVINE: How did—

OBERTHALER: I have a picture. I have a picture where I’m a little kid and he’s over—he’s six foot four. He was a tall man, and he held me like this, you know. I don’t know where the hell the picture is now. That’s what I’m worried about. I’d like to find the picture. It’s home at 771 some place, but where it is, I don’t know.

LEVINE: Well, now, where were your grandparents living?

OBERTHALER: In Sepadda.

LEVINE: In Sepadda. So your father left for the United States from Switzerland.

OBERTHALER: Yeah. No, I don’t think so. I think he left from—

LEVINE: From Sepadda?

OBERTHALER: From Sepadda.

LEVINE: Okay, and then when did your mother go?

OBERTHALER: My mother came with my father when they came over, first, but they were here. They came here the first time, and then my father—when the war came, the First World War came, my father said to my mother, “Go over and get Victor,” and that’s what she did. She came over to Sepadda. I don’t know how she came, but she came to Sepadda and then while that happened, I’ll tell you another funny little story, all right?

LEVINE: Yeah.

EI-727/OBERTHALER

OBERTHALER: There was a terrific snowstorm and my grandfather used to take me out to the barn so that he could milk the cows, right. They were huge cows, and I went up in the hayloft and went out on the porch on a patio like, and made a big snowball. I was waiting for my grandfather to come out so I could hit him with the snowball. Well, he came out and I dropped the snowball and it hit him right on the head and I laughed like anything, but I fell on the steps. I fell right down the steps into what they call the kilapoch [PH], which is nothing more than the residue of the animals that goes through a trough into this kilapoch. Well, I fell in and my grandfather had to take a wooden rake and pick me out, and I remember him telling me, "Oh, you stink. You stink," you know. But they put me in what they call a kockloven [PH], a big, big copper kettle. Put me in clothes and all, right in there so I got all the stink out of me.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other experiences with your grandfather?

OBERTHALER: That on particularly, I remember that.

LEVINE: Yes.

OBERTHALER: Not other than that, except that he took us to a photographer and they took a picture of he and myself.

LEVINE: And how about your grandmother?

OBERTHALER: She was a little old woman, a very, very good cook. An excellent cook.

LEVINE: What do you remember her cooking?

OBERTHALER: Knadel. They call it Knadel, K-N-A-D-E-L. It's like—it's put in soup, put in chicken soup and they made these dumplings. It's like the Jewish call—what do they call it now?

LEVINE: Knadloch. [PH]

OBERTHALER: Knadloch, yeah, like that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Now, did you ever know—were they your father's parents or your mother's parents?

OBERTHALER: My mother's parents.

- LEVINE: Did you ever know your father's parents, that set of grandparents?
- OBERTHALER: Just by happenstance. You know, I don't remember them at all.
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How about aunts and uncles, did you have any of those around?
- OBERTHALER: Oh, I had so many. I had—on my father's side I had three uncles and a couple of sisters, couple of aunts I had who all went to Innsbruck. They migrated to Innsbruck and became very, very successful. My uncle became a doctor in Innsbruck and the other guy became a water engineer, you know, government job, but the last time I went to Europe—not the last time, but the time I went to Europe with my son, who is now video editor for Barbara Walters—he has his own shop. Not his own shop. He works for Broadway Video and he was forty—he was forty years old couple weeks ago. I hadn't—my oldest boy and my youngest boy were fifteen years apart to the day. To the day. My first wife had January 16<sup>th</sup>—January 16<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup>, I forget which now, but my first wife said to Jimmy my oldest boy who works down in Washington, DC now. He's a director of patents. They asked him did he want to quit the job and go with a think tank now, and that's where he is now for two years. As a matter of fact, during the holidays he got a very good promotion about this [unclear].
- LEVINE: Wonderful.
- OBERTHALER: And my daughter is in British Columbia as a gender person, you know.
- LEVINE: Oh, okay. Mr. Oberthaler, if you'd lean back a little so that we can get you better on the mike.
- OBERTHALER: A gender person. I don't know what that means, but it means that women have rights, too, you know. That's—she's a pretty big shot down there. She has her own office and everything.
- LEVINE: That's wonderful. Okay, well, so in other words, do you remember any experiences when you were in Sepadda with your aunts or uncles?
- OBERTHALER: I used to go skiing. I remember skiing with my aunts and uncles. They had kids, too, you know, my cousins and I was

crying like anything because my father would send toys from Switzerland to there and they would steal them all. My aunt, when I was there—one of the few times. I was there fourteen times back to Sepadda. I got there, she says, “Oh, I remember you. You always used to cry,” because all the kids would take my toys and I used to get real mad. I had a terrible temper. Awful temper. I found out that I could push kids around because they stole my toys, and I didn’t want that.

LEVINE: Well, now—so your mother went with your father in 1910.

OBERTHALER: Yes.

LEVINE: To New York. I mean to the United States.

OBERTHALER: To the United States.

LEVINE: And then you were living with your grandmother and grandfather?

OBERTHALER: That’s right.

LEVINE: Let’s see, were they religious, your grandparents?

OBERTHALER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What religion were they?

OBERTHALER: Catholic.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about—

OBERTHALER: I remember them taking me to church. My grandmother would take me to a little chapel every day. Every day she’d take me there and this last time when I was over there by myself because I wanted to settle an inheritance over there, the mayor of town, who was my Power of Attorney, took me up there and he says here’s where his mother used to tell him that here’s were the Kratter’s used to take him. My mother’s name was Kratter, and then for some unknown reason, it was really Kratter-Pillar Kratter hyphen Pillar

LEVINE: How do you spell Kratter?

OBERTHALER: K-R-A-T-T-E-R. See, Austrian. Austrian name, and Pillar was Austrian. P-I-L-L-A-R.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's first name?

OBERTHALER: Maria.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

OBERTHALER: Joseph.

LEVINE: And your father's name was Oberthaler?

OBERTHALER: Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and—

OBERTHALER: He spent a great life at—before that, he and a fellow by the name of Keller, my father told me, migrated from Sepadda, Plodn and decided that they would go to Turkey. That's where they wanted to go, to Turkey, and this one day my father told Keller that they better get something to eat pretty soon. So they climbed over this wall, it was a harem and they're having food and everything from all these concubines and everything were coming around and feeding them. Next thing they know, a guy's there with all kinds of knives and everything, you know, chasing them. So my father jumps over the wall again and starts getting away. He runs about a mile. He told me about a mile and all of a sudden he felt something trickling down his leg. It was a dagger that the guy threw at him and had him in the leg.

LEVINE: In Turkey?

OBERTHALER: In Turkey.

LEVINE: Your father went to Turkey?

OBERTHALER: Yeah, sure.

LEVINE: From Switzerland?

OBERTHALER: No, I don't know where from. Either from Sepadda or—but anyway, Keller who after awhile became a doctor. He might have brought me into the world. I don't know. I'm not sure. They were both young and adventurous, you know. So anyway, that's what happened. My father said when "I got a mile away from the house we weren't being chased anymore,"

he feels something going down. Some guy hit him with a stiletto.

LEVINE: Right. Well, now, how about anything else you remember about life in Seppada before you came here?

OBERTHALER: No. I think there were things that I remembered for a while there and then gradually forgot them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Do you remember like what would be like a typical day? Like you were living with your grandfather and your grandmother. You wake up every morning—

OBERTHALER: I remember making a sled with my grandfather, who used to pull me all through town. I remember that very distinctly.

LEVINE: And let's see. Well, you were too young to go to school.

OBERTHALER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Did you have playmates?

OBERTHALER: Oh, all the kids, they all wanted to be my playmates because all the toys would come, which was terrible.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of the toys that you particularly liked?

OBERTHALER: I remember one thing was a coloring book that my mother sent from the United States. It was all about circuses, Barnum and Bailey Circus and the tigers and everything and the coloring book, they sent me the crayons and everything. I used to love to do that. That was great.

LEVINE: Did you have any idea about America? I mean did your mother and father like write letters that maybe your grandmother or your grandfather told you?

OBERTHALER: Oh, sure, but I don't remember them offhand.

LEVINE: Yeah.

OBERTHALER: I know that like coming to America was the thing, you know. That was everything. The gold was in the streets. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Were other people leaving for America while you were still in Sepadda?

OBERTHALER: I think—I think after awhile my father went over to his brother's home and became an uncle to a fellow who had gone to Vineland, New Jersey, who later had two sons. Arbino Oberthaler. His name was Arbino Oberthaler and he had two sons. Aldocia and I forget what the other fellow's name was, but they both went to Princeton University, which was quite a thrill.

