

Welcome. I am Joseph Preil, Co-director of the Oral-- of the Holocaust Resource Center here at Kean College of New Jersey. Today, Friday, November 20, 1992, we are indeed privileged to have with us a very special guest who will discuss with us his experiences during World War II and the Holocaust. He is Mr Lee Merel, currently residing in Westfield, New Jersey. Mr. Merel, to begin with, could you tell us when and where you were born?

I was born in Berlin, Germany, on April 7, 1924.

Can you tell us something about your early years in Berlin? How long did you live in Berlin?

If my memory serves me correctly, we left Berlin when I was around four or five years old. I attended a fairly orthodox Hebrew day school. My parents were born-- both parents were born in Poland. My mother comes from a very religious background. And as a matter of fact, I wore tzitzits until I was around 13 or 14.

You left Berlin at the age of four or five?

Yes.

Where did you go?

From Berlin, we went to-- first, we fled to Switzerland.

At age four or five?

Yes. And then we went to Palestine, where we lived for about four or five years.

So you left--

I left Pales--

If you were born in 1924, you left Berlin in '28, '29?

No, no. Then I must-- I'm sorry, it's such a long time ago. We left Berlin about '34, so I really must have been older.

Oh, so you were more like 10 or 11--

Yes.

--at the time. And then you went to Switzerland and then quickly to Palestine.

Palestine, right.

So you were in Palestine before World War II.

Yes.

And from Palestine, come to the United States?

The day after my bar mitzvah, we came to the United States.

So you came to the United States in '37.

About.

OK. Now let's go back to Berlin. Although you were very young at the time, still, 10 years, you can remember a few things.

I remember.

What do you remember of your education and life in the community?

My family was very Jewish oriented. It's centered around the Jewish community. We had a very large family which interacted very well. We had only Jewish friends, if I remember correctly. And as I mentioned before, I attended a fairly orthodox Jewish day school called [HEBREW].

You say that you come from a fairly large family.

Yes.

How many members of that family do you recall?

My father had five brothers.

All in Germany?

All in Germany.

That's right, because his parents came, so the children grew up in Germany.

All in Germany. My mother had four sisters, four or five sisters. We had numerous--

So one was a family of boys and one was a family of girls.

Girls, right. And we had numerous cousins. And I remember very clearly that my mother didn't want to give me chicken fat, which I loved immensely, and gribenes. And there was my most favorite aunt. And whenever we visited her, she would take me into the kitchen and quickly give me a sandwich with chicken fat and gribenes.

OK. Now, your family, that is, your parents and-- how many siblings did you have?

I have a sister.

One sister.

One sister, yes.

So your family, your parents, your sister yourself, eventually did you all come to the United States and all These travels?

No, no. We went from-- when we went to Palestine, my sister at a very early age-- she was 16-- was introduced to a Iraqi Jew. And when she was 17, she married him. And unfortunately, we had to leave her when we went to the United States. She's still living there with her family now.

You say "unfortunately" because you came here and she remained--

There.

I don't know if the emphasis is on the fact that she remained there or that you came here.

No, the emphasis is on the fact that I lost a sister because we now don't see each other very often.

You're very logical in that reaction. Now, so your immediate family was completely safe. What happened to the families of the four brothers of your father, the three brothers?

Everybody's dead.

Really?

Everybody's dead.

From being in Germany.

No. Either from being in Germany, or they were three brothers here, including my father, and they're all dead now also.

Of natural causes.

In this country, yes. But many of my family members, many of my cousins, aunts, they all died in the Holocaust.

You don't know how it happened, you just know that they died--

Yes.

--or were killed.

Yes.

Do you have any idea how many members of the family you're talking about?

Oh, I would guess an estimate of maybe 20.

About 20 members of the family were killed because they did not get out of Germany.

Exactly.

And those who did get out of Germany represent how many individuals? Four in your family.

Four, seven, I would say perhaps 12, 12, 15, no more than 15.

