

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

MEMORIST: HENRY BIRNBREY
INTERVIEWER: SANDRA BERMAN
LOCATION: ATLANTA, GEORGIA
DATE: DECEMBER 31, 2009

INTERVIEW BEGINS

<Start Tape 1>

Sandra: Today is December 31, 2009. I am here with Henry Birnbrey, who has agreed to participate in the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. My name is Sandy Berman and I am very grateful that you have decided to come in today—the day before the New Year—to participate in this project.

I'd like to begin by just talking to you about your parents' decision to get you out of Germany in the late 1930's. If we could go into that period first and just, let's talk about it. Mention your parents' names. Anything that is not clearly understood as far as towns or names, if you could spell them that would be really helpful. One other thing that would be really helpful for the purpose of this interview is: if you remember, repeat the question so that when we transcribe this it will be on the tape.

Henry: I was born in Dortmund, Germany.¹ That's D-O-R-T-M-U-N-D. My father was Edmund Birnbrey and my mother was Jenny Birnbrey. When the situation got very bad in Germany vis-à-vis the Nazis and the Jews, my parents decided to see if I could get out of Germany. They applied to numerous agencies to see if they could get me a visa to immigrate to anywhere. One day, we got a phone call from a social worker in our Jewish community who said they could get me a visa to the United States but I had to be out within twenty-four hours. I had twenty-four hours to get packed, to say my goodbyes, and to make the plans, etcetera. I was able to get into the United States.

¹ Dortmund is a city in northwest Germany. In 1933, the Jewish population was 4,108 (out of 540,000). By 1939, emigration and persecution had reduced it to 1,222.

I left on March 31, 1938. The reason for this was that Germany had just invaded Austria.² Some Jewish groups got President Roosevelt to issue visas to a number of children because it was very difficult for Jews from Germany to get a visa to the United States.³ This was a special program just to admit children. To the best of my knowledge, between 1,100 and 1,200 came to the United States under this program.⁴ Something like 12,000 came to England under this program, which was called a *Kindertransport*.⁵

Sandra: How old were you?

Henry: I was fourteen.

Sandra: Can you describe your feelings of leaving your home and your family?

Henry: It was a mixture of sadness and adventure. I had read books about America, and cowboys, and Indians and so on, so it was very exciting. On the other hand, I realized that this was a goodbye. We had no idea if we would ever meet again. I

² After a succession of threats and the pressure of military feints by Hitler, Austria was forcibly annexed into the German Third Reich on 12 March 1938. The Austrian chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg was deposed and the Nazi puppet Arthur Seyss-Inquart was put in charge. German troops marched into Austria, Hitler did a triumphant entry parade into Vienna and Austria ceased to be its own country.

³ Throughout the 1930's, isolationism and xenophobic sentiments allowed a restrictive immigration policy to prevail in the United States. The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act) had limited the number of immigrants allowed entry into the United States through a national origins quota. The Immigration Act of 1924 limited maximum annual immigration to 153,774 people. Inside that total number, each country was assigned a total number of immigrants. Germany was assigned about 26,000 immigrants—a number not related to Jews, but to all Germans. Those Jews who determined very early in the Nazi regime to leave Germany essentially had to get in line as their numbers would not be available for several years. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's (FDR) legacy regarding the Holocaust remains controversial. Although aware of and sympathetic to the plight European Jews faced, FDR was also preoccupied by a severe economic depression. Throughout the 1930's, political leaders with ties to the Jewish community advised FDR of the growing refugee crisis in Europe and asked Roosevelt to increase the visa quotas for German Jews. While quotas were not increased, Roosevelt did instruct the State Department that German Jews applying for visas were to be given "the most generous and favorable treatment possible under the laws of this country."

⁴ The "One Thousand Children" or "OTC" refers to over 1,400 Jewish children who were rescued from Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied or threatened European countries, and came directly to the United States between 1934 and 1945. The rescue efforts in the United States were strictly non-governmental. The children were rescued through the organized efforts of private American citizens and organizations in the US and Europe. Most of the children came through official programs run by private refugee agencies such as the German Jewish Children's Aid (GJCA), The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (colloquially known as "the Joint"), and the Society of Friends (Quakers). The first small group of OTC children arrived in New York in November 1934. This and subsequent small groups, totaling about 100 annually in the early years of operation, were taken to foster homes across the country, many of which had been arranged through appeals to the members of congregations and organizations.

⁵ '*Kindertransport*' is the name given to a series of rescue missions that assisted Jewish children in leaving Nazi-occupied Europe. The United Kingdom took in nearly 10,000 predominantly Jewish children from Nazi Germany and the occupied territories of Austria, and ex-Czechoslovakia. The children were placed in British foster homes, hostels, and on farms.

mentioned a number of times, the episode at the train station when we left. I was looking out of the window and they got smaller and smaller. I didn't know if we would ever meet again.

Incidentally, there was a book written about people who came over the same way and almost every one of them mentioned that same episode at the train station. Therefore, the book was called "Don't Wave Goodbye."⁶ It's a story about children coming over from Germany.

Sandra: Just a couple of questions about life in Germany. I said I was not going to get into this, but it is just so fascinating. As a thirteen or fourteen year old boy, how did you feel about the ostracism [and how] your life that was changing when the Nazis took [control]?

Henry: Obviously it was not a normal life. We also lived in a state of fear. We had a lot of traumatic experiences already. We got kicked out of the apartment because the apartment house didn't want any Jews in it. We had to move into a slum and didn't have a lot of privileges. We couldn't go into parks, we couldn't go into swimming pool, we couldn't go into a movie theater, and we were very intimidated by all of these antisemitic signs on billboards and on the streets everywhere. Last but not least, with a few exceptions, most of the non-Jewish friends that I played with wouldn't associate with me, although there was several of them that I got together with after the sun came down and whom I even made contact with after World War II. I always like to emphasize that not everybody was bad. We can't generalize. There are good people and bad people in every society.

Sandra: Was it surprising to you that some of your so-called good friends did not want to see you anymore?

Henry: I think . . . I don't know if I was surprised or sad or . . . but obviously they were intimidated. Families wouldn't acknowledge us anymore. It was just . . . I don't know if I was surprised. I guess I was more saddened and in fear.

⁶ "Don't Wave Goodbye: The Children's Flight from Nazi Persecution to American Freedom" is a book published in 2004 by Professor Philip K. Jason with Iris Posner, the President and co-founder of One Thousand Children, Inc. (OTC). It tells the story of the approximately 1,000 Jewish children who were sent to the United States by their parents and taken in by foster parents and distant relatives between 1934 and 1945.

Sandra: Did your parents talk to you about their feelings at all during this time? Did they try to protect you or were you pretty aware of what they were going through?

Henry: I really can't remember. The only thing I can tell you is that—"the situation" is what they call it in Israel—when the situation happened, [it] was the only topic of conversation around the table because every day something new happened to somebody else: this person got beaten up or this person's store got closed down. There was a different episode every day and the German Jews used the word *rishas*, which comes from the word *roshe* [which translates to] 'bad person' from the Hebrew. *Rasha* and *rishas*. Because things were censored, they would call it 'Richard.' It was a topic of conversation in every conversation. Then I belonged to a young Zionist group and, of course, we were talking about making *aliyah* to Israel and that was difficult.⁷ It was just a very . . . It was a time that was something you can't describe.

Sandra: Can you describe your actual travel experience—the train, the boat?

Henry: The travel experience as I said had a certain sense of adventure and the Germans were expecting a war because we just invaded Austria so the train ride to the U.S. Consulate was during a blackout. Here I was fourteen years old, going away in a train that had no lights on. It was a weird experience. When we got on the ship, it was a German ship with German staff and, because they wanted to appear different to the international community, we were treated first class. We were not treated like Jews were treated in Germany although there was a German crew. All I can tell you is that when we landed in New York and saw the Statue of Liberty, it was one of the most emotional events of my life. You just cannot imagine. I had heard a little about it. I didn't know how to pronounce it. We called it *Liberté* [French: liberty]. It was a highly emotional event to see the Statue of Liberty. I was met in New York [City, New York] by a social worker.

Sandra: What was her name? Do you remember?

⁷ Zionism is a movement that supports a Jewish national state in the territory defined as the Land of Israel. Although Zionism existed before the nineteenth century, in the 1890's Theodor Herzl popularized it and gave it a new urgency, as he believed that Jewish life in Europe was threatened and a State of Israel was needed. The State of Israel was established in 1948 and Zionism today is expressed as support for the continued existence of Israel. *Aliyah* (Hebrew: ascent) is the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel. It is one of the most basic tenets of Zionism.

Henry: Marcusa. As a matter of fact, in later correspondence from my mother, my mother thinks that we were related to this lady but I was never able to follow it up. I spent a night in New York and the next day I was off to Birmingham [Alabama]. When we got to Washington, D.C., I didn't know anything about segregation and Jim Crow, and that sort of stuff.⁸ All of the sudden, I see half of the train moving in one direction, people moving in one direction and other people moving in the other direction. The social worker tried to explain to me what was going on and I honestly could not comprehend it. I never heard of segregation before, but as I say in my talks, here I had left one injustice in Germany and faced a new injustice—the segregation of blacks and whites. I was sponsored by the Birmingham [Chapter of the National] Council of Jewish Women, so I spent the [first] nine months in Birmingham.⁹ Then I came to Atlanta [Georgia] in 1939.

Sandra: Who were the families that you stayed with?

Henry: There were a number of families. In Birmingham, my guardians were a family by the name of **Cohnheim** and I stayed with the [Bessie and Jacob] Cotton family. You may know Harriet Orentlicher.¹⁰ It was her parents. Then when I came to Atlanta, I became a part of the Fannie Asman family.¹¹ I'm still a part of that whole family. They consider me a cousin and an uncle and I'm just treated as if I'm a member of that family.

Sandra: How difficult was the adjustment?

⁸ Jim Crow laws were state and local laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1965. The name seems to have originated in the song “Jump Jim Crow,” a song-and-dance caricature of blacks performed by white actor Thomas D. Rice in blackface in 1832. As a result of Rice's fame, “Jim Crow” became a pejorative expression meaning “Negro” by 1838 and the later segregation laws became known as “Jim Crow” laws. Jim Crow laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in the southern states of the former Confederacy, with a supposedly “separate but equal” status for black Americans, although in reality this was not so. Some examples of Jim Crow laws are the segregation of public schools, places, and public transportation and the segregation of restrooms, restaurants and drinking fountains for whites and blacks. Private businesses, political parties and unions created their own Jim Crow arrangements, barring blacks from buying homes in certain neighborhoods, from shopping or working in certain stores, from working at certain trades, etc. In the middle twentieth century, the Supreme Court began to overturn Jim Crow laws on constitutional grounds.

⁹ The Birmingham Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women (CJW) was organized in 1898 in Birmingham, Alabama. The group hosted weekly study groups for members, joined in civic and philanthropic projects, and lobbied against child labor and for prison reforms.

¹⁰ Harriet Cotton Orentlicher (1924—2017) was originally from Birmingham, Alabama. She moved to Atlanta, Georgia with her husband, Abbot Orentlicher, where they owned and operated Gershon's Market for over 30 years. Harriet was an active member of Hadassah and other Jewish organizations.

¹¹ Fannie Schoenberg Asman (1885—1947) was born in Latvia and had one son, David, and one daughter. In 1940, she lived on Washington Terrace in Atlanta, Georgia and had five boarders, including Henry.

Henry: I don't know if it was difficult or awkward. First of all, I didn't have the right clothing. I didn't have American-type looking clothing, which was very difficult. Also with the language. I remember a classic story is when they told me which bus to take when I went downtown by myself and to come back home. One day, I saw a bus pass by that said, "Garage." I figured that this was a bus that goes to our house, too. I picked up the Garage bus and ended up in a car barn. It was very interesting, the whole thing. I was put in a six grade of an elementary school and I was promoted every two weeks and went to summer school and then high school as a sophomore in September.

Sandra: Did you have tutors to help you learn English?

Henry: No.

Sandra: How did you learn English?

Henry: Just really on my own because I'm one of those few people that I know of who came into a living experience where they had no one who could speak German to. There was absolutely nobody and I just had to manage.

Sandra: What was the school that you entered into in Atlanta? Which high school did you go to?

Henry: In Atlanta, I went the first year to Tech High, which is no longer.¹² Then I went to Commercial High, which is also not here anymore.¹³ I graduated from Commercial High.

Sandra: Were you able to correspond with your parents during this time period?

Henry: Not long because my father got killed six months later. My mother died about sixteen or seventeen months later, so that was the end of that.¹⁴ But we did

¹² Tech High School in Atlanta, Georgia was only for boys interested in the applied sciences (electricity, automobiles, aviation, skilled manufacturing, etc.). Tech High and Boys' High merged in 1947 to become coed Grady High School.

¹³ Commercial High School began as a department of Girls' High School in Atlanta, Georgia in 1889 for girls who wanted to learn business skills. They taught bookkeeping, typing, math and history. It expanded to a four-story brick building on Pryor Street, and in 1910 became Atlanta's first coed high school. It closed in June 1947.

¹⁴ Soon after World War II began, the Jews of Dortmund were confined to "Jewish houses." The city became an assembly point for deportations to the East, with about 40,000 deported in eight transports between 1942 and 1945. On April 27, 1942, between 700 and 800 Dortmund Jews were deported to Zamosc, a camp in southeastern Poland, and then on to the Belzec extermination camp. On July 29, 1942, 331 elderly Jews were deported. By July 1944, only 334 were left, mainly partners of mixed marriages, but most of those too eventually were deported.

correspond until then. One day, one of my letters came returned and said, “address unknown.” That’s how I found out that my mother had passed away.

Sandra: I’m sorry. You are about fifteen or sixteen years old and things are becoming worse in Europe . . . Can you describe what it was like to be a young German boy dealing with everything that was going on in Europe with your family and also trying to fit in here, to become an American boy?

Henry: Honestly, this may sound wrong to you, but we knew things were bad in Germany, but nobody knew how bad it was because that didn’t come out until much later. Except I’m here to tell you that I learned some of it earlier. When I was in Commercial High School, I was sent to Washington, D.C. as a delegate to the Red Cross Convention.¹⁵ This was in 1939. Caseworkers from the Red Cross came back and reported on the invasion of Poland that was taking place.¹⁶ They publically told us all this when everybody said, “We didn’t know what was going on.”

<Interview pauses, then resumes>

But the real extent . . . We didn’t know about concentration camps. The world didn’t know what was happening at that time. All we could do was hope that this would blow over, and my parents could get out, and things would go back to normal.

Sandra: What happened to your father? You said he was killed.

Henry: My father was arrested on Kristallnacht.¹⁷ He was beaten up and died from his wounds a month later. When I filed the restitution claim, they said that everything I

¹⁵ The Annual American Red Cross convention was held in Washington, D.C. on April 24, 1939.

¹⁶ German troops invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, triggering World War II. The Red Cross would not have been aware of Germany’s invasion plans at the time of the convention Henry attended in April 1939. However, tensions had been increasingly mounting through Europe and especially in Poland as talks over the Polish Corridor—a strip of land on the Baltic Sea Germany had been forced to cede to Poland at the end of World War I—broke down. On April 28, 1939—around the time Henry was attending the conference—Adolf Hitler announced he would no longer honor a nonaggression pact Nazi Germany had signed with Poland in 1934.

¹⁷ On November 8 and 9, 1938, the Nazis started a state-sponsored nationwide pogrom. Across the country (and in Austria) Jewish synagogues, homes and businesses were looted and burned, Jews were attacked on the streets and 91 were killed. Thousands of Jewish men were sent to concentration camps for several weeks and released only when they agreed to leave the country as soon as possible. The Jews were made to pay for the damages to their premises. The pogrom was called ‘*Kristallnacht*,’ which means ‘Night of Broken Glass,’ because of all the damage done to Jewish shop windows. Thousands of German and Austrian Jews were arrested after *Kristallnacht* and deported to concentration camps in Germany. In Dortmund, 600 Jewish men were arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen. Most of those arrested were released within a few weeks, but often only if they promised to immigrate immediately, leaving their property behind.

said was a lie and they turned me down.¹⁸ Fifty years later, I went to the place where he was held, which is now a museum—a Holocaust museum actually.¹⁹ I was there again this past summer. I went through the archives and, low and behold, I found my father's name, date of birth, address . . . The only problem was our name was misspelled. It was spelled B-I-R-E-N-B-R-E-Y, so the courts conveniently told me that nobody by the name of B-I-R-N-B-R-E-Y was held there. I learned this fifty years later.

Sandra: Did you file a new claim?

Henry: You couldn't. It was too late. The statute of limitation had expired. The whole thing is just so unbelievable, what happened.

Sandra: Was it difficult to walk two paths? I mean, you were not able to live the carefree life, because your parents were not here, that your fellow students were living here in America. Can you describe your feelings about that?

Henry: For a while I felt like an outsider, although people were wonderful to me. But I still felt like an outsider and didn't belong because I had to learn so much. I never knew anything about football, and cheerleaders, and recess. There were things that simply didn't exist in Germany. The way the whole school system functioned in America was different. Sometimes I felt like I didn't belong. You had to get acclimated to the culture.

Sandra: Did you try to stay in touch with some of the other children that came over here the same time that you did?

Henry: There's one who I hear from every once in a while who you have in the archives. I can't think of her name....