LEVINE: Yes.

OBERTHALER: As a matter of fact, in Vineland, he had grapes. He used to grow grapes.

LEVINE: Now, why was it decided that you would go to—

OBERTHALER: Because I was the son.

LEVINE: But I mean at that particular time? Do you know why?

OBERTHALER: My father wanted to get me out of not being in the war over there. That was the important thing. My mother said, "Don't forget you're going to America where they never had war." It was very great.

LEVINE: Do you remember leaving?

OBERTHALER: No. I remember walking up the gangplank.

LEVINE: Do you remember leaving Sepadda and going to the port? No. Do you remember—

OBERTHALER: I remember—I remember when we went from LeHavre to Liverpool it was wintertime and I noticed that the kids in the street had no shoes and they were bleeding. I remember that very distinctly.

LEVINE: The kids in Liverpool?

OBERTHALER: In Liverpool, like English speaking kids. Very poor neighborhood. Very poor and the kids feet were actually bleeding in the snow. It was terrible.

LEVINE: Do you remember—what was the name of the ship?

EI-727/OBERTHALER

OBERTHALER: Rochambeau. Rochambeau. R-O-C-H-B-E-A-U or something like that. R-O-C-H-A-M-B-E-A-U.

LEVINE: And do you—what do you remember about the ship, the Rochambeau?

OBERTHALER: It was fourteen days coming over here and we saw whales and everything. I remember seeing the whales.

LEVINE: Who were you traveling with?

OBERTHALER: My mother.

LEVINE: Oh, I see, your mother came back from the United States.

OBERTHALER: Oh, sure, she came from the United States.

LEVINE: Oh, I see, uh-huh. Do you remember anything you took with me when you came?

OBERTHALER: The crayons. I wanted that with because that's what I got over there. That was my ship from here, you know, my boat. I remember I wanted that, and I took it.

LEVINE: And what were the accommodations like on the ship?

OBERTHALER: Fair to middling from today. We always ate, that's one thing, but that's about all. Well, you must run into this regularly, where people say—

LEVINE: Yeah, people have different experiences, you know, on the ship.

OBERTHALER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, you were probably in a cabin?

OBERTHALER: Steerage.

LEVINE: Oh, you were in steerage, so it was one big space with a lot of beds.

OBERTHALER: Yeah, lot of people.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

EI-727/OBERTHALER

OBERTHALER: As I remember it. As I remember it there was a lot of people.

LEVINE: Do you remember—

OBERTHALER: I remember something very important. When I came to New York, Ellis Island, my mother said, “See, there’s New York and it had all the Riverside lights, the lights all the way up Riverside Drive. I thought, “Oh, boy, this is heaven,” you know. That’s what I thought.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

OBERTHALER: [Crying] Brings back memories.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yes. Did you—

OBERTHALER: I remember we landed here at night and we stayed on the ship and then during the night I saw all these lights going up Riverside Drive, I guess it is. I don’t know.

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

OBERTHALER: No.

LEVINE: And what—

OBERTHALER: I remember we were all standing at the rail, but I remember—I remember some big thing happened, but I didn’t know. I was four years old.

LEVINE: Right. Do you have any memories at all about Ellis Island?

OBERTHALER: Except that one incident that I told you about. I don’t know where it landed even. I don’t know where it landed at Ellis Island or whether we went into New York or I don’t know.

LEVINE: You probably landed at Battery Park in New York and then a ferry took you out here to Ellis Island.

OBERTHALER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So did you have to stay at Ellis Island at all?

OBERTHALER: I don’t remember. I think we had to stay one night or something like that. You know, at four years, especially now at eighty-five, eighty-six.

LEVINE: Well, sometimes your memory's better for earlier things.

OBERTHALER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, now do you remember when you first saw your father?

OBERTHALER: Yeah, right on the pier. You know, he was waiting for us. He was the second man I—[Laughs]

LEVINE: What was it like seeing your father for really the first time?

OBERTHALER: Oh, and how. My mother, God Bless her, she whacked me in the fanny. She said, "That's not your father." First—it was an innocent accident on my part. You know, I had never seen a man in the United States before. This was the first man that I really—your mother said, "Your father is down there," see. I thought "This man is my dad," you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So where did you go when you left Ellis Island?

OBERTHALER: Do a place in Jersey called New Durham, which is North Bergen now, North Bergen. We went to some place that was Little Italy, you know. Everybody wanted to help my father. He got money, we'll take care of you, but we only stayed here like for a day. Then my mother actually had—we had an apartment over in Jersey, see, so we went there.

LEVINE: I see.

OBERTHALER: New Durham was the first place that I went to.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that struck you as new and different when you—you know, when you first got here?

OBERTHALER: I know my father bought an embroidery factory over here.

LEVINE: Oh.

OBERTHALER: He had quite a few machines.

LEVINE: You mean he had that factory when you first got here?

OBERTHALER: No.

LEVINE: No, later.

OBERTHALER: No, later on. In New Durham we had a factory.

LEVINE: I see. I see.

OBERTHALER: And then some fellow came over and made a contract with him to take all his goods and everything, you know, and he gave my father a check. My father gave the check to a watcher from the factory and he went up the Hackensack Plank Road in Union City in some—a big bank, and the watcher showed the guy the check and he said, “Yeah, that’s the way you fill it out.” He found out later that’s the way you fill it out, but it was a phony check. Twenty-two thousand dollars.

LEVINE: Enormous amount of money.

OBERTHALER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, let’s talk about when you first got to New Durham. What was your—I mean how was the house or apartment?

OBERTHALER: It was like—it was like a factory building.

LEVINE: Well, where you lived.

OBERTHALER: Right in the factory building.

LEVINE: Oh, you lived right in the factory building, and how did it compare with how you had lived at your grandparents’?

OBERTHALER: Huh?

LEVINE: How was it compared to your grandparents’?

OBERTHALER: Oh, that was a house. You know, that was a real home over there, but here my father because of the fact that he was in the business, in that business and actually he got the apartment, cold water apartment. I remember that, the cold water apartment because it was cold, and then the factory was downstairs, see.

LEVINE: I see. Well, we’re going to pause here for a second and we’re going to turn over the tape and then we’ll continue.

OBERTHALER: All right. Okay.

END OF SIDE A  
BEGIN SIDE B

- LEVINE: Okay, we're going to continue now with your story.
- OBERTHALER: Oh, that was shut off. Hopefully, anyhow.
- LEVINE: Yes. Yes, it was. Okay, so we're talking about the factory. You said it was a cold—cold water flat.
- OBERTHALER: Flat.
- LEVINE: Can you describe it?
- OBERTHALER: No.
- LEVINE: And how about, did you start school then, soon after that?
- OBERTHALER: Oh, sure. I went to School Number 5 in West New York, right, and I stayed in 5, School Number 5 about two years. I remember a certain teacher, Mrs. Roth. No, Miss Roth. She was lovely. I fell in love with her right away.
- LEVINE: How did she treat you?
- OBERTHALER: Great, great. In the wintertime, my father bought me a coaster, you know, and in buying the coaster, she found out about that I had a coaster and when school ended in June, she asked me to take her plants down to 9<sup>th</sup> Street, West New York. So I took all the plants and put them on my coaster. Then I went from—oh, this is way after awhile. We were in School Number 4 then. I went up to 22<sup>nd</sup> Street in West New York, School Number 4 and I know I took her down there and she wanted to give me ten cents because—and I wouldn't take it, you know. I said, "No, no, that's mine." It was great.
- LEVINE: Now, is a coaster like a wagon?
- OBERTHALER: Huh?
- LEVINE: Is a coaster like a wagon.
- OBERTHALER: Yeah, like a—yeah, like a roller coaster thing, you know. Like you pull it with four wheels on it, put the pots on there.

