

Excerpts from Interview with Joe Portaleki  
By Deborah Levenson, July 11, 2016

After World War 2 there were people from all kinds of countries in countries other than where they originated from, so this displaced persons camp was interesting in the manner that there were about a dozen different nationalities in this camp. Therefore, many people couldn't speak to anyone else because they didn't share a common language, and that, I think, needs to be known right up front. That also made it interesting for young people and children like myself at the time. You go out and told to go and play, but you're playing with kids and you don't have a common language to share. I can still remember my early days, and children finding it not to be a problem. We just decided, why don't we just create a new language, and just decide what we're going to call something, agree on it. Next thing, we had our own language! It made it quite easy. I don't know how we all thought of that, but I remember certainly thinking about it, and that worked for us as young people.

Q: Can you explain how you and your family got there?

A: Yes. Mind you, this [was in] Austria, [in] the city of Klagenfurt, in the province of Carinthia in English, or Kärnten in German, and about 80 percent of the city was destroyed by Allied bombing, and so people were living any way they could. Now the war ends, and you've got people looking for housing. And by maybe around 1950-51, some government monies came about to help people build the equivalent of bare military barrack-type, almost sheds, for housing, in a location outside the city. The people that ended up there were not Austrian citizens, people that had no place to go. Mind you, that also included a lot of Austrian people, because in my case, where my mother was Austrian and my father Hungarian, the women never counted. So you marry a Hungarian person, now you're Hungarian. Women didn't count, so therefore that is one way you end up there. There were all kinds of people, you know -- people with children, without children, widows. I mean, a lot of people in pretty sad shape.

Q: Who ran the camp?

A: There was nobody running the camp. There was just a communal place where people lived and they were all, you know, one-story barracks where each building had about four divisions -- four families in equal spaces. Each barrack was just two rooms. A front room which would have a wood stove. There would be heat for the winter as well as your cooking, and you would go and find wood to burn. The so-called back room was the bedroom. It didn't matter whether there were two people there or there were four or six people, they lived in the same place in two rooms...

Q: How old were you when you first got there?

A: When they were first built, which was, I think, about 1951 or so. Before that, I can still remember my parents and I living in the basement of a bombed out building, like many, many people did. You know, in Europe they have mostly concrete and steel buildings. When they're destroyed, what's left over? The basement. So there were multiple families living in the basements of these buildings, and I can still remember it as a young boy. Then, when the money came through to build these barracks for an actual camp right on the edge of the city, the people that were going to be living there also had to help build it.

It was your labor and the buildings were basically, you know, shacks, a wooden box sitting on top of a bunch of rocks. That's the building. There's no cellar, there's no anything. There's no electricity, there's no water, there's no heat. I mean, on the one side of a number of buildings you'd have toilets for four men and toilets and latrines -- toilets being an outhouse -- and the same thing for women on the opposite end. And, needless to say, those weren't fun because in the summer you got a million and one flies and in the winter you got frostbite. It was not pleasant. [There was] a communal well in the center which had an old manual hand pump where you would get water that everybody shared, and everybody had a small plot, a space of land next to their small house, [a] shed. And you would grow whatever you could for food, growing vegetables, basically. And some people who were so-called better off would be able to build a cage of some kind and maybe have some chickens or a duck or something and maybe raise a rabbit or two, and that would be it. . .

[Speaking of schools in the camp]

You really had to pay attention because the teacher was behind you, which also meant that if you were goofing off or looking left or right, you might get a rap on the head from the teacher because you weren't looking forward, or you were goofing off. So it was pretty strict, but I still enjoyed what I learned. I did like learning things by rote. I became very good at math and other things. I certainly enjoyed music, you know, singing an awful lot.

Q: Is that where you learned to play music?

A: No, but I got a love of music. Since you brought up the subject, one of my favorite, favorite things in the camp was on Sundays or holidays. The only way you had music was, people would make it. So people would sing or people would dance. People would make their own entertainment. And I truly loved hearing other people sing in whatever language it was. People got together and shared, you know, they'd just share anything, whether it was music or poetry or dance or whatever. I love that. I look forward to holidays when people were doing that. That instilled a great thing, in music. My mother sang quite often, but my father would sing his Hungarian laments, and I could always tell how happy he was or sad he was by what he was

singing. Hungarian singing is funny because sometimes the most miserable-sounding song is the one that's the happy song, because you're letting all your emotions out. And my father did that very well. He was an extremely kind man. . .

Q: Tell me how people got along. You had told me a story last time about -- I guess it was a Polish family, and the woman giving birth --

A: Oh yes. It was a Czech family. There was a family, a husband and wife and three daughters. One was an older daughter who was maybe, I don't know 12 or 13 or whatever, and the other girls were maybe six, seven, eight, whatever age I was at that time. One of the things that was difficult living there is, mind you, the walls are as thick as the boards are, and so you would hear people talking and doing what they do in their part of the barracks. And very often that was screaming and yelling and being upset, and people feeling abandoned, feeling trapped, feeling lost, feeling -- there was a lot of sadness, put it that way. And needless to say, very often there was a lot of alcohol too. And so one of the things, again, I am blessed. I had wonderful parents.

Well, the one story that you're asking me about is, I learned something very early that was incredibly painful. This Czech couple with the three daughters where the mother was expecting another baby. Well, the day came that she was to deliver. All the kids in the area were all sent away, like "go far away, go far away and go out in the fields." So we were sent away, and of course I was with the daughters, as I often played with the two girls, and we would get close enough so we could hear what's going on. Well, needless to say, a woman in labor would very often be screaming and yelling in pain, and so something was going very terribly wrong in that barrack with that woman delivering. The next thing, me and the girls were watching, and the priest shows up in this black garb, and he goes in, and next thing you know the screaming ends. And I'm terrified, and these girls are super terrified.

And a little while goes by, and all I can still see as the man comes out opens the door to the barrack, and he's holding a baby in his hands crying and crying and crying. And what happened is, the mother died. And they learned from them that under Catholic rules, if someone's going to have to live, it would always have to be the child, and that the mother should die. I don't know what they did or why the mother died. But here is a case where all of a sudden, this man had four daughters and a dead wife. Needless to say, the girls cried their brains out, and shortly thereafter they moved. And I know what happened to them in that they went off to orphanages, because a man couldn't take care of four daughters and also work. So I still wonder to this day what happened to them.

One of the things I remember is this one -- I can't remember if she was a Russian woman, or what she was, but the woman lived about three, four shacks down from where we lived, and the children were encouraged to go see her and help her because she was quite an old lady who was

not able to do much of anything. And I remember going and we'd bring her wood or would help her with her ashes or with fire or bring her water or whatever and maybe cut some food for her, but I remember in some manner learning about her -- that she had lost her family, and lost her husband, lost the children. And then, mind you, these people lived through the horrors of -- if she was Russian, which she may have been, lived through the Russian Revolution, and during World War One, living through the depression of the '20s and '30s, living through the hell of World War 2. Having a life of hell, basically. And now she's an old lady all alone with nothing but the goodwill of other people.

And one of the things I learned very well from all of these experiences is how to listen to people's stories. Mind you, if you're not distracted by television or radio or, you know, magazines or whatever. If older people tried to pass on their wisdom where they tell a life story, you'd listen. You listen to the story, listen to what they tell you. And I still remember many, many stories that people told me about their lives, or telling us advice of what you should or shouldn't do when you get older. There was a lot of beauty in the pain -- it sounds awkward, but it's true. You see the inside of the person and not the outside of the person. And I'm very thankful for those experiences. Obviously I didn't have a choice in any of it. But I'm fortunate that I'm smart enough to be able to recognize it and see it, learn from it. And I think that's one of the reasons I tend to have an awful lot of compassion for any and all people. I really truly believe there is no damn difference between any two humans on the planet. You know we're -- yes, we can be all be different. But inside we're all the same. You know, as my mother used to say, doesn't matter who you are, you still have to eat, you still have to sleep, you still need someone to love you. You still have to have a purpose in life. You still, you know, we're all the same on the inside. And that is absolutely true. We forget that. We're constantly pitted against each other like, somebody is better than the other or smarter than the other or whatever, but down on the bottom we're all the same. We all need food. We all need shelter. We all need each other...

Q: How many years were you there?

A: Well, I was in the camp itself from whenever it was built, I think it was like 1951 until 1957.

Q: How old were you when you left it?

A: I was 11 when I left.

Q: That's a whole life -- those are really big years.

A: And then coming to the U.S., talk about a shift in the middle. I mean an incredible shift.

Q: Would you like to talk about that?

A: Well, there's lots to know...

A lot of people would search through the Red Cross and through the many different agencies -- places to go, where can you go. And one of the places that a lot of people went to was South America, and I remember one time my parents saying -- well my mother specifically, who wanted to get out badly -- saying, oh, we have an opportunity to go to Brazil, and I can still remember my father saying, "I'd rather go to hell than to go to Brazil!" He said he didn't want anything to do with South America. He wasn't going to in any manner. And I remember arguing, my mother saying well, we should do this, and my father saying no way.

Anyway, to make a long story short, you had to make a folder of your circumstance and your family, including some photos of you, and then the various agencies around the world, including in the United States, would look at these folders of families and people and decide if they wanted to, or could, help any of these people. Well, it just so happened that we were among the last people in this camp, because as I say, various agencies would take you out. But my parents were a unique situation because they were Catholic and Protestant, so the Protestants didn't want them and the Catholics didn't want them, and so we were sort of stuck there.

Well, it just so happened that my mother, who was always pushing to try to have someone help us -- that was the First Parish of Westwood, Massachusetts. At the time, there were a number of people there who decided they should sponsor a refugee family to come to the United States. They had been a Unitarian congregation at that time, and they decided that, well, they should put their actions to where their mouths were, in the manner that, since they were preaching that all people are basically equal, they decided and noticed that no one was going to help us unless it was them.

So those people at that congregation put together a package, which meant that they had to find housing for us, and they had to find a job for my father, and help us for, I think, a minimum of one year, so we should be self-sufficient.

Q: Did anyone in Austria have to approve that? The government, or the mayor?

A: The U.S. had to approve it through the immigration department, or whatever. And anyway, my mother found out that this church in or outside of Boston, Massachusetts, whatever that was, would sponsor us. So my father -- I remember listening to him and he would agree that yes, he'd go to America, and especially North America. And so I can still remember the nervousness and the excitement and the sadness and the joy, the joy was -- you know, well, it was going to be a new future.

The sadness is, why do you have to leave your country? Why do you have to leave your cultures? The sadness is no matter where you live. You know, I always say that if you know the story of *Fiddler on the Roof*, for example, that shows a lot of that pain between change, and also these poor people living in a miserable state, basically, sad that they have to leave, no matter how miserable it was. It's a very good example that people are familiar with; it's a great, wonderful play. But there's so much truth in it for any people.

And so I remember that we had a date and all that stuff. In order to leave, we had to obviously fill out all kinds of paper. You had to show that you didn't owe anybody any money, which meant there if there was a local grocer, they would have to say that you don't owe him any money. If there was a local farmer that you did work with, that yes, you don't owe them any wages, or money for something you may have got. And so you have to basically prove that something you bought you didn't owe any money on, and then put all that paperwork together so that you could be released from the local authorities to be able to leave.

I still remember the day came [for which] we had a date, and my father saying well, we had to pack the few possessions we had, and I and my father getting and cutting boards. And I remember going to someplace where they sold screws and nails, buying packages of nails and screws. And my father, again, being a carpenter, he built this wooden crate which was like a big trunk, basically.

Q: You had to build your own luggage?

A: Right. And you put it all together, and nailing it together, and screwing it together and that had, you know, clothing and a couple of oddball things that were important to my parents -- some spoons, dishes, whatever.

Q: Did you bring any photos from before or during the war?

A: Yes, we had photos. Next to nothing from the war. There are some photos from the camp, five or six of them, which I'm glad to show you. I always asked my parents, including my grandparents, why are there no pictures of anybody? And like my grandmother in Austria says, well, when the Russians are coming and you're trying to save your life, what you leave behind in the house? Everything. And you don't see it again. So there are no pictures. There are no pictures of my mother as a young person. There's no pictures of any of the other relatives. You leave everything.

The reason I mentioned the crate my father made is because it was very sad and hopeful, building that thing with my father, I remember. But the sadness of it all was when we finally got to it, we took the train and went to -- I can't remember which -- Munich, I think, in Bavaria, and

from there we went up to Bremen and Bremerhaven, the harbor in Germany, and from the Bremerhaven we got on the ship called the *General Langfitt*, a battleship from World War Two, and, you know, cannons and the whole thing. And anyway, we finally made it across the ocean and got to New York...

Q: Who received you when you got here? Did someone come to New York?

A: Yes, someone came and picked us up. It was a family who were members of the congregation.

And mind you, they were a pretty well to do family, you know, and they had everything, a nice house with a big yard. They had a pony, they had dogs, they had everything. I remember very early that [their] kids were not happy. They were our age, a little younger, and they were so unhappy, and I remember thinking, how can you be unhappy? You've got ten thousand things and I don't have one, and I'm pretty happy. Seems like the more you have, the [more] you're not happy. That made me think about humanity. Like, what makes you happy? What should make you happy? What should make you unhappy? All these questions in my head as a young person, and I've done a lot of thinking of that and in my life.

Q: Did you ever talk to anyone about that? Your mother or your brother?

A: Well, my brother is five years younger than myself, and my own parents did their own struggling, because I remember coming here and the change being so difficult. And now, mind you, there's good things and bad things of coming from place A to place B. This may sound funny, but here I am telling you how you had nothing, let's say, in the old country. Well, you want to know the good part? You come to this country. You want to know the bad part? Well, here you are, you come to this country, well, by the way, you're paying the rent. By the way, how about the electric bill? How about the gas bill? Do you have insurance, by the way? Do you have this, do you have that? My parents flipped out, like, in the old country, well, you didn't have any rent. You didn't get an electric bill. You didn't *have* any electricity, didn't have a water bill. You didn't have a gas bill. You didn't have a heating bill, you didn't have even much of a food bill because you were working for the food as food. You didn't get money, or else you were growing the food, or you bartered for your food. So all of a sudden, the economic thing hit you in the face! Overwhelming. And of course my father was earning small money, and meantime overwhelmed realizing that the budget calls for X dollars, and you are not earning enough to pay these bills!

So how are you supposed to proceed? How did the other people get cars and houses, and how did people get these fancy clothes? I mean, it was frightening for us, and frightening for my parents, and all of a sudden I see my parents smoking their brains out and my father, you know, needing

an extra drink all of a sudden, which he never needed. And a couple of years went by and my mother got sick as well. So that was another means she needed. She became very ill. And now you've got hospital bills. Never mind, how do you get to the hospital?

And they decided they wanted to go back. But they realized you can want to go back, but there's no back, because a couple of years after we left, I remember asking my uncle Carl when I went to visit, I said, what happened to all the barracks? He says, oh, they set them all on fire. And they got rid of them -- they were just wooden shacks, right? And they set them on fire.

Well, you can't go back, and what are you going to go back *to*? And what are you going to do when you get there? All the people over there were struggling, you know, after World War 2. Austria, Germany, and a lot of countries were suffering. You didn't have to be Jewish to be suffering, you were suffering in your own ways. And so that was a whole 'nother horror. It's like, talk about depression. I'm amazed my parents got through the fact that you couldn't go back. There was nothing to go back to. How would you get back? You owe all this money, mind you. You were sponsored to come here, but it's your duty to pay this off. They gave us like, eight or ten years to pay that bill, to pay for this, to pay for the ship, pay for everything. You were not given one nickel.

Q: The church didn't help collect funds?

A: They did, they helped us get clothes and and helped us get things, get some furniture. They funded the rent at the house for us, and we had to pay for it after X amount, but it was the duty of all the people, not just us but any immigrants that came, it was your duty to pay all the expenses. That included your fare on the ship and whatever have you. And you can't go back because you owe this money. Besides, what are you going back to?

The change is torturous. It's like being twisted in all directions, you know? And again, being a young person, watching my parents try to make sense of the world, and I realized there are certain things that that you miss that have nothing to do with economics. You miss hearing languages or the language that you grew up with. I mean, I remember being sad -- well, who can I speak to? And in those days the idea of having a phone call to another country -- forget it. It was it was a big deal if you called from here to California, never mind calling another country. You couldn't do that. If you did listen to the radio, the music was strange, the language is strange. All the food is strange. You go to the supermarket -- supermarket? You've never seen a supermarket! Now, what are all these things? How do you read them, what you do with them? I mean, the cultural change -- it's not just my family, it's any immigrant family today, it doesn't have to be 50 years ago -- is tremendous. Absolutely tremendous. You know?

So here we are in the U.S, and my father began to work through the contractor. His name was Haslam, a very kind man. Being on construction sites among his kind, needless to say, there's always a lot of scrap wood and trash at a construction site, which he would drop off at our house, which would be firewood to help heat the house. So my father was basically given all this scrap, trash wood from the construction sites, which was a giant help...

I can still remember my first day in school. First day in school, being terrified because I didn't speak any English. This was at the Deerfield School in Westwood, Mass. I remember several things from the first day. One is, how do you get dressed? What do you dress in? I remember going to school and all the kids laughed at me, and my not realizing that I was dressed like a silly foreigner to the kids, I guess. I was laughed at about my clothes. I still remember that, thinking, I'm really dressed nice, and coming home and everybody laughing at me.

And I remember the hardest thing, you know, young people, obviously they think certain things are funny because they don't know any better, and so sometimes that can be cruel. They may not mean to be cruel, but it can be cruel sometimes. Kids are kids. All kids are kids. And I remember being fearful to say something, because the teacher would ask something, I'd say, I think I know the answer to this, and I realized that wasn't good enough, knowing the answer. Now I have to be able to say it. And then you mispronounce things. English has its funny things about how you read and how you pronounce, you know the stupid old jokes. Why do you need the letter K in the word knife, for example, you know what I mean? A lot of things in English that don't make any sense.

And [I remember being] terrified to be brave enough to answer what the teacher would ask me specifically, "You know something?" and then I catch on, and then let's say I mispronounce something and the kids would laugh or whatever, and there was a point where I was terrified to say anything because I just didn't know the right or wrong way to pronounce, etc.

I don't know. If I say so myself, I was pretty smart and fortunate in so many ways. I realized that if I wasn't brave enough to speak up with a terrible accent and with incorrect grammar that I'd never learn to speak.

Q: You really had an internal life!

A: That's true for any foreigner. You've got to be brave enough to speak because otherwise you're never going to learn to speak! So you're going to mispronounce it, sure, and the sentences are going to be screwed up, too, but people caught on to what you meant. Well, that's the beginning of all of it. And it's a very painful thing, it's a very hard thing for any immigrant. I caught on pretty quickly, let's put it that way. There was, obviously, in any class, some mean

kids and some incredibly nice kids. So I was very fortunate that there were plenty of very nice kids who said to me, you know -- I started to make friends.

And of course the funny thing about me is, as you know, I got heavily into music, especially classical music...

So I think in 1961, I think, we moved to Jamaica Plain.

We could go anywhere by just getting on the elevated train or bus, which we couldn't do otherwise, and we could also -- in those days, Jamaica Plain was a very heavy immigrant community. There were a lot of Ukrainians. There were Greeks. There were a lot of people, especially Ukrainians, and further up the street by Egleston Square, it was a heavy Jewish community that was also into Blue Hill Avenue. At the young age of 13, I ended up being offered a job at Irving Mazer's delicatessen, who was an incredibly nice man. And, you know, what they call schlepping stuff up and down the stairs.

Q: Where was Irving's Delicatessen?

A: Right on Washington Street by Egleston Square. In those days, a lot of the foreigners and a lot of Jewish community would get off [at] Egleston Square, they'd go to the deli or maybe they'd go take the bus out further, out to Mattapan or whatever. And since I understood an awful lot of what these people were saying, you know, a lot of them are Russians and Poles and Germans and whatever, and I could help these people, and take directions from these people, and that was my first job. It was very nice. He paid me minimum wage, but he also gave me a sandwich every day, which I thought was a big deal. A very nice man, he was extremely nice. And that was my first job.

Q: Where did you live in Jamaica Plain?

A: 3274 Washington Street, which is almost on the corner of Green Street and Washington. That was the first place, and of course that was funny because it was a three-decker, and we were right next to the train. We lived on the second floor, and if you looked out the living room window you were at the exact [same] elevation as the people sitting in the train. So if you left your window open they could look into the apartment and you could look into the train...

And then we moved to Montebello Road, 100 Montebello Road, top of the hill, and the White Stadium is not far away, and Franklin Park, which was also a good place because we could go for walks in Franklin Park, we would go to see all the animals in Franklin Park. My parents would take the train into old Haymarket Square to go shopping, it was really a great place to live for us. So moving to Jamaica Plain was super, and there were a lot of foreigners and of course

the German Club, Boylston Schul-Verein, on Danforth Street, was also nearby so my parents had a place to go and socialize.

Q: Who started the Schul-Verein?

A: Well, German immigrants, of which there were many, many, in the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s. The club is still very active. It's still a very active club of about 500 members, which is now in Walpole. And anyway, it was a very, very important place for immigrants to share not just, you know, some fun, but also share information about what they've learned, or share information where you might get help, share information about where to get a job, helping each other as well as being able to create their own music and their own poetry and things that everybody needs.

When you're a person from another culture or another country, needless to say there are a lot of good things there, and also, the interesting part of being a foreigner is, it doesn't matter who you are as you come into a different country, a different language, and you see the differences in people and how they view things -- almost like going to a movie in some strange manner, because you were brought up with other ways to see the world and other ways to behave. So the nature is, one tends to be blind to themselves, or tends to be blind to your own country or your own culture. So there's a lot of questioning, and of course, one of the things being a young person, a thing immigrants deal with, it's -- parents come here with their children, and they expect children to follow the rules and the norms of the old country. Well, now you're in a new country and you do things differently, and children and young people behave differently, and in the 1960s the whole world and the United States was changing to something different, and now as a young person you're caught in the middle because all of a sudden, you're not looked at correctly because you're not behaving correctly, and not behaving like you would if you were in the old country, and you're not behaving like you would if you were in some other decade. And so the young person struggles with being trying to be sort of American and trying to be sort of wherever you come from, and that's a struggle all by itself...

Q: What was Jamaica Plain like?

A: Well, Jamaica Plain in those days was heading down, down, down, and down. It was a very cheap place to live because Jamaica Plain was basically being abandoned, along with the rest of the city. There were a lot of Irish kids, Italian kids. I hung out with a lot of the Irish kids, but one of the things that was very, very good for me, again, being offered a job as a soda jerk, or "carbonic engineer," at Green Street Pharmacy was, I am behind the counter. So I had to learn how to speak English, and I bumped into a thousand kinds of people, and I learned about the types of people there are working behind the counter. Mr. Rosenberg was very, very kind to me.

So I had to make the syrups and I had to do all the stuff, clean everything, cook the food, the whole thing. Needless to say, a lot of young people hung out at the soda fountain, including a lot of the local girls. So I had a date every so often. Some of the girls I still bump into and we laugh about the old days.

Q: It sounds like nobody moved.

A: People were pretty much stable. It doesn't matter who you were, because in the old days, you know, if you're an Irish family, for example, the high point was, you bought a three-family house, you lived on one floor, and you rented the other two. That was the giant goal of many immigrant families. Doesn't matter what nationality or whatever you were. But Jamaica Plain was down, down, down. You lived there because it was a cheap, cheap place to live.

Q: So who left? The Irish and the Italians?

A: Well, as people did better, which is usually the next generation, you moved out of there to someplace better. So while we lived in Jamaica Plain, I was able to get money together and my family moved to Bradfield Avenue in Roslindale near the Russian Orthodox Church. So that was a big step up.

Q: How old were you then?

A: Now I was probably about 20. So the next generation helped the first generation move out.

Q: What was it like to move to Roslindale? Was it very different? What was it like moving up in the world?

A: Sure, it was moving up. You got away from having the train in front of your face when it went by, that was one thing! Jamaica Plain was pretty dirty, you know, and Roslindale is like the suburbs in the manner that it's a green area, real trees, you don't have a train in front of your face, things like that. Roslindale Square in those days, in the 60s, was still very, very active. There were many, many stores there that don't exist anymore.

Q: What kind of stores?

A: Brigham's Ice Cream was down there, Tom McCann's Shoes was down there, Park Snow's department store was down there. Kresge's was down there. Kennedy Butter and Eggs was down there. All these stores that are long gone were in Roslindale Square. Roslindale Square was *the* place to go shopping. And then by the late 60s when Dedham Mall opened up, those stores moved out, and Rosendale went downhill. It went right downhill, very, very badly downhill. You

may not know Roche Brothers Markets, you know, their first store was down in Roslindale Square, right on Corinth Street. Right where the Bank of America is now, that building was Roche Brothers until they had a fire and moved to West Roxbury. As a matter of fact, the first CVS store, the Consumer Value Store, was in Roslindale Square.

Q: How old were you when you started your own business?

A: I told you I worked for Stanley Ross, who was a wholesaler for food? I ended up learning about the most basic, cheapest business you could get into, which was opening a submarine sandwich shop. So I basically opened a store with nothing. Absolutely nothing. I rented it, I cleaned it, I painted it, and opened it.

Q: What was it called?

A: It was called -- well, I guess I can, I can show you. I happen to have the menu right here hanging on the wall. So this is 1967, and here is the menu.

Q: [Reading the name] "Giantissimo"!

A: You know, that technically means "bigger than giants."

Q: Why did you use an Italian name?

A: Well, because there were a lot of Italians around here. So anyway, I opened up with barely enough money to make change for a customer. And as you can tell, the average price of a sandwich was 50 cents.

Q: Who was the clientele?

A: Well, everybody in the neighborhood was the clientele.

Q: Were they all immigrants? Armenians, etc?

A: Yeah. I branched out and I added pizza -- here's a pizza box.

Q: [Reading] "Joseph's Pizza."

A: I added the pizza box cover, and that's the last of the pizza boxes.

Q: Who designed this?

A: One of my customers designed this.

Q: But you didn't call yourself Josef.

A: Well, this is Joseph. You know, when you see an F instead of a PH, it's called a Germanic spelling. When it's ph is called a Latin spelling, right?

Q: Did you do the pizza flipping?

A: Oh yeah, I did all that. I have scrapbooks, I have photos, I have newspaper articles, I have almost anything you could want.

Q: Did you prosper?

A: Yes, I was fortunate that I did quite well, again, working many hours and at the same time trying to go to school and trying to study.

So by the time I was finishing at BU, I knew I wasn't going to be a music teacher, and I wasn't going to do those things because -- just for a lot of complex reasons, but I never stopped playing violin. I still love it, you know, have a lot of fun. I got out of Boston University where I played in Boston University Symphony. We had some friends of mine I actually when I met my later wife, a friend of mine who was a friend of her, a girlfriend of hers, told her, "You oughta date this Joe guy, you know, he plays in the Boston Symphony and he runs a sandwich and pizza shop." My wife laughs about that -- he runs a sandwich and pizza shop and he plays in the Boston Symphony? Well, they set up a date for for us and then she found out I did -- I played in the *Boston University* Symphony Orchestra and ran a sandwich-pizza shop. So that's a little bit of a joke that was interesting.

I've now been in business by myself for 49 years. That's a pretty big deal.