¹⁸ Between 1945 and 1947, the Allied governments enacted various legislation dealing with reparations to be paid to the victims of Nazi oppression. The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) was established in October 1951 to help with individual claims against Germany arising from the Holocaust. The Claims Conference initially recovered \$100 million from West Germany, with direct compensation to Holocaust survivors paid in installments. In 1952, the government of West Germany reached an agreement with the state of Israel and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany to pay reparations for material losses and injuries incurred during the Holocaust. Three separate German laws, known as the West German Federal Indemnification Laws, were adopted in 1953, 1956, and 1965. They further provided for compensation in the form of one-time payments and monthly pensions to Holocaust survivors. In the years since, other agreements for reparations have also been reached.

¹⁹ The Steinwache is a memorial museum in Dortmund, Germany. Originally, it was a police station built in 1906. In 1928, a prison was added next door. The Gestapo took over the prison in 1933. Over 66,000 people were imprisoned and tortured there between 1933 and 1945, earning it an infamous reputation. The structure survived the war intact and was opened as a memorial in 1992. In addition to a permanent exhibition, it also houses an archive.

Sandra: Charlotte Dreyfus?²⁰

Henry: Charlotte Dreyfus. But that's about it.

Sandra: It's now about 1940. America is at this point, before Pearl Harbor,²¹ still clearly divided about whether or not we should enter the war. Did you get involved in any kind of activities to try to promote America's involvement in the war when you were in high school?

Henry: No, I did not. I just didn't. I didn't know if I was politically mature enough. I did not.

Sandra: Then what happened to your resolve about getting into the war after Pearl Harbor?²²

Henry: What happened was because I had a German . . . This only happened after Germany entered the war. Because I held a German passport, I was classified as an "enemy alien" and therefore ineligible to join the United States Army.²³ I wanted to get in. I actually had to report to the post office once a month because I was so-called enemy alien. I filed a Presidential appeal and I was granted the right to join the Army. Before I went overseas, they made me a citizen. I became a U.S. citizen in Norfolk, Virginia. But I did get in in June of 1943.

²⁰ Charlotte Dreyfus arrived in the United States from Germany with Henry in 1938. Her immigration was sponsored by The Jewish Educational Loan Fund, Inc., which provided funding for displaced European Jewish children brought to Atlanta under the auspices of the Jewish Children's Service during the years immediately prior to, during and after World War II. Charlotte's records from 1937 until 1946 are among the Case Files of European Children Administered by the Jewish Orphan's Home in the Cuba Family Archive at The Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum.

²¹ During the 1930's, the combination of the Great Depression and the memory of tragic losses in World War I contributed to pushing American public opinion and policy toward isolationism. Isolationists advocated non-involvement in European and Asian conflicts and non-entanglement in international politics. In the early years of World War II, the United States remained neutral. Then, on December 7, 1941 the Japanese surprised the United States by attacking the United States' fleet in Honolulu, Hawaii. The ships were all docked in Pearl Harbor. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was the beginning of World War II for the United States. A few days later, Germany declared war on the United States as well and we began fighting in the Pacific and Europe.

²² On December 7, 1941 the Japanese surprised the United States by attacking the United States' fleet in Honolulu, Hawaii. The ships were all docked in Pearl Harbor. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was the beginning of World War II for the United States, which until that time had remained neutral. A few days later, Germany declared war on the United States as well and we began fighting in the Pacific and Europe.

²³ Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued Presidential Proclamations 2525, 2526, and 2527 to authorize the United States to detain allegedly potentially dangerous enemy aliens. The FBI and other law enforcement agencies arrested thousands of suspected enemy aliens, mostly individuals of German, Italian, or Japanese ancestry, living throughout the United States. Although many were released or paroled after hearings before a local alien enemy hearing board, by the end of the war, over 31,000 suspected enemy aliens and their families, including a few Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, had been interned at internment camps and military facilities throughout the United States.

Sandra: Can you describe your feelings of becoming an American citizen?

Henry: It was a very highly emotional feeling. The judge made a beautiful talk. It was just unbelievable—one of the highlights of my life, really.

Sandra: You decided to enlist in the Army. Was it the army? Was that the branch of the military that you were in?

Henry: Yes, I was in the Army. I went to a basic training camp at Fort Eustis, Virginia.²⁴ I was put into the anti-aircraft battalion. When my basic training was over, I joined the permanent anti-aircraft outfit, which was then stationed at Fort Devens [Massachusetts].²⁵ I can remember the dates. On [President Abraham] Lincoln's birthday [February 12, 1944], we shipped overseas and we docked on [President George] Washington's birthday [February 22, 1944]. I know exactly. Those dates I'll always remember. When we got to England, we became a part of the 30th Infantry Division and served with the 30th Division throughout the war.²⁶

Sandra: Going back to joining up, what was it like joining the Army? Did you have any problems because you still had an accent or you may not have spoken English well yet, with your other soldiers?

Henry: People made fun of my accent quite often, yes.

Sandra: Were there any problems with fellow soldiers being either Jewish or German?

Henry: Not the German. I did have a few instances of antisemitism, but by and large, I became very close with the men in our outfit.

Sandra: Describe your ocean voyage.

Henry: The ocean voyage, believe it or not, at that time we were told was the largest convoy that went to Europe. Because of the U-boat scare,²⁷ we zigzagged through the Atlantic Ocean to get to England. It took us ten days and we actually went as far north

²⁴ Fort Eustis is a United States Army installation near Newport News, Virginia.

²⁵ Fort Devens was an active United States Army military installation in the towns of Ayer and Shirley, in Middlesex County and Harvard in the U.S. state of Massachusetts. The Army post which resided at Fort Devens was officially closed in 1996 after 79 years of service

²⁶ The 30th Infantry Division was a unit of the Army National Guard in World War I and World War II. .

²⁷ U-Boot (German) stands for 'Unterseeboot,' or undersea boat. The term 'U-boat' refers to military submarines operated by Germany in World War I and World War II. The Atlantic Ocean was a major strategic battle zone. After war was declared, German U-boats began to be frequently spotted along the East Coast of the US, where they torpedoed several ships.

where we saw icebergs. We left from Boston Harbor and we docked in Southampton on February 22.

Sandra: What were the sleeping conditions like on board ship?

Henry: Not like the Ritz-Carlton [a high end hotel chain]. We were in hammocks, most of us in hammocks, one over the other. Because the ship was a British ship, we had to eat British food, which did not satisfy most of our appetites.

Sandra: Can you describe what the meal was like?

Henry: It was terrible. Some of the guys used to go through the chow line and make all kind of nasty remarks and then the British would get upset with us. They feed a lot of mutton [meat from sheep]. That's one of their staples. It was not first-class eating.

Sandra: How about seasickness?

Henry: The only time in my life I got seasick was when we came over to Normandy on a landing craft because they have no keel—it's a flat [bottomed] boat.²⁸ It was going like this [indicates significant rocking with hands]. I think everybody on the [landing craft tank] got seasick really bad.

Sandra: We are going to get to that in just a minute. You docked in Southampton [England] and then what?²⁹

Henry: Then we saw almost the entirety of England – our outfit circled England. We were stationed in about six different places. We spent most of our time in Hertfordshire [England], which is about thirty or forty miles from London [England].³⁰ We ended up in the Salisbury Plains where we maneuvered.³¹ At the end, we went to Bournemouth [England]³² to prepare for going into Normandy [France].³³ I did not see

²⁸ The landing craft tank (LCT) was an amphibious assault craft designed with a flat bottom for landing on beachheads, where it could deliver tanks. The British Royal Navy initially developed LCTs and later the United States Navy developed a series of versions during World War II.

²⁹ Southampton is a major port city situated 121 kilometers (75 miles) southwest of London, England.

³⁰ Hertfordshire is an administrative and historic county in southern England.

³¹ Salisbury Plain is one of Great Britain's best-known open spaces. It is a treeless chalk plateau covering about 300 square miles (775 square km) in the southwestern part of central southern England. A large part of the plain is used for military exercises, and one of the largest army camps, founded in 1902, is situated at Tidworth.

³² Bournemouth is a seaside resort on the southern coast of England.

³³ Normandy is a region of northern France. The Normandy landings (codenamed 'Operation Neptune') were the landing operations on June 6, 1944 (termed 'D-Day') of the Allied invasion of Normandy (known in its entirety as 'Operation Overlord') during World War II.

Scotland—just England. We completely circled it with the various places we were stationed.

Sandra: What rank were you?

Henry: At that time, I was a private.

Sandra: How aware were you about the plans for the invasion? Were you all talking about it?

Henry: No, when we got to Bournemouth, we were in secluded areas where nobody could come in or out. Our general [Leland Hobbs]³⁴ told us he had just left [General Dwight D.] Eisenhower's³⁵ office and that we are going to make the invasion either June 5 or June 6 [1944], depending on the weather.³⁶ It ended up being June 6. That's about all we knew. Obviously we were told we couldn't talk about it. Of course, there was no mail going out [and] we didn't have cell phones. We just knew it was going to happen. Then, right before June 6 when the invasion started, I never saw so many airplanes in the sky in my life. The sky was just packed with airplanes going over to France.

Sandra: Now we're going to get to your part of the invasion. I'd like if you could describe in detail what it was like. It was an LST that you were on?

Henry: No, an LCT.

Sandra: LCT. Can you describe what that was like, knowing that you were going to get on this beachhead?

Henry: Again, you may find this hard to believe, but at that age, you've got the combination of fear and excitement. You've got a little of each. I had become chief of

³⁴ Major General Leland Stanford Hobbs was a decorated senior United States Army officer who commanded the 30th Infantry Division in Western Europe during World War II.

³⁵ Dwight David Eisenhower (1890-1969) was a five-star general in the United States Army during World War II and served as Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, headquartered in Reims, France. He later became the 34th President of the United States, serving from 1953 until 1961.

³⁶ The Normandy landings (codenamed 'Operation Neptune') were the landing operations on June 6, 1944 (termed 'D-Day') of the Allied invasion of Normandy (known in its entirety as 'Operation Overlord') during World War II. The landings began on June 6, 1944 after being delayed one day for bad weather. First, airborne troops went sent in and then the Allied infantry began to wade ashore starting at about 6:30 a.m. The Supreme commander was General Dwight David Eisenhower. It was the largest amphibious landing to that time in history combining land, sea and air elements. Nearly 160,000 troops were landing the first day. Over 5,000 ships were involved and thousands of airplanes. The landings took place along a 50-mile stretch of Normandy coast divided into five sectors: Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword. The United States Army landed on Omaha and Utah Beaches and the British on Sword, Juno and Gold.

section of a half-track.³⁷ That was a . . . We had a 450-caliber gun in a turret on it. When we landed, unfortunately . . . This sounds bad. The American ships that took soldiers aboard went all the way to the beach. The English ships let us out a little away from the beach because when the tide came in they wanted to be able to turn around and go back. We had to go through the water and lost a lot of our equipment. That was our first problem. Then when we landed, the beach was full of dead bodies.

Interestingly enough, about forty or fifty years later, I was on another cruise. We went on a tour of Normandy and the first thing I told everybody when we landed [was that] we didn't see all these souvenir shops and sightseeing buses. I actually had lunch at the Omaha Beach Golf Club.³⁸ When I saw that sign, I couldn't believe my eyes.

Sandra: I've actually been to that golf club.

Henry: When I saw that sign, I couldn't believe it.

Sandra: What wave were you in? Were you in the very first wave?

Henry: No, we were not. It was the next day. I still have my map. We were supposed to go straight to Saint Lo [France] but obviously we didn't.³⁹ [It] took us over a month to get to Saint Lo. I still have the map where I penciled in which direction I was supposed to go.

Sandra: You mentioned that the men lost a lot of equipment when they disembarked. What equipment did you have?

Henry: I was on a half-track. We made it ashore but people lost their duffel bags, their rifles . . . They just went under the water. They came in with nothing. My half-track made it.

Sandra: What about yourself? Were you able to hold onto your rifle?

Henry: Yes. I didn't lose anything.

³⁷ A half-track is a civilian or military vehicle with regular wheels at the front for steering and continuous tank-like tracks at the back to propel the vehicle and carry most of the load. The half-track was widely used during World War II as it had the off-road hauling capabilities of a tank with the conventional drive power of a military truck.

³⁸ The Omaha Beach Golf Club opened in 1986. It is a resort with two 18-hole golf courses. It is situated between Le Touquet et La Baule in Normandy, France, just a few miles from the D-Day Landing beaches and the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in Colleville-sur-Mer.

³⁹ Saint Lo [French: Saint-Lô] is a town in northwest France. The Battle of Saint Lo is one of the three conflicts in the Battle of the Hedgerows, which took place between July 7 and 19, 1944. Saint Lo had fallen to Germany in 1940, and, after the Invasion of Normandy, the Americans targeted the city, as it served as a strategic crossroads. American bombardments caused heavy damage (up to 95% of the city was destroyed) and a high number of casualties.

Sandra: What was your reaction when you saw the absolute carnage on Omaha Beach?⁴⁰

Henry: It was an instant shock but it's a funny story. The only time I really had fear was that first night when we dug a foxhole to go to sleep in. Because it was drizzling we had put a shelter half [tent or tarp] above the foxhole to keep us dry. Some shells came in. All of what [I thought] kept falling on my shelter half were limbs of trees. I didn't know it . . . I thought it was [tree limbs]. Of course, after a day you get used to these noises and you know exactly what is . . . As a matter of fact, we could identify what kind of gun it was when a shell came over—whether it was an 88 [millimeter German anti-aircraft and anti-tank artillery gun] or whatever—but the first day we didn't know what it was. [I thought] all that was dropping on my shelter were limbs and that sort of stuff.

Sandra: How long does it take to build a foxhole?

Henry: That depends on where you are. It can take half hour to an hour.

Sandra: What did you use?

Henry: Everybody carried a shovel—not a shovel with long handles; a shovel that you can tie onto your belt.

Sandra: Boy! After you went to Saint Lo, where did you go from there?

Henry: Saint Lo, incidentally, was one of my . . . I hate to skip an experience. I don't know if you are aware of it or not, the Air Force was supposed to bomb Saint Lo before we went in. The first day, they dropped one of these smoke things—a flare—to show the direction for the next plane. The wind blew the flare toward us and we got bombed. What happened is we had taken shelter in a two-story farmhouse. One day, I am sitting there and I hear a voice behind me. At that time, I was a Corporal. It said, "Corporal, can this house be seen from the horizon?" I said, "How in the hell do I

⁴⁰ Omaha Beach was one of the five areas, or beaches, that spanned the 50-mile stretch of beach on the Normandy coastline. Omaha Beach was divided into ten sectors: Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog Green, Dog White, Dog Red, Easy Green, Easy Red, Fox Green and Fox Red. The objectives of the first wave of troops were to clear the beach and then form up and start inland. By the end of the day (June 6, 1944), the bridgehead was five miles deep. However, little went as planned. The engineering teams had no cover and had to work clearing gaps through the beach obstacles under enemy fire. Many LCIs didn't make it under heavy fire; others discharged their soldiers in neck-deep water, while others found themselves on the wrong beach. Casualties were heavy. Dog Red suffered 50% casualties before they reached moderate safety. The second wave of troops on Omaha Beach was just as difficult and dangerous.

know?!” or something even worse. I turned around and it was General Omar Bradley.⁴¹ He was very kind, very nice. What we did know, the next thing this house became the headquarters for all the generals to watch the bombing, to watch the things at Saint Lo. When the shells came back toward us, you won't believe how General Eisenhower cussed out the Air Force Generals—like you would not believe. Then word came back [ask]ing, “Where is General [Lesley] McNair?”⁴² He was number two or three in the military. I found out later that he had gone up there to see it first hand and had got killed. That was really one of the highlights of my experience because every big General from the U.S. and British Army was at this place where we were, observing.

After Saint Lo, first we had had to cross the Vire [and Taute] Canal.⁴³ They made a new experiment, which had never been done in the war and I don't think has been done since. They asked if we could use anti-aircraft guns for direct fire. We were dug in on the hill overlooking the Vire [and Taute] Canal. It was very fierce fighting and as Germans were trying to get us, we would shoot them coming up the hill, but we couldn't get their bodies. After a couple of days, the stench was just unbelievable. After Saint Lo is really when . . . No, the breakthrough didn't really begin.

We had another battle, which for some reason has never made the history books and our outfit believes that it was one of the key battles of World War II. It was the Battle of Mortain.⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, there is a big monument to my outfit in Mortain. The

⁴¹ Omar Bradley (1893-1981) was the senior United States Army field commander in North Africa and Europe during World War II. At one point he commanded nearly 900,000 men or four field armies. It was the largest group of American soldiers to ever serve under one field commander.

⁴² Lesley James McNair (1883-1944) was a senior United States Army officer who served during World War I and World War II. He attained the rank of lieutenant general during his life. He was killed in action during World War II, and received a posthumous promotion to general, making him the highest-ranking American soldier killed in combat in World War II.

⁴³ The Vire and Taute Canal [French: Canal de Vire et Taube] was a shallow east-west canal built in 1839 to connect the Vire and Taute Rivers. American troops met heavy German resistance as they pushed south after D-Day. With the objective of capturing the French town of Saint Lo, American troops pushed across the Vire and Taute Canal after heavy fighting between July 7 and 11, 1944.