- LEVINE: Now, were there other children who had come from Europe in your classes?
- OBERTHALER: No.
- LEVINE: You were the only one?
- OBERTHALER: I think so.
- LEVINE: How was learning—
- OBERTHALER: I was a redhead, real redhead. No, tisian red, tisian. You know, real, like Tinsiano, you know.
- LEVINE: Now, how was learning English for you?
- OBERTHALER: Very simple. There's one word that I'll never forget. Catch-ed. C-A-T-C-H-E-D. The teacher tried to get me to say caught, and I couldn't imagine how the hell can you say caught, when it's catch-ed, you know. I was very good in school. I was very good in mathematics, even as a kid. I would find—well, later on I worked in Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in the mathematical section. When I took my entrance exam—is this out of—
- LEVINE: No, this is fine.
- OBERTHALER: When I took my entrance exam, you know, they give you an exam to take and one of the things was cross out all the T's in this questionnaire, plus arithmetic, obviously and in the spelling, cross out all the T's. Then they put me in the mathematical section.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh, now did you—was your family religious in this country?
- OBERTHALER: Yes, my mother was Catholic, St. Joseph's in West New York. For the first couple of years they didn't join anything and then after that we went to—we were Catholic.
- LEVINE: And then did your mother and father know other families that had come from Sepadda?
- OBERTHALER: No, my father was the first one.
- LEVINE: I see.

OBERTHALER: As a matter of fact, in World War II, he became the mayor of the town because he could speak English.

LEVINE: Well, now, why don't you talk a little bit about your father, when he first came here what he did for work and how he built his way up.

OBERTHALER: Sure. Well, my father, he became manager of Alpha Embroidery, which was on 10<sup>th</sup> Street in West New York. My former school teacher, Miss Roth, was on 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Hudson Avenue. Well, then, you know, I went to School Number 5, but we were living in West New York and my father became manager of Alpha Embroidery. Of course, they invented a machine that put beads on cloth. It was a Swiss company that put the beads on cloth, mainly through this guy Wilson, whom he had known a long time ago. My father was the first stitcher—panograph, panograph machine, where he actually made—it wasn't automatic yet, you know. Automatic, they make automatics by putting like a piano roll on a machine and it prints, gets all the holes in it. That's what they call a puncher. Not a stitcher, a puncher, and my father became a puncher then and then he became manager of Alpha Embroidery.

LEVINE: So then after he became a manager—

OBERTHALER: After he became a manager?

LEVINE: Then what did he do?

OBERTHALER: Well, then things started going down in the embroidery business because Swiss laces were no longer being made here. The French people were making more Swiss laces in France, and then sending them here, and as a result, my father later on became a restaurateur. You see, they made—they make sausages in Northern Italy in Sepadda, homemade sausages and my father learned how to do that when they were over there, you know. So when he came here, we had a shop out front and in the back we had a speak easy. [Laughs]

LEVINE: What do you remember about the speak easy?

OBERTHALER: Oh, I could tell you so much about the speak easy.

LEVINE: Oh, go ahead. That would be interesting.

OBERTHALER: My father said it would be a wise thing for us to have a front, a speak easy front, which was a sausage factory. Oberthaler's Bavarian Sausage, see. Not Bavarian, it was something else. Plot Deutsch, sausage. It was like a German sausage factory and all the sausage were hanging in the front, see. In order for me to get some money, my father made me use my little push cart, my coaster, and I'd go around Fridays and take the ad of how many pounds of sausage you want. Well, the sausage was so good, I had a four pound order every week from all these different people and I'd go around with the sausage. Saturday morning I would deliver them. They were paying me forty-two cents a pound for sausage. Now, I understand it's six and seven dollars a pound.

LEVINE: Well, who was making the sausage?

OBERTHALER: My mother and my father and the people that he had there. Oh, incidentally, I had two uncles, Mike and August Quinz, Q-U-I-N-Z, and they became painters. They were painters from the old country, and they became very excellent painters after a while.

LEVINE: You mean painting—

OBERTHALER: House painting.

LEVINE: Houses.

OBERTHALER: House painting. They worked for a fellow by the name, a boss by the name, a Swiss fellow by the name Nunner, N-U-N-N-E-R, who was the boss painter and they stayed with him until they went into their own business.

LEVINE: Well, talk some more about the speak easy.

OBERTHALER: Oh, we had a place in West New York. We moved—in one month—in one year we moved fourteen times.

LEVINE: Why?

OBERTHALER: Well, because the federal agents when they—you can't operate there. The local police would come down and tell my father, "The federal agents are around. Get out," you know. Then we moved from there to 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, to 14<sup>th</sup> Street, all different places.

LEVINE: All in West New York?

OBERTHALER: All in West New York.

LEVINE: And did you always have the front of the sausages?

OBERTHALER: Not that much. After a while we had a restaurant. My mother cooked very excellent food. My mother was a very good cook, besides being a mender and everything else. She made money for my father. The funny part of it was that an outfit called—ah, West New York Coal Company, they had these guys that would deliver coal and a fellow by the name of Johnny Gayweller was the boss. They would go to my father's place and have a drink and then go down and load up the coal and then deliver the coal, and then whatever money they got to spend, they would go down to my father's. And my mother got the idea that you shouldn't spend all your money doing this, so she would keep the money for them. She was like a book keeper, you know. My mother was a very industrious person. My father was a 'hale fellow well met,' guy. My mother was the brains of the business. So anyway, well, she taught my father how to become a stitcher and everything, right?

My mother was a gorgeous woman. Little tiny one. I'll never forget this one time we were in the speak easy on Winkler's Corner, 17<sup>th</sup> Street. Now it's 61<sup>st</sup> Street, West New York and that days they was 44, 44 added. Part of Union City came up and then stopped at 4<sup>th</sup> Street. Then West New York would start off of there. So they consolidated the whole thing and made it one big run. So we were living on 17<sup>th</sup> Street in a place called Winkler's Corner, which was an old like station wagon house. They'd stop by the railroad and they would get out and go over to my—and my father had the speak easy and my mother had the restaurant. Do you remember years ago they used to have whiskey in coffee cups and things like that?

LEVINE: In restaurants, you mean?

OBERTHALER: Yeah, yeah. In the speak easies they had like coffee cups. Well, that's what my mother had and I played the violin.

LEVINE: In the restaurant?

OBERTHALER: In the restaurant and I was the waiter and a washer and everything. They put me right to work.

LEVINE: Were you the head waiter?

OBERTHALER: Huh?

LEVINE: Were you the oberthaler?

OBERTHALER: Yeah, I was the oberthaler. Vittorio. They used to call me Vittorio. You know, in Italian, Vittorio.

LEVINE: And did you have like regulars who came into the speak easy?

OBERTHALER: Oh, sure. Fellows that built Brentwood Hospital in Long Island and they were terrazzo and tile workers, and my mother would always have dinner ready for them when they came all the way back from Brentwood, Long Island, just so that they would have a hot meal or something like that. When my mother died, she died of over work. She worked too hard. She died when she was forty-five, but they gave her money and she would put it away. Now, on Saturday nights when they were going out and have a good time, she'd keep money and then give them so much so money, like maybe five dollars to go out and have a good time, but keep the money here. And she was like the treasurer.

LEVINE: No, in other words, in the restaurant—

OBERTHALER: The front room was a restaurant and the back room was a—

LEVINE: Speak easy.

OBERTHALER: Speak easy.

LEVINE: But would the restaurant also serve the alcoholic drinks or not?

OBERTHALER: Oh, sure, in paper cups.

LEVINE: Coffee cups.

OBERTHALER: Coffee cups.

LEVINE: I see, and what was the back room like? What was the speak—

OBERTHALER: The back room was a regular bar.

EI-727/OBERTHALER

LEVINE: A bar, uh-huh.

OBERTHALER: We had a pool table in there and a regular bar. Oak bar, you know. It was very nice. We made a lot of money there. My father when he sold the place, we built a hotel in Italy, in Sepadda, which an earth quake shook it all out. He didn't get too much out of that.

LEVINE: But he built that on the proceeds from the speak easy?

OBERTHALER: That's right.

LEVINE: Wow, and how about the booze itself? Where was that made?

OBERTHALER: Gee, I don't know. I have no idea.

LEVINE: Yeah, wow.

OBERTHALER: Something, huh?

LEVINE: Yeah.

OBERTHALER: I know we used to make grappa. Grappa was an Italian alcoholic drink, but it was the remnants of the pressed wine. They would press wine and whatever was left was distilled in grappa.

LEVINE: Oh, do you remember that being made?

OBERTHALER: Oh, sure. One time we put—I put too much of that stuff in the still, and it got—it got to where it was boiling and my father said, "When you hear it boiling, shut it off," because then the steam comes out and that's grappa. So I kept hearing it and hearing it and nothing was coming out of the spigot, you know. So I started to take the arm off the spigot. I got about two inches from the top and the whole thing blew up. I was covered complete, complete purple. I was purple all the way through.

LEVINE: Wow. Where was the still?

OBERTHALER: In West New York.

LEVINE: Was it like near where you lived?

- OBERTHALER: Well, it was part of the whole establishment.
- LEVINE: Wow.
- OBERTHALER: I'm telling tales out of school now.
- LEVINE: This is very interesting. We don't often get people who can remember like you and had all those experiences.
- OBERTHALER: Well, I had a good life.
- LEVINE: Where did you learn to play the violin?
- OBERTHALER: In one of the pool places that we lived in in West New York. Different places. I had a professor by the name of Lora, L-O-R-A, who graduated from Julliard School of Music. As a matter of fact, one of his brothers now teaches the flute in Julliard School of Music, Professor Lora. I remember playing the violin with three brothers and Mr. Lora and I was like the fifth, sixth person there. I would play the violin and they had the cello and the viola cello and Saturday mornings Mrs. Lora, the mother who gave the son's education, gave like—we used to have a regular concert like, you know. All the music was handed out and I would play.
- LEVINE: Where would you play? I mean who would—
- OBERTHALER: Woodcliff. In Woodcliff, New Jersey.
- LEVINE: Would there be an audience?
- OBERTHALER: No, in her living room.
- LEVINE: I see, uh-huh. Wow. So were you the only child? Did you remain the only child?
- OBERTHALER: No, I had a brother. I had three brothers, but Joey—Joey died, who was named after my father and then Eddie died because he was studying to be a chemist in Switzerland. When my father closed the business, when he sold the business, he took my brother, who was seventeen years of age, to Europe and then sent him up to Switzerland to study to be a chemist, and some kind of chemical got in and it exploded and hit my brother in the throat. So he got cancer of the throat and died. My brother was twenty-nine years old when he died, and Eddie, my other brother—yeah, I only had

two brothers, not three. And Eddie died fourteen days after he was born. He was almost like a change of life baby for my mother.

LEVINE: Well, now, how long did your father keep the speak easy?

OBERTHALER: Well, let's see. We started—1928, 1927-28 to 1932. '33 prohibition went out, so then he got out of the business.

LEVINE: What else do you remember about prohibition?

OBERTHALER: About what?

LEVINE: Prohibition. What else do you remember?

OBERTHALER: Oh, I used to belong to a club called the Shamrock Social and Athletic Club. We were runners. A guy by the name of Kusack or something like that. Kerry or Kusack or something, he was in the Boston Marathon when they had the Boston Marathon and he was our trainer. So on Boulevard East there was a place called Barney Dudd's and Flegenheimer, Dutch Flegenheimer got guys out of the speak easy. It wasn't a speak easy. It was a restaurant front again, but the speak easy was in the back. So Dino Barder and Gene Audi and myself are running on Boulevard East for the twenty-six mile run, which was sponsored by the Hoboken Elk Club in Hoboken. You had to run from the Elk Club up to Hudson County Park and all the way back down again and that was twenty-six miles. So Dino Barder, Gene Audi and myself are on Boulevard East with training every night. Then we go down to a place called Willie's, who used to make us milk, toast and prunes. That was our diet, and we kept it faithfully.

LEVINE: Was this a diet especially because you were running?

OBERTHALER: No, no, because we were running. We had to get down to our weight and everything. And we were passing Barney Dudd's place on Boulevard East. There's a guy against the wall and boom, boom, boom, they shoot him. They kill him and then the guy turns around with the gun and says to us, "It's all right, fellows. Just keep running. Nothing happened." We ran down to Willie's place, the diner—that's where we had our thing. But I'll never forget, we ate the breakfast—everyone called it breakfast, and then I got sick. You know, because I knew what was going on. Dino Barder and Gene Audi didn't know, see.

- LEVINE: Well, now, this was connected with the speak easy?
- OBERTHALER: Yeah, sure. That's why they shot the guy. He wasn't running—he wasn't their beer. They had beer. Flegenheimer is a Bronx person. He lived in the Bronx. Dutch Flegenheimer. Dutch Schultz they used to call him.
- LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So your father had to deal with these gangsters.
- OBERTHALER: He never dealt with them. He just told them, he says, "We're an Italian American German family. We either drink wine or beer. Wine or beer, that is all."
- LEVINE: Is that all you served?
- OBERTHALER: No, no, we served grappa.
- LEVINE: Oh, grappa right. Right. Wow. Well, do you remember any temperance organizations or anything—
- OBERTHALER: Do what?
- LEVINE: Temperance organizations that were around during prohibition?
- OBERTHALER: No.
- LEVINE: No.
- OBERTHALER: My father was always careful that I didn't get mixed up in any business like that.
- LEVINE: Yeah, wow. Well, so now how would you—looking back on your life coming here as a four year old and living your life out here, what would you say about your life here in America?
- OBERTHALER: Greatest place in the world. Absolutely the greatest. I cry. I hear the Star Spangled Banner, I cry. [Voice cracks] Because I remember. At eighty-five certain things I remember very well.
- LEVINE: What are the kinds of things that you tend to remember at your age, when you think back?

