

## SOURCES – FIRST HAND ACCOUNTS

DORIS SCHECHTER was a young refugee on the journey from Naples to New York. She is the founder and owner of the kosher restaurant, My Most Favorite Food, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Michael Patrick Hearn and Mona Kanin ate with me at the restaurant, before I had a chance to talk with Doris. (The food was delicious!)

On April 29, 2015, I spoke with Doris over the phone. She gave me some initial information:

Doris was six-years old while on the USNS Henry Gibbons. When I asked her about her memories, she said she was sick as a dog on the voyage. She said she kept her head in her mother's lap a lot. She said that her mother used to tell her the story of how outgoing she was as a little girl. Although the wounded soldiers on the boat were not in close proximity, somehow she spoke to them in Italian, and asked for a shirt for her father—which they gave to her. Doris was born in Vienna, but her father soon realized they would need to relocate. "(Hitler's army entered Vienna shortly after she was born in 1938)." After going from embassy to embassy, they obtained a visa to go to Italy under the heading of "Free Prisoners of Mussolini." It says something about their situation that the terrible racial laws were a better alternative. They moved to the medieval city of Abruzzo, and reported to the Mayor. They were among the 50-70 people interned there.

We are working on a plan to get together. Here is an online bio through the [HarperCollins website](#): "Doris Schechter was born in Vienna to Jewish parents. Forced to flee Austria for Italy, she and her family eventually settled in the United States. In 1982 she opened My Most Favorite Dessert Company in Great Neck, New York, and in 1986 moved the bakery to Manhattan, where it is now combined with a restaurant. Doris lives in New York City."

And this [review from Publisher's Weekly](#) on her book, *At Oma's Table*: "Starred Review. Ostensibly a Jewish family cookbook, Schechter's loving ode to her family, in particular her grandmother, achieves more than that, compiling in food and family lore a shining portrait of what it means to be an American. After fleeing Vienna for small-town Italy during the height of WWII, Grandma Schechter's family made the trip to America by troop ship, dodging Nazi planes and submarines along the way. Each stop in her family's pilgrimage influences the dishes Schechter offers in this nostalgic collection: traditional Jewish fare such as Cholent (a beef and bean stew) rests comfortably next to a classic Italian Pepper Ragout, Backhendl (a Viennese take on fried chicken) and a Turkey Pot Pie culled from Thanksgiving

leftovers. Though her grandmother never wrote down a recipe in her life, Schechter dutifully recreates her most memorable dishes, ranging from Liptauer, a savory cheese spread so beloved it's offered in four variations, to hearty classics like Beef Goulash with Carrots and Potatoes, Brisket and Stuffed Cabbage. Supplemented throughout with vivid anecdotes of the family's pilgrimage and resettlement, this is a warm account of one family's journey to America and how food kept them close long after their arrival. "

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And Booklist: "Schechter, who operates a New York eatery and has already established her reputation as a baker, turns her attention to the cooking passed down from her beloved Viennese grandmother. These recipes vary a bit from typical Ashkenazic examples due to a number of Italian-influenced dishes, which are still rigorously kosher. Schechter's grandmother's sojourn in Italy's Abruzzi region during the war years brought her into close contact with her Italian neighbors, during which she had to mask her Jewish identity to protect her family from potential deportation to the camps. Schechter's liberal use of toasted breadcrumbs on pasta or atop cauliflower would please any Italian chef. Such anomalies offer unique and delightful cultural comment as they sit side by side with gefilte fish and cholent. Schechter provides menus for Jewish holidays as well as everyday, unpretentious meals featuring borscht, roast chicken, various veal stews, or goulash. Knoblauch, Mark"

RUTH GRUBER escorted refugees from Naples to New York.

Mona Kanin (critique partner) has put me in touch with a family friend of Ruth's—Michael Patrick Hearn. Ruth is now 103. I would love to talk to such an amazing person—but I don't want to be a burden. So hoping and waiting to see if we can meet.

Even if I don't get a chance to talk with her prior to creating the illustrations, I would love to include a likeness of her on the boat, behind Renato. I plan to include the name of the boat as well. A younger audience won't pick up on these details, but as they get older, or if they read the Author's note or check out more information on the website, they can learn so much more that is factual. In this regard, though Ruth is not a big character in this story, it would be wonderful to highlight her and honor her work.

DANIELA TURNER

Born in 1940 in Florence.

EMAIL FROM DANIELA: My limited and strong memories are of the year 1944 I really do not remember anything in 1943. In 1944 I remember living near Piazza del Duomo after we had to evacuate the country villa on the via towards Bologna. The

Germans arrived in the evening and we had to leave the next morning leaving everything in the house. There was my mother Raimonda Romanelli Bartolini Pigli my grandmother Emma Chiari Romanelli my grandfather Lorenzo Romanelli our maid Luisa Cordovani and the dog Blacky.

My father was hiding in Pescia near Pistoia as Badoglio had dissolved the Italian army in 1943 I think was sep 28. He was anti fascist and anti monarchist. All the men were at that point in hiding from the Germans and the fascist. In the house in Florence beside us there was a priest a fascist a couple of Jews and the owner of the house. We spent every night in the cellar because the Americans and Germans were about to bomb. The night when the Germans bombed all the bridges except Ponte Vecchio (they bombed all the beautiful palaces around it) I remember a huge noise and then silence. A stone from Santa Trinita's bridge reached the roof of the house and reached the entry hall. It remain there until was used again to rebuild the bridge after the war.

During the day I remember that the Germans or the Americans were telling us via speakers to close the shutters and the others to open it. We did not have much to eat as I was told we were eating just rice. The last thing that is vivid in my memory is my mother and grandmother going to the well in Piazza (now) della Repubblica at the hotel Savoy to get water every day We did not have water or electricity I was 4 that year and I do not remember any conversations, I could contact some of my friends and see what they remember if you are interested.

EMAIL: Yes we went to the country thinking to be safe. Some country place were safe, but not the villa on via bolognese. The name of the villa was "Il Cupolino". So it went this way. One German guy arrived on a motocicle. I do not remember his face, but I remember his boots. He came in the house and me grandmother offered him a drink. He said to her "make sure that it is not poisoned because few nights ago some soldiers were poisoned in an other villa. The day after we killed all the people on the villa. My grandmother did not sleep that night thinking "what if he has indigestion or he would just not feel well!!!" She loved to tell this story. After a while the courtyard was full of Germans I do remember if some of them slept there, but I remember we spent the night all of us in one room. I remember the camion that took us to Florence, but I do not who drove it.

Forgot to tell you that in my subconscious when I hear an airplane over me I cringe. It sank in. Talked to a friend even one year older than me. He said everything too vague to write about. Vaguely he remembers when the theatre in (now) Corso Italia was bombed near where they lived. They also were going in the cellar at night and neighbors will join them.

I have found an other source of memories I hope he will answer soon his name is

Gianpaolo Brunori a little older than I so his memories should be good.

EMAIL: I have the answer on the soccer ball. The balls were not colored made of natural leather so the color was between yellowish and brownish. To inflate them there was not a hole. They were inflating the thing inside (as the ones in the bicycles) that was closed with a leather string as we do with the shoes. I was born July 29 1940. I was really hoping to have an older friend's memories, but he was not in Florence. If something else will come along I will let you know.