⁴⁴ In August 1944, after the Normandy invasion of June and subsequent breakout at St. Lo, in July, the Germans prepared for a massive counter-offensive and moved massive amounts of armor and infantry to the area of Mortain, France, 150 miles west of Paris. On August 7, 1944, German troops and a Panzer Division headed directly for Mortain and Hill 317, a key terrain feature in the central sector of the attack. The 120th Infantry had set up a roadblock adjacent to the hill and were dug in directly north of Mortain. About 700 American soldiers were soon surrounded, but managed to hold out for six days before the 35th Infantry division was able to finally relieve the besieged troops on August 12th. In one of the outstanding small-unit achievements of the war in Europe, the defenders sustained 300 casualties, but denied the enemy a key objective.

German Army had gotten all of its tanks together, trying to force us back into the sea. Every person had to get into the combat mode—including the cooks and the people in the kitchen. I was sitting there. I was given the bazooka [rocket-propelled anti-tank weapon] to sit on the hilltop to get the tanks. One day, there was a big noise in front of me and I thought it was a tank. I could not find out what it was. I let go of my bazooka and actually killed a cow. It was a cow in the thicket. Mortain was considered . . . We considered Mortain one of the major battles and it's very little mention of it in the history books.

After that, the breakthrough [into German held territory] began. We were supposed to go into Paris [France], but [Charles] de Gaulle⁴⁵ . . . for political reasons, he wanted to make the entry.⁴⁶ So we were sitting on an airfield near Paris, while [French Resistant forces led by French General Jacques Leclerc] were marching in Paris and getting all of the cheers.

Then we went forward and we were supposed to cross the Rhine [River].⁴⁷ Here again, I have to talk about myself. We were practicing crossing the Rhine on the Maas River in Holland.⁴⁸ We were concerned about how to get communication across the water, so I came up with what I thought was a brilliant idea. We had to get the wire, the cable across the water. I suggested shooting it with a bazooka. Every officer in the Army thought it was the greatest idea they had ever heard of, except it did not work. The slag of the wire would get caught in the water, so that did not work. From there we went to the Rhine. Thank G-d they found a bridge further down and we did not have to make that crossing. Although while we were on the other side of the Rhine, it was very difficult for

⁴⁵ Charles de Gaulle was French statesman and leader of the Free French government during World War II while it was in exile and President of France after the war.

⁴⁶ After more than four years of Nazi occupation, Paris was liberated by the French 2nd Armored Division and the U.S. 4th Infantry Division on August 25, 1944. De Gaulle led a triumphant liberation march down the Champs d'Elysees the next day.

⁴⁷ The Allies planned multiple Rhine crossings as part of their strategy to encircle and capture the Ruhr, the industrial center of western Germany, and conquer Germany. In March 1945, British and American troops successfully carried out multiple river assaults. By the end of March, all four US armies fighting in Western Europe were east of the Rhine. While the First and Ninth armies encircled the Ruhr, the Third and Seventh Armies moved into central and southern Germany.

⁴⁸ The Meuse or Maas is a major European river, rising in France and flowing through Belgium and the Netherlands before draining into the North Sea.

us when we crossed [the German border]. We went to Jülich [Germany] and Düren [Germany].⁴⁹ That's when I got wounded the first time.

Sandra: Can you describe what happened?

Henry: Shrapnel from—actually it was the first jet planes ever seen. The Germans had jets against us and some shrapnel caught me. While we were there is when the Battle of the Bulge began.⁵⁰ Since my outfit has made every spearhead for the First and Ninth Army, we were called back to [Malmedy] Belgium.⁵¹ If you [imagine] the Battle of the Bulge was a triangle, we were the tip of the triangle, where the Germans were stopped. That, too, was an unusual experience, to say the least. First of all, the snow was very high. We were billeted in a farmhouse. I use to go in and out the house through the second floor window. On New Year's Day [1945], the Germans mustered of all their airplanes [that were] left to [attack] against us. Thank G-d, once again, we shot most of them down.

After the Battle of the Bulge, I think the war was almost over. From there, things became much easier, although we were on the Siegfried Line,⁵² trying to take the city of

⁴⁹ Jülich and Düren are towns in western Germany, near the boarder of The Netherlands. As part of an Anglo-American operation at the Western Front to push into Germany, the First and Ninth U.S. Armies began an offensive on November 16, 1944 near Jülich and Düren. Despite one of the heaviest Allied tactical bombings of the war, which led to Jülich and Düren being almost totally destroyed, heavy German resistance slowed their advance. The ensuing Battle of the Bulge led to the cessation of an Allied offensive effort into Germany until February 1945.

⁵⁰ Also known as the Ardennes Offensive (December 16, 1944 through January 25, 1945), the Battle of the Bulge was a major German offensive launched toward the end of World War II through the densely forested Ardennes mountain region in Belgium. Hitler threw everything he had into trying to drive the Allies back and stopping their advance out of Normandy, France. The Germans achieved nearly complete surprise during a period of heavy overcast weather, which grounded the Allies' air forces. The Germans nearly broke through ("the Bulge") the Allied lines. Nearly 19,000 Allied troops were killed and 62,000 wounded and 26,000 missing or captured. The Germans suffered nearly 85,000 casualties before they were pushed back. It was the largest and bloodiest battle fought in World War II.

⁵¹ Malmedy is a town in eastern Belgium, near the border of Germany. It is situated in the densely forested Ardennes region, and was the site of heavy fighting during the Battle of the Bulge, the last major German offensive campaign at the end of World War II. It is also the site of an atrocity known as the "Malmedy Massacre." On the day after the German offensive began, Waffen SS united captured and murdered more than 80 American soldier sand Belgian prisoners.

⁵² The Siegfried Line was a system of pillboxes and strongpoints built along the German western frontier in the 1930's and greatly expanded in 1944. In 1944, during World War II, German troops retreating from France found it an effective barrier for a respite against the pursuing Americans.

Aachen [Germany].⁵³ That was the worst artillery barrage I remember of World War II. I remember what happened is it suddenly stopped. The Germans had run out of ammunition. If they had gone another 30 minutes, we would have been out of ammunition. It was a very unbelievable . . . just nonstop shelling, both ways. Once the Siegfried Line fell, it just became easy going through the rest of Germany. We did not have much opposition after that.

Sandra: You said you were wounded more than once?

Henry: No, just once.

Sandra: Not 'just.' I have a lot of questions. Can you describe what it felt like for you as a German American to go back into Germany?

Henry: I really had very little feelings about it. I had hoped to go into my hometown and the chaplain kept trying to arrange it, but it was in the British territory. It got very complicated, so I abandoned that idea. I was within twenty miles of my hometown. Incidentally, somewhere along that time, they found out I could speak German. They made me a counter-intelligence agent. I was interrogating prisoners, POWs and etcetera.

Sandra: When was this?

Henry: I can't give you an exact date, probably February or March of 1945.

Sandra: Did you not want to tell them you could speak German? I would think that that would have been something that would have been . . .

Henry: Everybody knew it, but they had other duties for me.

Sandra: That's very interesting, that they did not pick up on that earlier.

Henry: I did a lot of interpreting. The first thing I did when we . . . There were all these salt mines that the Germans had aircraft factories in and hid art in [which] they had stolen . I was given the job in one salt mine to turn over the gold that had been taken from the French treasury. I never . . . That is the first time I learned how heavy a gold ingot is.

⁵³ Aachen is a city in western Germany, whose municipal boundaries coincide on the west with the frontiers of Belgium and the Netherlands. The Battle of Aachen was a major combat action of World War II, fought by American and German forces in and around Aachen, Germany, between October 2 and 22, 1944. Although most of Aachen's civilian population was evacuated before the battle began, much of the city was destroyed and both sides suffered heavy losses. It was one of the largest urban battles fought by U.S. forces in World War II, and the first city on German soil to be captured by the Allies as they advanced into Germany.

It is very hard to pick up. Looks like a little bitty thing. It was quite an experience to see all that gold changing hands.

Sandra: How much treasure was in those salt mines?

Henry: I have no idea, but more than I make a week, I can tell you. The salt mines were very interesting. These salt miners had the most gorgeous sculptures in there made out of salt. You can't imagine. It was beautiful to go down there.

Sandra: Where was this?

Henry: I don't know the names of the towns, but probably 150 miles east of the Rhine River somewhere.

Sandra: As you entered further into German territory, when did you become more aware of what had happened to the Jews of Europe?

Henry: At that time we still didn't know much about the Jews. We knew something, but not a hell of a lot. Of course, in my talk, I always mention the freight train. We liberated a freight train of Jews being shipped from one camp to another, locked in these boxes.⁵⁴ That was the first really traumatic thing that I saw, that I witnessed. It is hard to tell you. People from my outfit are still interested in that. Last year, they located some of the survivors from that train and brought them to our reunion. I got one man—I just got a stack of mail last week—he's spending full-time researching the people from that train.

Sandra: Were there a lot of survivors on the train?

Henry: There were twenty-five hundred people on the train. I would say that about three hundred of them were dead. What did not dawn on me then, until last year: these people looked so bad, so emancipated, and so terrible [that] I never thought of them as young people. The people who survive were about fifteen or sixteen years old. I was a little bit shocked when I found out. It was a horrible experience that human beings could be in that stage. I always said, "They did not look human." When I tell people that, I have

⁵⁴ On April 13, 1945, the 30th Infantry Division encountered about 200 starving and ill Jewish prisoners who had escaped from a nearby transport. Two tanks were sent out to find the train. When they located the train, they found approximately 2,500 prisoners in about 50 rail cars. Three trains left the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on April 10, 1945, intended for Theresienstadt concentration camp near Prague, Czechoslovakia. This train got as far as Farsleben, near Magdeburg, Germany before it was abandoned by most of the SS troops guarding them.

to correct myself because it was the people who put them there were not human; not the people who were on this train.

Then about a week or two later, we passed ditches on the way to Markkleeberg⁵⁵ full of dead people in the ditches, who were being . . . They were on a forced march from one camp to another and rather than let them be liberated, [the Germans] shot them and left them on the highway. This was really my first real experience . . .

The only concentration camp that I saw was not really a [concentration] camp.⁵⁶ They had a small camp for—there was a place where they experienced building the V-2 bombs—and they had slave labor there.⁵⁷ There was a small camp connected with that.

In my search for Nazis, I found a number two or three man of the V-2 project, and at that point I was playing games with him. I talked to him in English because I knew that every educated German knows French and English and he would not answer us. The sergeant in my Jeep said, “Why don’t we just kill the son-of-a-bitch?” He immediately spoke fluent English. To make a long story short, I thought we really had somebody here that’s going to serve and pay for it. About two or three weeks later I look in the *Stars and*

⁵⁵ Markkleeberg is a town in northeastern Germany, approximately four miles [seven kilometers] south of Leipzig. While there was a labor camp in Markkleeberg and others in nearby Leipzig, it is unclear where the prisoners Henry encountered came from. At the end of the war, the Germans began evacuating concentration camps, moving prisoners from place to place, often on foot in what were called “death marches.” These marches could last for weeks, without food or water, during which time many of the prisoners died and were left along the side of the road.

⁵⁶ As it moved eastward into Germany, the 30th Infantry division liberated 421 malnourished prisoners from the Weferlingen forced labor camp on April 12, 1945. Weferlingen was a sub-camp of the Buchenwald concentration camp called “Gazelle” by the Germans and located between the villages of Grasleben and Walbeck, Germany. Prisoners at Weferlingen worked in an old mine, fabricating submarine engines, airplane engines and rocket engines.

⁵⁷ The ‘V weapons’ were the V-1 and V-2 rockets that were used by Germany at the end of World War II. They were the world’s first cruise missiles. The V-2 rocket was more sophisticated than the V-1 and was really the world’s first ballistic missile. The area of destruction of a V-2 was 800 to 1,200 yards wide. It was developed during World War II in Germany as a “vengeance weapon,” designed to attack Allied cities in retaliation for Allied bombing of German cities. The first V-2 attacks were launched against Paris and London on September 8, 1944. Nearly 1,000 V-2s fell on London and the surrounding area (as well as in Belgium) after September 1944. In total the rocket weapon killed or wounded over 6,000 people and seriously injured and maimed another 18,000.

Stripes,⁵⁸ which was the Army newspaper, and found out that he was in Huntsville, Alabama helping Wernher von Braun.⁵⁹

Sandra: Wow! Do you remember his name?

Henry: Yes, [Walther] Riedl, R-I-E-D-L.⁶⁰

Sandra: Was the V-2 camp at Peenemünde?⁶¹

Henry: No, it was near a town called Lehesten . . . in [the German state of] Thuringian.⁶²

Sandra: Can you spell that?

Henry: L-E-H-E-S-T-E-N. Another experience that I always like to talk about when people ask me about my German knowledge, just like you have . . . We captured an aluminum plant. The American government thought that the aluminum processing in Germany was way ahead of ours, so they flew in people from Reynolds aluminum,⁶³

⁵⁸ *Stars and Stripes* is a newspaper that reports on matters affecting military service members. It published four daily newspaper editions for the United States Armed Forces serving overseas. In World War I, it was an eight page weekly with 526,000 readers. In World War II it was published all over the world. Some of the reports were soldiers and some were regular journalists. It is still published today in a daily edition. (2015)

⁵⁹ Wernher von Braun (1912-1977) was a German rocket scientist, aerospace engineer, space architect and one of the leading figures in the development of rocket technology in Nazi Germany during World War II and, subsequently, in the United States. He is credited as being the ‘Father of Rocket Science.’ Von Braun was the central figure in the development of the design and realization of the V-2 rocket which used slave labor to build the rockets and which killed 9,000 civilians in England and Belgium in late 1944. Some 12,000 slave laborers died in the production of the rockets. After the war, he and some select members of his rocket team were brought to the United States as part of the then-secret Operation Paperclip. He worked for NASA and served as director of the newly formed Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama and was the chief architect of the Saturn V launch vehicle, which took the astronauts to the Moon.

⁶⁰ Walther Johannes Riedel (1903-1974) was a German engineer who headed rocket engine development at Peenemünde in 1944 and was Director of the Development Facility at Karlshagen. In 1947, he began working with Wernher von Braun in the United States as part of Operation Paperclip, a program that helped Nazi scientists to resettle in the US in exchange for their research work.

⁶¹ Peenemünde is a remote island in the Baltic Sea, where a V-2 production plant, which used slave laborers, was built in 1943. When the Allies bombed that site in the summer of 1943, production was moved underground out of reach of Allied bombers to various sites in Germany.

⁶² Lehesten is a town in eastern Germany’s Thuringian Forest, about midway between Nuremberg and Leipzig. In September 1943, the Saalfeld or “Laura” sub camp of Buchenwald was established in the vicinity of Lehesten and nearby Schmiedebach. It was created to provide inmate labor for the manufacture of parts for the V-2 rocket. Facilities were located near a slate mine, the underground tunnels of which were used to mask production from Allied air raids. Over 10 nationalities of inmates lived in overcrowded, brutal conditions and worked in various work groups—the most dreaded of which was the group that had to dig in the tunnels. The camp was hastily evacuated on April 13, 1945.

⁶³ The Reynolds Metals Company was founded in Louisville, Kentucky in 1919 and became the second-largest aluminum company in the United States. In 2000, the Alcoa Corporation acquired it.

Alcoa,⁶⁴ and one other company I don't remember and asked me to be the interpreter. That is when I discovered that my German is the German of a fourteen-year-old because they were using words that you and I only learned as adults—high tech words and so on. That's why when people always ask me about my ability to speak German, to this day, I tell them my language is really a fourteen-year-old language.

Sandra: When you came into contact with some of these . . . First of all, what rank did you become when you went into interpreting?

Henry: When I became a counter-intelligence agent, my title was Master. I was a corporal in the Anti-Aircraft [battalion] and then became a Master in the Counter Intelligent Corps.

Sandra: When you came into contact with these Nazis, can you describe your rage, your feelings when you had to interrogate them?

Henry: I don't know what you call it, but what . . . there was a stock answer that each one gave us—same answer: "We didn't know what was going on and we never fought the Americans, although we captured them on the our side. We only fought against the Russians." It was the same answer from every one of them. You didn't know what to think.

My main target I never caught, but he was later caught and tried in Nuremberg [Germany].⁶⁵ I was supposed to look for [Martin] Bormann, who was Hitler's assistant because he came from that area that we were in, but I never found him.⁶⁶

We had another thing that was very interesting [was that] the SS had a membership number.⁶⁷ By the low number, you could tell how long they'd been SS

⁶⁴ Alcoa Corporation (from *Aluminum Company of America*) is an American industrial corporation that began in the late 19th century in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Today, it is the world's eighth largest producer of aluminum.

⁶⁵ Commonly referred to as the Nuremberg Trials, the Trial of Major War Criminals was held from November 20, 1945 to October 1, 1946 in Nuremberg, Germany and was widely covered by the media. An international military tribunal tried 22 leading German officials for war crimes. Twelve prominent Nazi Party members were sentenced to death. There were twelve additional tribunals that tried Nazi doctors, judges, industrialists, and leaders of the *Einsatzgruppen* [German: mobile killing squads].

⁶⁶ Martin Bormann (1900-1945) was a powerful party leader in Nazi Germany and one of Adolf Hitler's closest lieutenants. He was involved in an array of domestic policies, including the deportation and murder of Jews, the Euthanasia Program, the plunder of artwork, and the expansion of forced-labor programs. Bormann disappeared in the last days of World War II. He was tried in absentia at Nuremberg in 1946 and sentenced to death. West German authorities officially declared him dead in 1973 after his remains were discovered in Berlin, Germany and positively identified.

members, whether they were newcomers or old-timers. Somehow or another, we got hold of that. When we interrogated people, all of them would lie to us. Then we would show them this and they . . . It was quite interesting how long they'd been members of the SS by the number.

Sandra: Did you readily tell these people you were interrogating that you were Jewish?

Henry: No, I never did. I don't think I did.

Sandra: Did you want to?

Henry: No, it was not a matter of wanting to or not wanting to. I was an American soldier doing my job and I just didn't.

Sandra: If we could go back a little bit to the beginning of the war . . . When you first enlisted, did you enlist because of what was going on in Europe or did you enlist because of Pearl Harbor?

Henry: No, because of what was going on in Europe obviously.

Sandra: How did Pearl Harbor affect you?

Henry: First of all, I was going to . . . a club meeting at the Lions,⁶⁸ which was the old Jewish Community Center.⁶⁹ I was picking up a friend when the radio announced what had happened. At that point, I had never heard of Pearl Harbor. I didn't know what Pearl Harbor was. It took all of us time to let the whole thing sink in, but that's about the extent of it.

Sandra: Did you know even before we were attacked by the Japanese that you were going to go into the Army to try to get back to Europe?

Henry: No, this happened when we entered the war.

⁶⁷ The SS or *Schutzstaffel* was a major paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. It began at the end of 1920 as a small, permanent guard unit known as the "*Saal-Schutz*" made up of Nazi Party volunteers to provide security for party meetings in Munich. Later, in 1925, Heinrich Himmler joined the unit, which had by then been reformed and renamed the "*Schutz-Staffel*." Under Himmler's leadership, it grew from a small paramilitary formation to one of the largest and most powerful organizations in the Third Reich. Under Himmler's command, it was responsible for many of the crimes against humanity during World War II. After World War II, like the Nazi Party, it was declared a criminal organization by the International Military Tribunal and banned in Germany.

⁶⁸ Lions Clubs are worldwide with over 46,000 individual clubs and 1.35 million members. They are a service organization that gets involved in community works.

⁶⁹ The Atlanta Jewish Community Center was officially founded in 1910, as the Jewish Educational Alliance. In the late 1940's it evolved into the Atlanta Jewish Community Center and moved to Peachtree Street. It stayed there until 1998, when the building was sold and the center moved to Dunwoody. In 2000, it was renamed the 'Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta.'

Sandra: Right, but did you know that you wanted to join the Army?

Henry: At that point, I don't think so. First of all, when Pearl Harbor came, I had just become eighteen.

Sandra: Did you have other relatives left in Europe?

Henry: My mother came from eleven children and my father from three children. Out of all of those, four first cousins survived. Then . . . Are any of you familiar with this movie . . . where the Germans . . . the first time they backed up because they were intimidated when the non-Jewish wives . . .

Sandra: Yes. Was it *Rosenstrasse*?⁷⁰

Henry: *Rosenstrasse*. One of my cousins was one of those women. We had one family [member]—a cousin of my father's—who was gassed in World War I. A Lutheran minister rehabilitated him and converted him. His children I found in Germany. Then I found one of my cousins from my father's side who had [been trapped] behind the Iron Curtain.⁷¹ Then I suddenly see our name in the Berlin [Germany] telephone book, but that's all we had left.

Sandra: Did you try to find them when you were still in Europe?

Henry: No. We just had no opportunity to do that sort of stuff.

Sandra: How long were you in service after the war ended?

Henry: I was discharged right after Thanksgiving of 1945.⁷² They had a point system and I had a lot of points. I got out quickly. It was after Thanksgiving of 1945.

Sandra: Did you think about staying in just to continue interrogating?

⁷⁰ *Rosenstrasse* is a 2003 film about the Rosenstrasse protest of 1943. Between February 27 and March 6, 1943, a group of up to 200 non-Jewish Germans demonstrated outside the local Jewish community building on Rosenstrasse in Berlin, Germany. German police had incarcerated around 2,000 mostly Jewish males married to non-Jewish partners and the male children of the so-called mixed marriages. The group hoped to prevent the deportation of the men. In response to the very public and unprecedented demonstrations, the Gestapo temporarily released the majority of the men.

⁷¹ The Iron Curtain was a political, military and ideological boundary dividing Europe into two separate areas from the end of World War II in 1945 until the end of the Cold War in 1991. The term symbolizes the efforts by the Soviet Union to seal off itself and its dependent eastern and central European allies from open contact with the West and other noncommunist areas. The term 'Iron Curtain' became prominent after it was used by the former British prime minister Winston Churchill in a speech at Fulton, Missouri, U.S., on March 5, 1946, when he said of the communist states that, "an iron curtain has descended across the Continent."

⁷² Immediately following the end of the war, the 30th Infantry Division spent the next two months in Occupation on the border of Czechoslovakia and Germany. Shortly after the end of their Occupation duties, in early August 1945, the 30th Infantry Division returned to the United States on the Queen Mary and the USS General Black, and was soon deactivated at Ft. Jackson, S.C. on 25 November 1945.

Henry: No.

Sandra: You wanted to get home?

Henry: At that point, I was ready to get out.

Sandra: How did the ocean voyage back differ from the ocean voyage there?

Henry: First of all we were on an American ship. I think it was a Coast Guard ship. We were treated first-class. The food was good and when we entered the harbor at Virginia near Norfolk—I can't think of that name either all of the sudden—we could hear the music welcoming us from the shore. It was a tearjerker.

Sandra: Was there anybody there waiting for you?

Henry: No.

Sandra: Where did you go?

Henry: The first place I went to was they took us by train to Fort Gordon [in] Augusta [Georgia].⁷³ There, we got a pass to go home for a week or two. After I was here for a week or two, I went to Fort Jackson to get discharged.⁷⁴

Sandra: Was it difficult to adjust to civilian life?

Henry: No, except one funny story. As a matter of fact, I don't know if you saw the obituary two days ago for [Henry Wiesbaum](#)? You did see it? A cousin of his, we were in his house about a year after the war. They are next door to a military school so when the bugle blew revelry, both of us jumped out of bed. We suddenly thought we were still in the army. Then we stood up and looked at each other and laughed.

Sandra: That's great.

Henry: That was in Henry Wiesbaum's house.

Sandra: You brought something with you today. I was wondering if you could hold it for a second for the camera and describe what that is?

Henry: This is the canteen cup that was issued to me when I first entered the service. I took a knife and every place that we were at, I inscribed into this canteen cup just for no reason at all. Of course, when I got out of the service, I saved it and here it is.

⁷³ Fort Gordon is a United States Army installation established in 1917. It is the home of the United States Army Signal Corps and former home of the Provost Marshal General School (Military Police). It is located in Augusta, Georgia.

⁷⁴ Fort Jackson is a United States Army installation located in Columbia, South Carolina. This installation is named for Andrew Jackson, a United States Army General and seventh President of the United States of America (1829-1837) who was born in the border region of North and South Carolina.

Sandra: It's wonderful. It's a wonderful object. Thank you.

Henry: Of course, we ate a lot of meals out of there.

Sandra: What about letters home? Did you write home a lot?

Henry: Yes, I did. I did and it was an interesting thing: I was in a Jewish boys' club at the Lions and two of the guys did not get into the Army. They were not eligible but all of the rest of us corresponded with each other. I was getting a lot of mail constantly, also from friends. I had quite a bit of mail. Interestingly enough, there was a teacher that I had in Birmingham several years earlier who heard I was in the Army and she started sending me packages.

Sandra: I know there was a lot of censoring in the letters you could send home, but did you try to describe what was happening? What was the content of your letters?

Henry: No, we were very aware of what we could say and what we couldn't say. For example, I could never say 'Today, I'm in Cologne [Germany],' or 'I'm here'. That was against the rules. We were just very careful [to only say] that we were fine and just generalities, but we never described the war.

Sandra: Being a Jewish-American soldier in the European theater, did you fear capture more than your fellow soldiers?

Henry: I thought about it but I really had no real fear of it. No. I tell you we had some very interesting Jewish services in the war. One of them sounds like I'm preaching. I think it was on Sukkot we had a service in a castle, outdoors.⁷⁵ As whoever was holding the Torah was raising the Torah, we were being strafed [by gunfire] and not a person got touched.⁷⁶

Sandra: That's a wonderful story.

Henry: Then the other story was there was a very famous rabbi in America called **Rabbi Shoubo**. He was a rabbi in Boston but very well known. He conducted a Seder

⁷⁵ *Sukkot* is one of the Harvest Festivals. It is seven days long and comes after the ingathering of the yearly harvest. It celebrates G-d's bounty in nature and G-d's protection, symbolized by the fragile booths in which the Israelites dwelt in the wilderness. During *Sukkot*, Jews eat and live in such booths, which gives the festival its name and character.

⁷⁶ *Torah* [Hebrew: teaching] is a general term that covers all Jewish law including the vast mass of teachings recorded in the *Talmud* and other rabbinical works.

service.⁷⁷ Every time it came to something about Egypt, he would take his fist and [shakes fist in the air] just like the Germans. It was unbelievable. We had some . . . They made very good accommodations for the Jewish soldiers.

Sandra: Where was the Passover service?⁷⁸

Henry: I don't remember. The first one was in England under English austerity [rationing laws], where they didn't have enough food. You won't believe . . . We got about a half a slice of *matzah*⁷⁹ for the whole meal [and] a tiny bit of gefilte fish.⁸⁰ There was just not enough to go around. The Seder was held in the theater.

Sandra: Did a lot of Jewish soldiers partake in these services?

Henry: Yes, I think nearly all of them. I would say almost 100 percent. I don't know if they used it for religious reasons or just to get away, but we had very good participation.

Sandra: After the war in Europe ended, of course we were still involved with Japan and then we dropped the atomic bomb.⁸¹ How did you feel about that then and how do you feel about that now?

Henry: I was on furlough. I had a two-week furlough going to England. We went back to Paris and I had gone to a canteen. One of the guys behind the food serving counter told me that our outfit had moved but he didn't know where to, so I didn't know where to go back to. I went to supreme headquarters in Paris to find out where to go and they gave me the address of where they had left and where I knew they were no longer, so I said, 'Hell, we'll just enjoy Paris for a couple of weeks.' Then we heard the atomic

⁷⁷ *Seder* [Hebrew: order] is a Jewish ritual feast that marks the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover. It is conducted on the evening of the fifteenth day of *Nisan* in the Hebrew calendar throughout the world. The *sefer* incorporates prayers, candle lighting, and traditional foods symbolizing the slavery of the Jews and the exodus from Egypt. It is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life.

⁷⁸ Passover [Hebrew: *Pesach*] is an eight-day holiday celebrating the anniversary of Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage. Unleavened bread, *matzah*, is eaten. In addition, Jews are also supposed to avoid foods made with wheat, barley, rye, spelt or oats unless those foods are labeled '*kosher* for Passover.' Jews traditionally have separate dishes for Passover.

⁷⁹ *Matzō*, *matza* or *matzah* is unleavened bread eaten in memory of the unleavened bread prepared by the Israelite during their hasty flight from Egypt, when they had not time to wait for the dough to rise. Leavened products are forbidden on Passover and there is a commandment to eat *matzah* on the first night of the festival of Passover.

⁸⁰ Gefilte fish is a dish similar to a meatloaf, made out of ground fish, onions, starch and eggs. It is traditionally enjoyed by Ashkenazi Jews on Shabbat and Jewish holidays.

⁸¹ The atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. Nagasaki, Japan was bombed on August 9, 1945. Japan sued for peace on August 15, 1945.

bomb was dropped and we quickly found our outfit. I was with three or four other guys, and found out where we were, and we were shipped home.

Sandra: Did you think it was the right thing to do at the time?

Henry: Yes.

Sandra: How about now? In retrospect, do you still think it was the right thing to do?

Henry: Let me tell you, when we talk about it, it's hard to explain it to people nowadays because we don't have regimes like Japan or Germany today. I think this was our only choice. At the moment, we have a lot of enemies but I don't see anything on the scale of the way Japan and Germany acted. You get down to a point [where the question is,] "Whose life is worth the most?" I dare say that we saved thousands and thousands of American lives because of the atomic bomb.

Sandra: Tom Brokaw described your generation in his book as being the greatest generation ever.⁸² Do you agree with his assessment?

Henry: Absolutely. I quote that all the time. I think that period was the best time for America. The people . . . we were together. We didn't have all these crazy things that are going on nowadays. We were patriotic. There was a tremendous sense of patriotism in America that you don't see today. It really was the best of times.

Sandra: Speaking of patriotism, how would you describe your feeling about being American?

Henry: I am very positive about it. I am very grateful to have come here. I really feel it is the best place to be, best place in the world.

Sandra: Why do you think that that generation was different than today's generation?

Henry: We had a sense of purpose and people did for each other. Just . . . things we did, you just don't see today, anymore. It just a whole general feeling. I think people were more educated. They were more aware of what was going on. It's very hard to describe, but I agree with [Tom Brokaw] two hundred percent.

⁸² Tom Brokaw (1949-) is an American television journalist and author. He is the author of *The Greatest Generation* (1998), which chronicles the story of D-Day (the Allied invasion of France in June, 1944) through the words and stories of individual men and women. As a result, "the greatest generation" is mentioned often in discussion of American soldiers in World War II.

Sandra: If we were involved in a full-scale war again, do you think the youth of today would rise to the occasion?

Henry: Not like they did then. I mean, if you were not in the Army you were an outcast. I am serious. You were looked down on. The people who were 4-F⁸³ . . . You would not believe what they had to take. I don't see it today. We had a whole different sense. We have lost it. Where we lost it was in Vietnam [War].⁸⁴

Sandra: One final question . . .

END OF VIDEOS IN DROPBOX. CANNOT VERIFY THE FOLLOWING

Sandra: Finally, Henry I would like to conclude with asking you when you finally heard about . . . really the horror that had happened to the Jews of Europe, what was your reaction? How did you feel? Can you describe those feelings?

Henry: First, it was a feeling of disbelief. Even in my Holocaust talk, I always say the number six million is so incomprehensible that nobody can associate with it.⁸⁵ The only reaction I had is to become more involve in Jewish affairs. I have been very involved since then. I started with the young zionist movement. I have even considered *aliyah* at one point. I felt that we needed unit and commitment and so this doesn't happen again. It took time for all of it to sink in, but it is still incomprehensible.

Sandra: How many times have you been back to Germany since?

Henry: I can only give you an approximate number. I went about a dozen times. The first time, I went when I found out my parents graves had been located. There is a Jewish law that you have to put a marker on it for the dead person. [I] went to shop for a

⁸³ 4-F (also called 4F) is a classification given to a new United States military registrant indicating that he or she is not acceptable for service in the Armed Forces due to medical, dental, or other reasons.

⁸⁴ The Vietnam War occurred in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from November 1, 1955 to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. This war fought between North Vietnam—supported by the Soviet Union, China and other communist allies—and the government of South Vietnam—supported by the United States and other anti-communist allies.

⁸⁵ The Holocaust is the best documented case of genocide, yet calculating how many individuals were killed during the Holocaust and World War II as a result of Nazi policies is difficult as no single document exists which spells out how many died. To accurately estimate the extent of human losses, scholars, governmental agencies and Jewish organizations since the 1940's have relied on a variety of records including census reports, captured archives, and postwar investigations. The best and most commonly accepted estimate of Jewish victims is six million.

marker for my father and mother's graves. When I got there, people who knew I was there came out of the woodwork, called me, and wanted to see me.

Sandra: Is that Jewish and non-Jewish?

Henry: All non-Jewish. Then I actually spoke in the high school, spoke at the Synagogue one time and I went back. The second time, I went to look over the stones to see if they were put up right. I located more people. We had some relatives who came from the non-Jewish world and I found those people. I was there this summer. My kids and grandchildren wanted me to show them all these places. Of course, when we went to the torture chamber—the place that my father got killed—is when I had the heart attack.

Sandra: I have talked to some survivors who refuse to ever go back. How do you feel about the Germans and Germany?

Henry: I have . . . Here is what I tell everybody: It's a personal feeling and I can't . . . I don't criticize anybody for theirs. When I look at people my age or older, I figure they were part of the system. When I look at people that are younger than me, then I say, "They are just like us. I can't blame them for what their fathers did." I have mixed emotions about the whole thing. The fact that I found so many distant relatives makes a difference also. You can't believe what some of these people have done for me.

About twenty years ago, the *Jerusalem Post* had a supplement to the *Jerusalem Post*, which was a book review of "[Annison's Story](#)."⁸⁶ When I read this report, I realized that Anna was a widow of my all time favorite teacher in Germany. I immediately sent a letter to the *Jerusalem Post*. Apparently a lot of people saw that letter, including his grandchildren. They contacted me and wanted to know more about their grandfather. About a year later, out of the clear blue sky, a German woman sends me a letter. She is doing her master's thesis on this guy, asked the grandchildren to help her, and they said, "Why don't you call Henry Birnbrey?" To make a long story short, what this woman has done for me, since then . . . she devotes her whole life to fighting antisemitism, to fighting Nazism, to do restitution. It is unbelievable. She has made this a full-time part of her life. The things she has found for me and sent me, you would not believe.

⁸⁶ The *Jerusalem Post* is based in Jerusalem, Israel, which publishes in English and French. It was founded in 1932 by Gershon Agron as the *Palestine Post* and changed its name in 1950 to the '*Jerusalem Post*.'

Sandra: That is amazing.

Henry: It's unreal.

Sandra: On that note, I think we can conclude the interview. I really appreciate you coming in today. Happy New Year.

Henry: Happy New Year to you!

INTERVIEW ENDS

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