All right. 12 or 15 were saved because they left Germany.

Yes.

And 20 perished because they remained in Germany. Now, why did your family-- obviously, I can imagine why, but I have to hear it from you. Why did your family leave Germany in the middle '30s? About '34 or '35, I think you said, 1935.

Right. My dad owned a cardboard factory in-- a cardboard box factory, I'm sorry. And he came home one day and told us about terrible problems that he had with one of his cardboard suppliers who was a very strong Nazi believer and who threatened my father terribly. , And he came home one day and said we're leaving. And he literally packed his suitcase and packed our suitcase, locked the door to the apartment, sold absolutely nothing, and we went to Switzerland.

That's an amazing story.

Yes, it was.

It was a sudden decision, do you think?

I don't think it was a sudden decision in my father's mind, but it certainly was a sudden decision as it was presented to the family.

Including your mother?

Including my mother, and my mother was a person who was a wife that followed her husband. And without any question, she packed and we left.

And that really saved four lives.

I think so. I think that my father had tremendous foresight in doing exactly that.

And what did-- well, since Switzerland was a temporary residence, we won't go into that, but you spent a number of years in Palestine.

Yes.

I think you said about four years.

Four or five years.

Four or five years. What did your father do in Palestine? And what did you do?

I went to school. I studied a Hebrew curriculum. Of course, I learned to speak Hebrew, which I still remember fairly well. My dad opened up a custom-made furniture factory. He found an architect, an Austrian architect, that designed the furniture, and he sold furniture to very wealthy Arab families.

And the very first boycott, the first Arab boycott, I believe, if I'm right, was '39, '38, someplace in there. He lost all of his money because the Arabs refused to pay their bills. And consequently, he decided to go to the United States.

And it was relatively simple to leave Palestine and come to the United States?

At the time it was fairly easy to get a visa, yes.

Did you have family here already?

No.

You were the first ones.

We were the first, and then two brothers followed.

And they followed with the help of your father?

Yes.

What did your father do when he came-- where did you settle in the United States?

We lived in New York City, uptown Manhattan, Washington Heights area.

Very well known German community until this day.

Very well known Jewish neighborhood, exactly. And then my father found himself a job in New Brunswick, New Jersey. And part of the pay for this job was an apartment above the furniture store that he worked in, and so we very quickly moved to New Brunswick.

So you didn't spend too much time in New York.

Well, long enough to go to the George Washington High School, where they told my mother that I was a mental idiot because I didn't understand any English and I failed every test in the beginning. And they really, really believed I need to be put into a mental institution because I failed every test. Thanks God that turned out otherwise.

And as a matter of fact, I remember, we came to this country, I only had short pants. And everybody in those days wore knickers. And the kids at school kidded me terribly about my very short pants, which they wore in Palestine, and I was beaten up almost every day. And then I came home so bloody one day that my father decided that he could spare money to buy me knickers also.

And did the beating stop?

And the beating stopped. The kidding stopped and the beating stopped.

Amazing. So you graduated George Washington High School.

No, no, no. I didn't. I went there for a while. Really, when we moved to New Brunswick, I went to New Brunswick High School.

How many years were you in Washington and how many years in New Brunswick High School?

Oh god, I don't remember. You ask me--

But you graduated from New Brunswick High School, your father was in the furniture business.

Yes. He subsequently opened up his own store.

And what happened to you after high school?

My freshman year, my mother decided I should study engineering, which I was completely unsuited for, and I failed miserably. And I literally was saved by World War II because I had a reason to enlist in the Army rather than seeing college, which, of course, I regretted two days after I enlisted. But it was my way of running away.

Where had you been a freshman?

In New Brunswick.

In Rutgers?

At Rutgers University, the School of Engineering.

All right. So you were now in what year? 19--

Oh god, if I had known that you're going to ask me the dates, I would have been more prepared. I--

Well, let's say Pearl Harbor was December 1941.

'41? I guess we--

Where was this in relationship to Pearl Harbor?

That must have really been, let's say for the sake of argument, the September or October of 1940, when I became a freshman at Rutgers University.

Really? So you-- wait. I think you were a little bit young for that. I suspect it's a year later because in 1940, you would have been 16. You probably were 17 at the time.

17, probably.

So it was it was shortly before Pearl Harbor that you went in, probably in September, October '41.

Exactly.

What happened to you in the Army?

Well, I went to Fort Dix, like everybody else did from New Jersey. I stayed in Fort Dix, and from there I was sent to Fort Leonard Wood Missouri, which was a combat engineer training center. And we were trained to become people who were supposed to blow up beach defenses, which scared the hell out of me, of course. And the more we trained to blow up beach defenses, the more I got scared.

In Missouri there, I met up with a great deal of anti-Semitism.

In the Army or--

In the Army. No, in the Army, a great deal of anti-Semitism.

How so?

Certainly, the non-commissioned officers called me the Jew boy.

There weren't many Jews in the outfit?

Not in my outfit. There was maybe one other Jewish fellow. And the officers as well referred to me as the Jew, and I had a very difficult time. I was a practicing Jew at the time, as I am today, and Friday night I would go to services, which--

Were in camp or in town?

In camp, which was frowned upon. I did not join into the drinking bouts that took place, and I was not considered one of the boys.

And how long did this continue, this existence of yours?

This existence? Until the end of basic training. Then I went home on leave. And at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station, where I arrived, I met a family friend who had been with the Military Intelligence Service, and he had questioned why I looked so bad and all. And I told them, and he had assured me that he will do something and he would get me out of the combat engineers.

When I came back to camp, we were alerted to go overseas, and I had forgotten all about this. And while we were going on the train, a Jeep pulled up and pulled me out of the rank, and gave me orders to go to Camp Ritchie, Maryland, which was the training center at the time for the Military Intelligence Service. And the last remark I remember was for the

Sergeant to tell me, well, you lousy Jew, you did get away with it after all.

So you felt that there was a strong element of anti-Semitism, at various levels.

I believe so.

What happened to you in your new camp and in your new life, your new career, I should say.

New career. I went from the fire into the frying pan, I must tell you. No, we were with people who certainly were more cultural, more intelligent. And know, on a personal level, I certainly didn't suffer at all because I was with people who I could get along with. As a matter of fact, my cousin, who's since passed away, went to that camp and finished and graduated as I came in, and I met him there for a couple of days.

And how long were you there?

In Camp Ritchie? I would say maybe eight, 10 weeks. And from Camp Ritchie, I was sent to the University of Illinois to do some additional language studies. I studied Serbian because at one time the plan of the Army was to invade Europe from the underbelly of Europe through Yugoslavia, which, of course, never materialized. But nevertheless, I studied Serbo-Croatian, or Serbian, if you will, at the University of Illinois.

So you were at-- started in Maryland, went to the University of Illinois?

Yes. And then I went to the University of Indiana as well.

So you were getting your higher education.

Almost, yes.

And what happened after Indiana?

Well, then we were shipped to England, and I was stationed--

Do you have any idea in terms of time when--

You've asked me before. I have no idea.

All right. Let me--

It certainly was before the invasion of Europe.

Yeah. About how long, would you say, a year, year and a half?

I was in England about a short year before the invasion, yes.

At least a year before the invasion.

Yeah.

And you were getting further training in England.

Yes.

The fact that you were born in Berlin, did this have anything to do with the kind of work you were given in the Army? You're in the intelligence corps, you know German.

Perhaps, before, as a matter of fact, while I was at the University of Illinois-- I believe it was Illinois-- they changed my name legally from Merel to Brewster.

Why did they do that?

Because they were afraid that in case I would be captured by the enemy, my whole family background would be revealed and I could very well suffer some dire consequences.

In other words, well before D-Day, when you're still in the United States, there were people in the Army who realized what was going on and wanted to protect--

Oh, yes, absolutely.

--wanted to protect Jewish soldiers?

I certainly wouldn't like to say that all the soldiers, all the officers in the Army were anti-Semitic. That's not the case. But there was enough anti-Semitism, of course. But they-- no, I think on the higher level, they realized that they had to do whatever they had to do to protect--

Our men.

Yes.

OK. What happened after D-Day? What happened to your group? What happened to you?

We went to France.

How soon after D-Day?

Very shortly, two, three, four days after D-Day.

So you were in France in June '44?

Yes. While we were in England, one of the things we were giving as an assignment was to prepare rather large books of pictures and histories of people that the Allies were looking for. And so immediately after we landed in France, that was one of the major assignments, was to look for these people, to find them, and to interrogate them and pass them on to other units.

All right. Let's continue. You're in France. And what progress is your unit making?

Well, we moved-- occasionally, we were, before main army units came to advance into France, occasionally we were ahead of the fighting. I was in Paris, for instance, a couple of days before Paris officially fell to the Allies.

I remember very clearly I met a woman in Paris who was a life photographer, who befriended me. And she took my picture, as a matter of fact, a beautiful photograph which I sent home, which I still have today. And by sheer accident, I discovered that she was one of the wanted people in the books that we carried with us.

She was a German?

She was a French woman who worked for Germany. And of course, she was arrested, and what happened to her afterwards I have no idea. Our whole office was then finally moved to Paris, and we stayed in Paris for quite a while. And then as the fighting progressed towards the German border, I moved up with the troops.



As a matter of fact, the very first Rosh ha-Shanah in Germany was spent in Aachen.

This would have been near the end of the war?

That was the very beginning when-- that was the first town that fell to the Allies.

Right.

And I blew the shofar at those services.

Really?

Yes.

I'm just trying to put it out. We're talking Rosh ha-Shanah would be September. It had to be either September '44 or '45. You're talking about '44 then, because in September '45, the war was over.

Yes. Aachen was the very first town that fell that was on the--

German--

--so-called Siegfried line, and that was the first town that fell to the Allies.

And who was in the congregation? Was basically military people?

Yeah. We stood on the street corner. And as the fellas pass by, we would ask them, are you a Jew? Are you a Jew? And soon enough, we had more than sufficient people to have a minyan.

Very interesting.

Now, so you're in France, you're in Germany. Do you have any recollections of interest of what took place that time? You mentioned one, the life photographer. Are there any other experiences that you had that tell us the story?

I was fortunate, if you want to call it that-- I was fortunate enough to interrogate the head engineer of the Krupp works.

Really? He was serving in the German army, is that is?

No, no, he was the head engineer of the works.

Oh, he was working for Krupp, which was producing armaments, right?

Right. And I made a habit of putting a German flag in front of my desk in order to antagonize those people that I would have to interrogate. And they would have to walk across their own flag before they would come to me. And then I would tell them, look, you better start talking because I'm a Jew, and I don't love you very much.

This German flag in front of your desk, where was it?

It was a captured Nazi flag that I--

But where did you have it?

On the floor.

Oh, on the floor.

Sure. It was like a carpet, and they had to walk-- exactly.

They had to walk on the flag.

Exactly. And I don't remember the man's name anymore, but I do remember the incident very clearly because it just focused more so what the Germans are all about. This man had lost two of his sons on the Russian front. His wife was killed in a bombing, and he had lost a leg in the bombing as well.

And I questioned him. I said, now that you know and you had all the experience that you had, what would you do? Would you do something different? He said, yes. Now that we had all the experience, I would be able to do it all over again, I would do exactly the same thing, except we wouldn't make the same mistakes we made.

So there was no regret for the ideology.

Absolutely none. Absolutely none.

The only regret was for the loss.

Absolutely none. Absolutely, yes. They couldn't care less.

This is one person. Did you find that feeling widespread?

I found the feeling very widespread.

You interrogated many Germans?

Many Germans. As a matter of fact, not to digress from that particular time period, but much later on, when I was discharged and I was in civilian life again, I was in the furniture business and we sold some furniture to-- a great deal of German-made furniture to customers who came from Philadelphia. There was a large concentration of German people living in Philadelphia.

And I had an opportunity to go to Cologne once a year to the furniture show. And while I was in Cologne, I went to a store to buy some porcelain that I wanted to bring home as a gift to my wife, and there was something-- I don't remember anymore what it was, but it was a pair of something. And I went in, not talking German at first, and the woman tried to double the price. Instead of charging me for a pair, she charged me for two pair, if you will.

And then, of course, I protested in German. And I was told by her, who asked you to come here? You can go back where you came from. We don't want you here anyway. And when I went to the city hall to put in to complain about this particular incident, I was given a questionnaire, like, 20, 25 pages long. And I was told, here, fill this out and bring it back. Well, of course, I tore it up and I threw it at the desk. I walked out.

But I'm convinced that people of that era, who were born and lived in that particular time period, have no regrets of what happened. The only regret that they have is that they don't have all that illustrious Hitler-ism back.

So they believed-- what did they believe?

They believe that, unfortunately, they lost, but it was due to not their circumstances. It was due to all kinds of outside influences, and they certainly would like to have the past back.

And the past meant the master race?

The master race, absolutely. Absolutely.

That they're tops and everybody else--

Absolutely, no question about that.

This German?

Absolutely.

And they believe that, you think?

Very much so.

In other words, it was preached to them, and they bought it and it couldn't go out of their system.

I don't know if it was preached to them. I think, historically, the Germans always thought they were superior, even from the times of Bismarck. And the younger people today, you said perhaps they--

Perhaps the younger people today don't feel that way. I don't know. Yet, the incidence of these skinheads that we have and the incidence of anti-Semitism in Germany that are very prevalent and which are accepted by the older people as well and sometimes lauded very much so can only point to the fact that they really haven't changed. I believe that people like Kohl internally accept this fact and live with it, even though he talks with a forked tongue outside and says something different outside of Germany and possibly condemns it, but it's not condemned enough because it's not controlled enough.

I have to ask you mentioned Kohl. Does that apply to Willy Brandt and Konrad Adenauer also?

Yes.

You don't see any differences?

No. No.

So you think that the anti-Semitism master race belief is alive and well, certainly among the older generation of Germans?

Isn't it?

The ones who grew up with you.

Read the newspaper. See what happens. All these incidents that are now again coming to the surface. Isn't it?

Let's go back to 1945. You're in France. You've moved into Germany. You were in Aachen, Germany for Rosh ha-Shanah of 1945.

I spent a great deal of time in the so-called Ruhrgebiet, which was the industrial area of Germany, which was adjacent to the whole French border. And I spent a great deal of time there looking to different factories and inspecting different factories and writing all kinds of reports and speaking to all kinds of different people.

Where were you when the war ended, on V-E Day, May 8, 1945?

As close as you could get to Berlin at the time. I really ended up in Berlin after the war was over, still doing the same thing.

And did you ever get to a concentration--

Yeah. Well, there was a small concentration camp in the area where I was very active. The name was Gardeleben.

Where was that located?

In the Ruhr, in this Ruhrgebiet. And the Allies were told that the Germans were killing all the inmates of that concentration camp.

But how large a camp was it?

I would tell you that we found maybe 3,000 or 4,000 dead people and maybe 2,000 living people when we got there. And we had received orders to go and try to save this camp from being exterminated.

This is after V-E Day?

No, no, no, no, no, no. That's before V-E Day. That's as the Americans--

Are advancing.

--were advancing to Germany.

But it's close to V-E Day.

You know, in the back of those pictures, there are dates. If you take a look in the back of those pictures, there are dates. I like to date my pictures.

We'll take a look at the pictures momentarily. And what was your connection with the camp? How often did you go in, once? More than once?

No, I was in charge of a group that was sent in to save what there was left to be saved.

Oh, you were given this as your work?

As an assignment.

This was your work assignment.

Exactly.

And you were in charge of how many soldiers who were going in there?

Oh, possibly a company of soldiers and a unit of the medical unit.

About how many individuals are we talking about?

I would say probably 125.

So you had quite a few people with you to work with?

Oh, sure.

And what did you find when you went in?

Well--

Would it help if we start looking at the pictures now?

If you want to, yes.

Well, let's take a look at the pictures, and we'll see how much of this we can get on the screen.

You better go to the left. OK. Oh, that's out of focus.

That's not clear. I think we have to get the other camera on.

That's completely out of focus.

We're getting the other camera to zoom in on it. There it is. That's fine. Now we have it.

OK. Very good, yes.

Who's in that picture?

That's one of the inmates and myself pointing at one of the ovens in the camp.

All right. The inmate, obviously, is in the undershirt and the striped--

Pants, yeah.

That's the uniform of--

He was one of the healthier looking ones.

Yeah. And you're there in khaki. All right, and this is May 1945, it says.

Exactly.

So it's right either before V-E Day or right after V-E Day. Next.

No, turn it.

OK.

No, the other way. That's it.

Who's this?

That's the Kommandant of the camp. Did you have anything to do with him? You took his picture.

Yeah. Well, I took his picture because he was the Kommandant. And I spoke with him for a very short time, and he was shipped out. And I really don't know whatever happened to him after that.

All right. Next we have-- all right.

That's what we found. That's what we found, dead people, many, many dead people.

All right. Well, we're going to have a few such pictures, I believe.

Yes.

There it is again, another picture.

That's what we first found when we came to--

This is your first day there?

Yes. We smelled that camp-- when we came there, that camp could be smell from miles away. It was an awful stench of dead bodies.

There it is again.

Yes. And then when we came there-- there's this one more picture.

Is this something you'll always remember, I assume?

I sometimes have nightmares about that.

I used to have quite a few such pictures. What do we see now?

Here, I made the-- there was a small town next to this camp, and I made the population come out and bury the inmates that were dead. And they wanted to put on things over their nose so they wouldn't have to smell these dead people and they wanted to put on gloves, and I would not permit this. I made them smell the smell and I made them touch these bodies while they were being buried. I would hope that they would remember this incident for the rest of their lives as well as I will remember this incident.

And these pictures keep on having the townspeople.

Yes.

There it is again. Obviously, I'm not the greatest technician in terms of-- what do I have to do to get this picture straight?

You show it well enough. These are dead people being put into the ground.

All right. Thank you.

There was one incident in that camp which was unbelievable. You probably can make a movie of this incident. After this camp had been cleaned up fairly well and everybody had been put into-- those living had been put into the hospital tents, I was walking down--

On the campgrounds.

On the campgrounds. I was walking down the camp street, and there was a body lying there. And I thought that body was dead, and that body just had enough strength to grab my ankle to show me that this person was alive. it was a male person. And I, of course, immediately called somebody with stretchers, and he was that he was brought to the hospital tent.

And in the evening, I wanted to see how everything was going and I went to the hospital tent. And I walked over to this man, who by then had recovered sufficiently, and he called me over. He turned out to be a deaf and dumb person. I know it shouldn't be dumb-- a deaf person who couldn't speak.

Mute.

A mute, yes. And he turned out to be my cousin.

Fantastic. A first cousin?

Yes. And this--

And you remembered him from your childhood?

Not immediately, of course. As we started to talk and I could sign a little bit because I had such a cousin when I was a very young boy and he was able to read lips, and I do speak German very fluently. We started to talk, and the more we talked, one thing brought the story to another, and pretty soon I discovered he was my first cousin, was my mother's sister's son.

Did you discover it simultaneously, or one of you realized it first?

Sort of together.

That was quite an experience.

It's very emotional when I think about this, all the time. It's always emotional to me.

That he--

Since I had a little pull because of the position I was in, I shipped him over to London by plane, and we placed them with a family who also had a mute daughter. And they married. And subsequently, years later, they came to the United States. He was a furrier by trade, and my dad had set him up then as a furrier, again, and the Washington Heights area. Unfortunately, he passed away. His name was Greenbaum.

What a story.

And so I sometimes feel that I was born to save him.

Fantastic. What were your days like? You were there for a month in charge of this entire operation. How did your days-- how did you find your days moving along? Did you-- were working constantly?

It was just an extreme effort to save as many people as possible. Some of these people died-- some of the life people that we found died afterwards. It was just a constant fight to keep them alive and keep them going. And then, in fact, they were all shipped out, and we closed the camp.

So the 2,000 who survived were very sick.

Very sick. They were undernourished, certainly undernourished. Some of them had terrible sores on them. Some of them had broken bones that were not set properly. Most of them had no teeth.

It's like some of our survivor friends here say that when the liberation came, it was impossible to celebrate.

Yes.

And had the war lasted another six months, nobody would have been left.

Exactly.

And what you're describing, of these 2,000--

As a matter of fact, in the beginning, when they were able to receive as much food as they really wanted, they weren't able to eat and they weren't able to keep the food down.

This was a dangerous time because soldiers and GIs were giving them chocolate, and it killed them.

Yes, exactly. They really died-- some of them died from eating.

You had 125 men who were working with you. How did they react to what they were seeing?

I think this was among the very first incidents that the Americans-- non-Jewish Americans-- were exposed to this.

Jewish Americans as well?

Jewish Americans as well, you're right. And this was quite interesting to see the reaction that, in fact, these things that they only heard whisper about really, really took place. And they learned the inhumanity of men.

How did they react to the experience?

Very kind and very caring. They did everything they could possibly do to make these people comfortable.

It was a shining moment for them.

Yes, I think so.

In the way--

It brought out their humanity, if you will. Yes.

So that's a beautiful story, their reaction.

Which many people lose very quickly. Morality and humanity is lost much all too quickly in the daily struggle of living.

How did you react to the discovery of this camp Gardeleben? You had heard something was going on?

Well, we were-- because of the job that I had in the Army, we certainly heard about these things, and we were exposed to these stories much more than the average GI would. And naturally, I knew that was-- but the actual experience, when you read something or when you hear about something, it's completely different than when you actually experience it.

And the first time I saw that soldier, when I landed in France, I vomited. I had to go to the side of the road and vomit because hearing that soldiers die and seeing one are two different stories. And the experience of seeing this actually, it was almost incomprehensible that this can happen.

So what did you find happening with your state of feelings day by day? You've now described your first encounter with this when you walked into the camp. As you worked, did you realize any change within you?

For a long time, I questioned God.

That experience brought that out in you?

For a long time, I questioned God. I still today-- I believe in God. I truly believe in God, but I question God.

But you have questions.

Yes. It's very difficult to understand a good God that lets something like this happen, and that's probably the biggest



struggle that I had and I still have today. Just to go to a synagogue on Rosh ha-Shanah or Yom Kippur, and then immerse yourself into the services, which very often to me are really meaningless because I don't think that a human being can go through a whole year of sinning, and then go on Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur and pray for forgiveness, and God will forgive them so quickly. And then he can go out and start all over again. Either you're good or you're bad, and if you're bad, I don't think that praying very hard will help very much.

And so my whole outlook on religion is very difficult for me to grapple with. I will tell you that I separate Judaism from religion. To me, Judaism is something, and Jewish religion is something else altogether. I'm a great practitioner of the Jewish heritage. I believe if we don't practice our-- those things that we need to practice or should practice, the Jews will be lost very quickly.

Belonging to a synagogue, however, does not mean religion to me. It really means to furthering of the Jews as a Jew, not as a religious entity.

So you want the Jews as a people to live is what you're saying. And if they don't--

If we lived this long, we must have done something right. But it's very hard. It's very hard to-- it's even very hard for me to interpret my own feelings.

All right. So you were addressing the question that's raised, where was God during the Holocaust? How do you view the question of, where was man during the Holocaust? What does it say to you about humanity?

Well, supposedly, according to what our rabbis tell us, man was born with a choice. And God doesn't make this choice, we make this choice. And if we choose goodness, then we are good. And if we choose evil, then we are evil. And apparently, man in those times, and historically many times before, chose evil over goodness. Except the question why so many people had to suffer because some men chose evil and why so many people were permitted by God, if you will, to die because we have a free choice of good over evil or evil of a good is very hard to very hard to grapple with.

So when evil is triumphant, people will suffer. And when people suffer, we have to determine whether evil is triumphant because of a lack in man or because of where was God.

Well, but why-- then the real question is, why did God give us a choice of good and evil? Why didn't God just say to us, be good, and be done with it and not have suffering?

Well, this is quite a theological discussion. I don't think we can go much farther with it. Otherwise, we'll be here forever, and our time is beginning to run out, I see. I want to ask you a few more, probably two more questions. When did you start talking about the Holocaust and what you experienced and with whom?

I think the older generation, the older Jewish generation, is more receptive to discussing the Holocaust and acknowledged the terror of the Holocaust than the younger generations. I will tell you that I have three children, two girls and a boy. They're married, they have lovely grandchildren. I'm fortunate. I have five grandchildren.

They have lovely children.

You're right.

You have a lovely grandchildren.

I have five lovely grandchildren and, thanks God, they live a very comfortable-- more than comfortable life. And I know that they're all active in Jewish causes, Hadassah, if you will. And they all belong to temple, if you will. My boy doesn't. He doesn't believe in Yiddishkeit at all, but that's another story. But they all lived a good life in terms of morality.

And they're bored. They're bored to hear these stories. And this is the generation, and my grandchildren's generation, those are the people who need to know about it because this cannot be forgotten. It shouldn't be forgotten. It may not be

forgotten.

So the next question is obvious what your answer will be. What should be taught to your grandchildren and to American students about the Holocaust?

The Holocaust? The Holocaust.

It has to be taught.

Absolutely. It's a terrible part of our history. Isn't the Hanukkah taught and Purim? And those are happy times, even though Hanukkah came after a bad time. The loss of the temple as law is certainly commemorated. Orthodox Jews sit with ashes on their head to commemorate the fall of the temple.

Not all orthodox Jews.

Many orthodox Jews. But the point is this is a recent event in our Jewish history that we all know about. We all have lived it. It's so recent. It's not ancient history. And because it's so recent, perhaps we can teach our children and their children to live lives so that this history should not repeat again. It can't repeat again, because I don't think that Jews can again afford to lose 6 million more because then we won't be left. There won't be anybody left.

Other than your questions that you raised of a religious nature, has this experience had any other impact on you?

Yes. I believe that I have become even a more practicing Jew, not religiously now, than I have ever thought that would be possible because I am a strong believer that our traditions are so important in order to learn that we must live as a people together, that if we don't keep those traditions-- intermarriage, for instance, is a terrible thing because our traditions are not being kept. And slowly, slowly the Jews are being disseminated not by terror, but by their own doing because we don't practice tradition.

So what you're saying is, while religiously you have questions, you've become firmer in your belief that the traditions of the Jewish people should be maintained.

Yes, the tradition of the book, the tradition of learning, the tradition of the holidays, the addition of the family, all those things spell out survival. And if we don't have that, we will have no Jews.

Well, I want to thank you for coming down and giving us your unique experiences of seeing these events, both from the point of view of a youngster who was born in Germany, from your point of view of a young man who received the American education and background. It's a unique experience that you have, and I think it was a very important development for us.

I must tell you, it was very important for me too because I haven't bared my soul as I have done here in a very long time.

Well, we appreciate your coming down. And it's very important for us, as you say, as it is for you. Thank you very much.