EI-727/OBERTHALER

OBERTHALER: Well, playing the violin, that's for sure. Then I never went to high school, I went to business school. Higgins Business School. It was a secretarial type thing, Pitman shorthand and typing, book keeping. Then from there I graduated from there, after grammar school. Graduated from there, then I went to Pace Institute, when it was Pace Institute. Now it's a university, but I went to Pace Institute and I took three semesters there and I fell in love. Then I didn't do anything.

LEVINE: Oh, who did you fall in love with?

OBERTHALER: My first wife who was a school teacher.

LEVINE: What was her name?

OBERTHALER: Her name was Catherine.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

OBERTHALER: Catherine Shroeck. Shroeck, which means fright in German.

LEVINE: S-C-H-R—

OBERTHALER: S-C-H-R-O-E-C-K.

LEVINE: And then—

OBERTHALER: They named a classroom after her up in Ridgefield where I live now. She was an excellent teacher. She was on the teacher's board down in Trenton, you know, to explain what we did. We have a wonderful school system up in Ridgefield.

LEVINE: And then you worked for Metropolitan Life?

OBERTHALER: Yeah, forty-nine years.

LEVINE: What would you say you feel most satisfied about? What do you feel really proud about?

OBERTHALER: The fact that I was working in a lampshade factory on 19<sup>th</sup> Street in the city, 19<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, which is a center for lampshades, and I worked for four days. On the fourth day, he says, the fellow says, "We have to work overtime tonight." So I figured, hey, well, it's a buck or something more, you know. So I said, "Do you get paid right away?" Because I didn't like the place. I kept hearing the chimes from the

Metropolitan all the time. So I asked to get paid and he says, "Oh, no, we have to get this job out. That's part." So I said, "I quit." Then I went up to the Metropolitan and I got in and that's when I got all my things, my credits and everything. I went into the mathematical section.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Now, how did you meet your second wife?

OBERTHALER: Through the Metropolitan. She worked for Metropolitan, too.

LEVINE: And tell me her name for the tape.

OBERTHALER: Oh, Rita.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

OBERTHALER: Ganser, G-A-N-S-E-R. Ganser, G-A-N-S-A-R. I forget how they spell it. It's a German name.

LEVINE: I see. So you both worked together in Metropolitan.

OBERTHALER: Yeah, she worked there forty-six years and I worked there forty-nine years. Ninety-five years between the two of us. We still go down to their receptions and things like that.

LEVINE: I see. Now, do you—you've been back a lot of times then.

OBERTHALER: To where?

LEVINE: To Europe.

OBERTHALER: Oh, sure. I went all together fourteen times, about. You know, give or take a year.

LEVINE: And how is this time in your life? Your—

OBERTHALER: Right now?

LEVINE: Well, they tell me I have a touch of Parkinson's Disease now, which I have to live with evidently. They can medicate it now, you know. It don't bother me that much. Every once in a while in my signature—I'm very poor at signatures now. So doctor says, he says, "I think you got a touch of Parkinson." It's not serious, but I know. Like when we walk from where I have the car parked, I walked out because there's snow and everything right, but even so, I walk very carefully now.

EI-727/OBERTHALER

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else that you'd like to say before we close.

OBERTHALER: Not that I heard. No, I pretty much covered everything. I may have said a couple of things out of school or something.

LEVINE: No, it's been a most interesting interview. I want to thank you very much.

OBERTHALER: Okay.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, this is Janet Levine. I've been speaking with Victor Oberthaler, who came here at four years of age and he came from Seppada, Northern Italy, although he was born in Switzerland, and he came here in 1914 and he is now eighty-five. This is February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1996. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW