

EI-877

JOHN SCHMITZ

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INTERNEED AT ELLIS ISLAND, SPRING 1943

NOTE: Mr. Schmitz is the brother of Louise Sabrsula Schmitz, EI-928.

LEVINE: Okay, today is May 12th 1997 and I'm here in Kendall (ph) Florida, with Mr. and Mrs. John Schmitz. Mr. Schmitz was interned at Ellis Island in the spring of 1943 when he was six and a half years of age. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if we--- if you would start with your birth date.

SCHMITZ: My birth date is 12 October, 1936.

LEVINE: Okay. And--

SCHMITZ: I was born in Manhattan, Lenox Hill Hospital, New York.

LEVINE: And--- do you--- do you remember--- about how it was that you--- what was the circumstance under which you were sent to Ellis Island?

SCHMITZ: Yes, the circumstances were that my father was--- supposedly an illegal alien. He hadn't--- entered the country legally. But because of his perfect English and his style of--- he was a waiter. He (clears throat) didn't--- he didn't have to go to--- I guess the authorities. He had registered for the draft. He registered for Social Security. He had all the necessary documentations to hold a job.

LEVINE: So wait, he was born in Germany.

SCHMITZ: He was born in Germany.

LEVINE: And when did he come here?

SCHMITZ: And he came to the United States in 1927. He was a steward on a ship. My father's family had a hotel in Germany. Restaurant. And he was the oldest son he was expected to take over the business. So he was taken out of school to learn the hotel business.

And he also was adventurous so he became a full fledged waiter. That was like a three year apprenticeship in Germany---

LEVINE: In Germany.

SCHMITZ: At that time. He got a job on a ship as a steward. And he sailed around the world. And when he came to the United States he said hey, it's nice here. He just got off the boat (laughs). And then some years later, a couple of years, a few years later he met my Mom. In--- in New York. She had immigrated legally and she had a sister in--- upstate New York. And--- they met and married and started having a family.

LEVINE: Now how did--how--- how did he come to speak such perfect English.

SCHMITZ: In his school--- his high school in Germany they had a British subject teaching English. So you mimic the tutor. So he spoke English with an English accent. And he could really put it on if he wanted to. You know--- you couldn't tell he was German. You would think he was--- British.

LEVINE: British.

SCHMITZ: Uh-huh. But whereas my mother who learned English in this country, she had a heavy German accent and did until she died. She sounded like she got off the boat yesterday.

LEVINE: Now did--- were they living in a--- in a predominantly German community in New York.

SCHMITZ: Perhaps in the beginning they lived in Manhattan, around 86th street. And then later on--- they moved to the Bronx because apartments were bigger and a couple of dollars a month cheaper. Back in the 40s, a couple of dollars a month was a lot of money (laughs). So--- during the war they had--- they shared an apartment with someone, with another waiter. And they--- got into little disagreements as to who was supposed to buy the toilet paper, the soap, and--- this and that. And---

LEVINE: This is the--- toilets in the hall that you shared with--

SCHMITZ: No, no, no, no no.

LEVINE: Oh, they shared an actual apartment together.

SCHMITZ: Yeah, yeah. And, but they weren't--- contributing their--- quote, fair share. So they asked them to---to leave. And he got--- I've heard he got very angry and he said I'll take care of Smitty. And then--- he supposedly went to the FBI. At the same time there was another lady who lived in this apartment complex in the Bronx. Who didn't like my father playing German music. And she took up a petition and said Smitty's a Nazi or something. And--- so we have the FBI, came to investigate my Dad. And--- they took him down to Foley Square and asked

him some questions and then they--- let him continue the interview at Ellis Island. This is over a few weeks. And then my mother would--- went to visit him in Ellis Island and--- back in those days I don't think there was very much of a support structure for families without a breadwinner. So they realized very early on that we had to do something.

LEVINE: How many children were there at this point?

SCHMITZ: By that time we were three. My oldest sister and my younger brother. He was three, I was six and a half and my sister was seven and a half. There's almost--- not quite a year difference between my older sister and I.

So we--- we had to get sponsors to convince the FBI that Smitty was not a spy or an agent or you know, gonna blow up the Brooklyn Bridge. And--- I guess that investigation was going slow. He was being shadowed. He knew people were watching him.

LEVINE: This is before they took him to Ellis?

SCHMITZ: Yeah, before they took him to Ellis Island. Yeah. But then once he was interned there, pending the outcome of his case, my mother was a very gutsy person. She took the three of us to Washington, DC. She was gonna go see the President. And we went to the White House. She went storming in and actually they wouldn't let her see the President. As she says in her note, "only if it was the Queen of England would they let me see him" (laughs). But they did let her talk to an immigration official. And he said look, what you need to do is go back to Ellis Island and stay with him.

LEVINE: Oh.

SCHMITZ: According to my mother, he---he didn't say go over there and have a sit in, but he more or less implied that that's what you should do. And so--- we went back home to the Bronx and put all the furniture in storage. (unclear) helped us, this is a neighbor now who lived--- in the same building. And put all the furniture into his place, one or two of his rooms, he was a bachelor friend of my father's. And--- we packed a couple of suitcases and took the ferry to Ellis Island and said here we are. Refused to leave. And according to my mother's story, it happened on a weekend in the evening and they didn't know what to do. Call Washington in the evening, you know, on a weekend, you know. And so--- so we stayed there. And--- eventually they let us stay with him.

LEVINE: Did you have a little private sleeping area?

SCHMITZ: Well as I recall--- no--- we were living in the big hall. We had like --- they had like cots set up. And that's where we slept. And we'd eat in the cafeteria.

LEVINE: Well were you like in a dormitory--- like where you were sleeping? Were there lots of other people around? Or was it just your family?

SCHMITZ: Yes, there were lots of other people--- people around. Seemed like they were on--- I recall, you know, cots and--- maybe that was just the place where we went during the day.

LEVINE: Oh.

SCHMITZ:: Okay I--- that memory is sort of vague. I remember--- seeing my first soccer game on Ellis Island. My first exposure to soccer. The men played on one side of the gate or big brick wall, a fence separating the men and women. And they could only visit at certain times. At night they were--- divided. And---

LEVINE: Now do you remember other--- do you remember Italians or Japanese being there?

SCHMITZ: No. Curiously I think there was an Indian, my father called him an Indian, maybe, I don't know what he was. But we would exercise, we would walk up and down this walk, the view of the harbor. And--- one bald headed guy and he would walk on his toes. And my father said--- he says it's good for you, it's good to walk on your toes. Indian style. Okay. I remember, walking--- and this guy was, he looked very mean, you know? I mean he just--- bald head, he just--- he says walk on my toes, I'm gonna walk on my toes. You know there's no--- (laughs).

LEVINE: Were there other children there?

SCHMITZ: Yes, there were. But I don't--- I don't recall playing with them too much. I--- I do remember--- one time playing--- with a ball, and either the Coast Guardsmen or Navy Seamen you know, with the Dixie cup hat and the Peacoat and the rifle, he was walking along the fence, the other side of the fence. And he asked me, he said what--- what team to do you like? And I guess he said baseball team. I said the Dodgers. He says why do you like the Dodgers. So I had this ball and I threw it, and I said because they dodge after the ball. I had no idea what I was talking about. But I just remember that, you know, distinctly. His white belt, the spats, and the rifle and the peacoat.

LEVINE: Do you have any other memories of--- servicemen being there or having any contact with you?

SCHMITZ: No, not--- just that one particular incident. We would always see them walking up and down on the--- on the perimeter fence of the--- island.

LEVINE: Now were they guarding you or were they like doing military duty?

SCHMITZ: No, they were guarding us. They were--- there was a perimeter guard. I would think that--- for someone it might be easier to climb the fence than to try to swim. But---

LEVINE: Especially to New Jersey.

SCHMITZ: Yeah, but--- that was the only--- actual memory I have of--- of the servicemen.

LEVINE: Do you recall--- like--- deportation judges holding court there or anything like that?

SCHMITZ: No--- no. It was--- maybe six and a half, you're--- you just recall this big hall, you know. There were steps going up to--- maybe to rooms or other offices. But---

LEVINE: How about the food. Do you remember anything about that?

SCHMITZ: No. According to my mother the kids got fed better than the adults. And she says because we were U.S. citizens (they laugh).

LEVINE: You were born here, right?

SCHMITZ: Yeah. And then we were able to have visitors. Visitors would come and they would bring food along with some extra packages of--- so people could have snacks. You know as opposed to--- getting three square meals a day, you--- that doesn't include snacks. It's just like boot camp, you know, you only get three meals and that's it.

LEVINE: Nothing in between.

SCHMITZ: That's it, nothing in between. So---

LEVINE: Let's see. What did--- do you remember--- like people visiting you and your family?

SCHMITZ: I remember my father's uncle coming. We call him Uncle Charlie, he was my father's friend. And--- I think that is where we had the furniture stored. I also remember one time---

LEVINE: Wait a minute, you had a furniture store with him?

SCHMITZ: No, Stored. Stored, where we stored---

LEVINE: Stored.

SCHMITZ: --our furniture.

LEVINE: I see. I'm sorry.

SCHMITZ: Because we couldn't take our furniture with us to---

LEVINE: Right.

SCHMITZ: Ellis Island. So we had to keep it with this neighbor. And he came frequently. And--- a few times my father was allowed, quote, "leave", to go rearrange the furniture or go into New York City for something. Maybe it was a hearing. As I recall one time, he came back from going to the mainland and he was limping. And while they were rearranging the furniture, I was told that a sewing machine fell on his toe. And he had a black toe. You know it was three times the size of a

normal toe. And he had to walk with it with an open sock, I guess--- he smacked it on, a piece of furniture fell on him, wooden furniture.

MRS. SCHMITZ: Do you recall where the furniture was when he went back to New York? Because that was several years, who kept it all that time?

SCHMITZ: Yeah it was three year--- no. Our neighbor.

LEVINE: Uncle Charlie.

SCHMITZ: Uncle Charlie. Yeah.

MRS. SCHMITZ: It was still with him when you went back, okay. I didn't remember that.

LEVINE: When your father was---went on these--- furloughs or whatever, who--- was he accompanied by a guard? Do you remember?

SCHMITZ: That I wouldn't know. I think he had--- company, yeah. But at the same time, he's not gonna jump ship, in a sense, because his family is there. So--- and I know that before he was interned in Ellis Island--- they--- they had like a hearing and he was like free on his own recognizance for a while there. So I think it wasn't till maybe after the determination was made that he was considered dangerous enemy alien, that--- maybe then he would have to go--- have company with him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Now you said he had--- he had applied for the service, did you say?

SCHMITZ: He registered for the draft.

LEVINE: He registered for the draft.

SCHMITZ: Yeah. Yeah, Social Security. And he was also 4F. Because--- one winter night when he was coming home from work he slipped on the ice and broke his leg. Just a shift of balance. And when they set it, they didn't mend the bones properly. So his--- it grew next to it. And so he walked with a limp. He--- not a noticeable limp. But I guess in one way he could have been--- had he taken a physical he could have been more---

LEVINE: So but that didn't count that he had---

SCHMITZ: That didn't count. No. My mother's story is that during the interview they--- the FBI asked him if he would fight against his country. And he replied "no," he said I'd fight against the Japanese." And they said Mr. Schmits that's not the question (laughs). Just "no, I would not fight against my brothers." And---

LEVINE: And he had actual physical brothers in Germany, did he?

SCHMITZ: Yes, my father had two brothers in Germany. And my mother had--- she came from a family of 13 children. They were farmers, they were from East Germany. And--- we had one sister here in the States. So the rest of her sisters and brothers were all living in

Germany. Oh, and one in Argentina. I have a cousin who lives in Buenos Aires.

(Off-Mike Conversation)

LEVINE: Let's see. Do you remember what the adults did during these days when they were interned?

SCHMITZ: What I saw, they would just sit around and talk and read their papers or they'd go watch the soccer game outside.

LEVINE: And they were actually playing?

SCHMITZ: Yes.

LEVINE: Against each other?

SCHMITZ: Yeah, the--- the internees. Yeah, they were playing. But I know in Crystal City they had--- they had a regular soccer league there. Where the internees would play one team against the other. And then--- they'd also play the Japanese in the camp.

LEVINE: But--- but at Ellis Island, you just remember the Germans interning, you don't remember ---

SCHMITZ: Right.

LEVINE: And you don't remember like people being held to be deported--- that weren't particularly German?

SCHMITZ: No. No that--no I think that stuff would sort of go over your head.

LEVINE: At that age.

SCHMITZ: At that age. You just--- remembered the---this big hall where we generally stayed in. And--- trying to play with other kids. I guess-- having an older sister and a younger brother, we sort of--- I think we stayed together more. I think the hardest part was--- finding your--- finding where you were staying in the hall. You know where your little area was. That's about it there. I just--- you know--- I just remember those--- that incident with the--- with the Coast Guardsman or the Seaman with dodge ball. Being exposed to soccer there. Like one time a soccer ball was kicked over the fence and over to our side. And I remember my mother running over to get the ball and she kicked it back over (laughs). She--- she enjoyed doing things, I guess.

LEVINE: Do you remember like--- your mother or father like talking about being there? Were they--- were they really feeling that it was unfair for them to be there or--- did--- do you--- recall?

SCHMITZ: My mother thought--- it was unfair. This is years later now, in retrospect. She felt that--- maybe because of my father's

honesty when he said that he wouldn't fight against his country, she felt that that was one of the reasons that they were interned. The other is the fact that he didn't legally immigrate, sort of jumped ship and came in. But---

LEVINE: Did they become citizens, your mother and father?

SCHMITZ: My, yes, after--- in the late 50s my mother became a citizen. In 19---they even tried to deport him after we came back from Texas in the---in the late 40s and 50s. Then they finally gave up on that because by that time we were four children, my mother was a citizen. They finally let him legally enter the United States in 1957. He had to go up to Canada and stay overnight and enter through Rouse's Point in New York in 1957. I was 21 then (laughs).

LEVINE: Wow.

SCHMITZ: And then--- then they asked him, "Oh, Mr. SCHMITZ:, now that you're legally in the country, do you want to become a citizen?" And I can't tell you what he told them. (laughter) Something like "oh kiss my...." But he--- naturally, after the--- he came back from Texas and went back to New York, my parents said hey, you don't talk about where we've been. You know the FBI told us not to say anything about this. And it was one of the better kept secrets of World War II was that we had interned German Americans. The Japanese Americans--- that was--- there were just too many of those. Some of them were--- relocated as opposed to being interned. There were two types of camps during World War II. Relocation centers and internment centers. And the ones that they thought might be hazardous, (laughs), they interned them. The other ones they just reli--relocated away from the West Coast. Because of, you know, the hysteria of Pearl Harbor.

LEVINE: You mean, in remote areas or---

SCHMITZ: Uh-huh. To remote areas. Crystal City, Texas, is like 80 miles from the Mexican border and is south-east of San Anton, it's out in the boonies.

LEVINE: Do you remember when you were at Ellis Island if people were leaving for these other internment camps like during the course of the time you were getting ready to leave?

SCHMITZ: Yeah, we would see people. You know they--- would pack up and--- leave and--- mother would always say oh pretty soon it'll be our turn to go and leave here.

LEVINE: But did people like--- did they sort of know where they were going? And did they--- wanna leave?

SCHMITZ: That I don't know. I didn't--- I couldn't detect anything then.

LEVINE: Do you remember leaving?

SCHMITZ: Oh yes. I remember we got on a boat. I think it was a-- it looked like a naval vessel. It could have been a Navy Ferry painted grey but it was grey. I remember going to these portholes we had to step through from one compartment to the next. And I guess I somehow got separated from my parents because I wanted to see--- look out. And I remember mother running after me. I mean she didn't find me for a while because she want me---didn't think I was gonna get tossed overboard or something, you know. But it was--- it was on a vessel of some kind. It was grey. And then we went--- to a train station for a three day train trip to--- Crystal City, Texas.

LEVINE: And what were your first impressions of that, do you remember?

SCHMITZ: Of Texas? Yes. I remember from the train station we got on to these open--- open trucks. And from a railroad--- railroad station in Crystal City, Texas, it was the middle of the town (laughs) .

LEVINE: That was the town.

SCHMITZ: That was the town. Had a statue of popeye the sailorman there. And--- we got into these trucks and they took us into the camp. Which had to be maybe a---

MRS. SCHMITZ: Ten minutes?

SCHMITZ:: Ten block ride?

MRS. SCHMITZ: (Laughs) It's darn near walking distance.

SCHMITZ:: It was--- having gone back to Crystal City, you know from where the center of the town was to where the camp was, why it--- it was very close. But they just transported us because we had suitcases with us. And other belongings and clothes.

LEVINE: Yeah, did you have many things with you at Ellis Island?

SCHMITZ: No we--- well, no I wouldn't say that. Because I'm sure--- that--- in our visits back home, we were able to get more clothes and more suitcases so I know we had a lot more--- we left Ellis Island with a lot more than we initially went---went there with. And I don't remember what kind of--- laundry problems my mother had or--- any of the people. But--- you're there for a few months, you know clothes have to be washed, hung and dried and--- I would not--- that was not my--- job. (laughter)

LEVINE: That wasn't, wasn't your concern.

SCHMITZ:: My job was just to get 'em dirty, right? (laughter)

MRS. SCHMITZ: Louise might have a memory of that because she probably had to help with it.

LEVINE: Yeah, that would be interesting. Um---

SCHMITZ: My whole--- to recap, my whole--- the whole experience of my father after the war was that--- he said it was like a country club. Because we were in---we were in the only family orientated camp where--- husbands and wives could live together.

LEVINE: In Crystal City?

SCHMITZ: In Crystal City. That was the only family orientated internment camp in this country. And---

LEVINE: And how were you treated? I mean---

SCHMITZ: Oh, we--- we were treated--- I would say like gold. We were quote, "prisoners of war." According to my father and my--- and my mother we ate better than the average American did. We had meat, we had eggs, we had milk, we had--- the perimeter guards were the best fed guards in the--- in the whole United States. Because all the women could do with the milk and butter, they'd bake. And every time we'd walk by the fence they'd give the guards cake. (laughs)

LEVINE: Wow. Huh. Now were there only German people interned in Crystal City?

SCHMITZ: No, there were Japanese also and ---

LEVINE: That you had contact with?

SCHMITZ: Oh yes. Yeah. We--we played ball with. And--- went to church with them. Generally they stayed in their half of the camp and we in our half. But at the swimming pool, we always met at the swimming pool once a day. At the beginning, there was no swimming pool. The men had--- organized--- they would get some funding from the government. And with the camp labor, they drained the swamp that was there and built a pool. I have a video, maybe you'll have time to look at that. That will explain that.

LEVINE: Interesting.

SCHMITZ: And--- the pool was large. It was 100 yards in diameter. Circular pool. Very big.

LEVINE: Did you go to school there?

SCHMITZ: Yes, that's where I learned, actually, perfected my German. Because--- there were three schools in the camp, the German school, Japanese school, and American school. So you'd either go to one, the other, or both. So--- that's where--- where I learned German for the first--- I guess three years.

LEVINE: Did you just go to the German school?

SCHMITZ: Um-hmmm. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you go to the---

SCHMITZ: No, I recall just going to the German school. And then after the war was over, then it all became an English school. Then we just--- studied English.

LEVINE: But you were speaking English fluently when you were interned to begin with.

SCHMITZ: Oh right. Right. Well--- my--- I guess my first language was German which I learned at home from my parents. And then when I started going to school in the Bronx there where we lived, Why I, I'd speak English.

LEVINE: Did you know English before you started school?

SCHMITZ: Oh yes, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHMITZ: Because I remember--- like playing with kids who lived in our--- apartment house. They had to be English because--- it was a mixed neighborhood that I lived in. In the Bronx.

LEVINE: It was mixed of German---

SCHMITZ: Yeah. German, Italians, Irish. It--- wasn't like a--- Little Italy or , you know, or Germantown. It was mixed.

LEVINE: So you didn't have trouble like when you got to school because you couldn't understand.

SCHMITZ: No, no, no, no.

LEVINE: And how about--- just back to Ellis Island a bit. Do you remember any of the staff and how they treated you? Or did you have any interaction with staff members at Ellis Island?

SCHMITZ:: No. I--- I would say not. I don't recall meeting staff. I know they had some offices there. The staff members there. But we just sort of avoided them. My parents say don't go there, you know, stay--- stay here. So--- like--- dutiful children, you stayed away.

LEVINE: Were--- were your mother and father strict parents, would you say?

SCHMITZ: Yes, I would say so. I would think they were strict.

LEVINE: Do you remember like any other things that---

SCHMITZ: No was no, you know? There wasn't a third warning. First one, there was a second one, and the third one, you got it. (laughs) That was--- third strike you're out, you know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHMITZ: They were not baseball players. But---

LEVINE: So like--- in the Crystal City camp, did you have like--
- boy scouts and---

SCHMITZ: Oh yeah, they had a--- a Hitler Yugen, (laughter). Well
it was--- I just remember one time--- it was Hitler's birthday. So there
were a couple--- there were a number of Nazis in the camp. Right, these
fanatics, I mean, in '43, the handwriting was very on the wall. I mean--
- from what I'm reading in history, you know, Germany was on the way out--
-- out the tubes. But there were also some--- Japanese fanatics there.
So maybe these two groups decided to see who could outdo each other with
the Emperor's birthday or Hitler's birthday. So they had a--- parade in
the camp. So we--- we wore white--- a white shirt and dark shorts. And
they made these wonderful torches. Just a piece of wood with a can in
it--- a little bit of kerosene and a rag for a lamp. And I thought that
was so fun, boy, to carry a torch. (laughs) We just--- marched---
(laughs)---

LEVINE: Wow.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Well, how did other people react to the--- fanatical---
group? Do you have any remembrance of that?

SCHMITZ: No, I don't know about their reaction. I know some
people though, who would joke. We also had the German Americans who were
deported from South American countries. Who went to the camp, okay? So
there was actually--- three languages in the camp, or four. There was
Spanish and German and English and Japanese. Because I know a lot of the
times, after a while it became a joke. My father would say oh yeah,
mañana, mañana, he said "we have some Germans here--- like in German it
would be "Morgen, morgen, nur nicht heute," Tomorrow, tomorrow, not
today. "Sagen alle faule leute," All lazy people say. But then that
became like--- Mañana mañana when these Latin Germans came into the--- so
we learned some--- you know Spanish words.

LEVINE: But do you remember it as a---an unpleasant experience?

SCHMITZ: No, I thought it was a great experience. I learned how
to swim in the camp in--- Crystal City. After that was--- through. All
we--- we only had one drowning in the whole camp, while the internees
were there. And that was some kid that went down to the--- pool was
deep, it was a good ten foot deep--- went down to the main drain and got
caught while they were letting some water out. Even though they had
lifeguards there. In fact one--- one day a week, this was the only pool
in the whole neighborhood. One day a week they would let--- the

residents from the city come into the camp to swim. (laughs) If you can picture that.

LEVINE: Wow. I see how the country club idea---yeah. And how about your mother and father. Do you--- do you have a sense of how they felt about being in Crystal City?

SCHMITZ: Yeah, my Dad--- well he--- by that--- he still became bitter and he wanted to put himself on the repatriation list and go back to Germany. And during the war they were exchanging citizens. This was going on during the time of war. Americans in Germany were being sent--- exchanged for Germans here. So he wanted to get put on the list. And I remember that happened frequently because every time they had a group leaving, there would be like a party or fiesta, you know. So you knew---

LEVINE: And you remember people leaving?

SCHMITZ: Yeah, you knew--- then all these crates were made up with their belongings in it. And you know they were--- trucks would come into the camp to pick that stuff up and--- and go. And they'd have a--- auf wiedersehen party. You know. But my father wanted to go back but--- by this time I--- my younger sister was born in the camp. And my mother wanted--- had a choice of either being born in the camp or in the town. The difference was what was marked on your birth certificate. One would say Crystal City Internment camp and the other one would say Crystal City, Texas. So my mother said "no", she says, "this is part of American history, and I want my daughter born in the camp with the interment on it." So that's the way it was. But---

LEVINE: Did your father ever get on that list?

SCHMITZ: Yeah, he got on the list. And then fate inter--- intervened see, he got a little infection from a splinter and it got bigger. And he started to blue line so he had to be admitted to the hospital in the camp. And--- to go on penicillin and I guess poison watch. So while he was there my mother went to the camp director and said, "do I have to go with my husband?" And he said "no, Mrs. Schmitz you don't." And he says "why don't you wanna go?" And she says "well Germany is--- losing the war," she says, "I don't want to take my family over there and starve to death." So he says--- "well, we can take you off the list and just leave your husband on it." But when my father came back from the hospital, it didn't take long in a small community like that, everybody knows where everybody else stands. He found out that he was the only one on the list. And--- he got very angry. But then--- my mother convinced him that--- going back to Germany, you're a fool if you do go. So--- he--- then removed himself.

LEVINE: Um-hmmm. So he probably was bitter about being interned and he--- that's why he wanted to go back.

SCHMITZ: Go back, right, right. But then after--- you know--- hindsight is always 20/20. You realize when you see the newspaper pictures of Germany and Dresden, and all that, he realized hey, this is-- - this is the place to be.

LEVINE: Right.

SCHMITZ: And---

LEVINE: So what were the dates actually then when you were in Crystal City?

SCHMITZ: From July of '43 to July of 1946. A year after the war. The camp was still--- the camp was still--- it was operated until 1947. By then it was an INS camp, Immigration Naturalization Service, like--- just like Krome Detention is, right here in Miami. We have a camp, a detention camp right here where we're putting all these people who jump ship and come into the United States.

LEVINE: Huh. And how about--- medical care? Like at Ellis Island? Did you ever have any reason when your father--- like--- dropped the furniture on his toe, do you remember that?

SCHMITZ: Oh yeah, I remember him getting care for that. Because he had a bandage and he would go have it changed. But where he got that changed, I don't know.

LEVINE: You don't know if it's the hospital buildings that were operative earlier were still going there?

SCHMITZ: I--- since we only--- since I was there maybe only--- two or three months, you know, a couple of months of this. Whereas in Crystal City, Texas, you're there for three years and--- you--- you know I had a hernia operation, I went to the dentist there.

LEVINE: You got good care?

SCHMITZ: Got very good care. Yeah, it was an excellent hospital. It was staffed by--- by Germans, by Japanese, and by American doctors. And the American doctors were Army--- in Army offices. So--- and these and nurses.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the Japanese as a group in that camp?

SCHMITZ: In the camp.

LEVINE: As compared with the German children, and--- and/or adults.

SCHMITZ: As a group, they were a different color. They were generally smaller. What I remember as a group is the soccer games, and the baseball--- softball games and the basketball games. Now the Germans would only excel in basketball sheerly because of their height. And soccer, the Germans would play Germans and also Japanese. So I don't remember too many Japanese playing soccer. But I do know softball, that they really excelled in that.

LEVINE: They did.

SCHMITZ: The Japanese did. I remember the Germans would get mad because they would lose. (laughs) Just--- intuitively I knew that, you know?

LEVINE: What about the temperament. I mean they seem like so different.

SCHMITZ: They had, I mean I guess they lived on sort of their half of the camp. We could go walking through--- through their part of the camp but--- it's like going to another country, I guess. People there--- they were allowed to buy seed and make plant--- plants around their buildings where they lived.

LEVINE: Were they like--- what were the buildings like?

(Off mike conversation)

BREAK IN TAPE

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming now having watched the propaganda films of Crystal City. But just--- just a few last questions. When you think about it now, how--- what do you think or feel about--- first of all, the Ellis Island part, but the whole experience?

SCHMITZ: The whole experience, I ended up with initially, like, sort of a complex of being German. I didn't sort of like it because of all the atrocities that--- sort of went on. I found myself--- I couldn't read about Germany and World War II, I just sort of didn't wanna know about. I wasn't saying that--- I hope my German heritage--- we sure as heck didn't do it, you know. Since the--- we were--- my parents told the FBI, don't talk about it--- it's a little black area in history that you're supposed to forget. But now of course you wanna remember it all. You know--- as time goes on.

LEVINE: Did people treat you--- badly because you were German? Did you have any experiences like that?

SCHMITZ: No, I guess after the war I had a couple of neighbors in the Lower Bronx, you know, and some kids would call you Nazi. Because--- of your name. But--- that wasn't--- a bad experience.

LEVINE: And how--- do you remember your mother and father--- afterwards? I mean did they--- your father, did he stay a little bit bitter about it? Or--- how about your mother?

SCHMITZ: No, he--- in a sense, he was a little bitter about being interned but he looked at it as a vacation paid for by Uncle Sam. That was--- maybe he was--- maybe it was tongue in cheek but that's the way he looked at it. At the same time realized that he was a lot better off here than over there. And after the war we were busy sending our mother's brothers and sisters and--- his brother, we would send packages. I remember schlepping every week to the post office with 20, 22 pound box of--- soap, coffee, cigarettes, all the things that they could trade to

stay alive over there. So we spent--- a lot of money send--- keeping our relatives alive after the war. And this was--- after 46, it was after we got back from Texas.

LEVINE: So when you got back to New York, did Uncle Charlie still have your furniture?

SCHMITZ: Yes, we got all the furniture back. Then we moved into a--- a railroad flat. We had to take the super's job because apartments were very scarce.

LEVINE: In the Bronx?

SCHMITZ: In the Bronx, yeah. 154th street. It was a railroad flat. With the bathroom in the hall. That we shared with the other neighbors, it was a three story--- six family house. And we were the supers. And we had to--- you know clean the bathrooms and dust down the hallways and empty the--- the basement from ashes and--- then came the big coal strike. And we had to beg--- beg wood from some shipping companies and the furniture company next door. Get them to throw down their barrels so we could burn it for heat. Because--- they had this big coal strike. And there were--- so.

LEVINE: And--- is there anything else that you can think of--- where this experience--- the whole of it, has like--- affected you in your later life?

SCHMITZ: My later life. Well, yes, being able to--- go to a German School, that was--- that was a big plus in high school. I hardly had to crack a book to pass my German classes. I went to college, I had a 15 minute conversation with the head of the German Department and he waived my language requirements for my Bachelor's degree. So that was a plus there. And when you--- when you're going to night school---

LEVINE: Have that waived.

SCHMITZ: Right, have that waived and make it up with other--- other courses that I had to take, so that helped. And so it was nice to have another language. German has helped somewhat with the little Spanish I've been able to learn down here in Miami. Experience--- at Ellis Island--- watch---seeing soccer and in Texas seeing soccer, I--- somehow got into soccer and--- played it or--- officiated most of my life. I'm still a soccer official here in Miami. I officiate high schools and youth leagues so that keeps me in shape (laughs) and in touch with the--- younger kids.

MRS SCHMITZ:: And on the down side?

SCHMITZ: On the down side? Soccer?

MRS. SCHMITZ: No. The down side from your--- being interned.

SCHMITZ: Oh, well I discussed that already, I mentioned that. Those German guilt feeling, you couldn't talk about it or anything. You felt---

MRS. SCHMITZ: Until how old, when you first told someone how old were you when you first told someone where you had been?

SCHMITZ: That was a long--- yeah. During the--- first time I let somebody know was when our--- during Carter's reign when we had taken the--- the Iranians took the Embassy. And for some reason then I started talking about--- you know--- hostages and internees and--- things like that.

LEVINE: So in other words it really wasn't a bad experience for you but--- but somehow it was a dark secret.

SCHMITZ: Um-hmm .

LEVINE: So it was like the secret of it that was---

SCHMITZ: You couldn't talk about it. You were told---

LEVINE: the---the part that was so--- the negative part.

SCHMITZ: That was the only cloud, I think. Everything else was positive.

MRS. SCHMITZ: From a child's point of view.

SCHMITZ: From a child's point of view.

LEVINE: Right. Okay, well I think--- we'll close here. I've been speaking with John SCHMITZ: and--- I'm here with--- he and his wife Billy (ph) in Florida. And it's May 12th, 1997, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW