

Tell me when I can.

We're rolling. Go ahead, Ina.

OK. Good morning.

Good morning to you.

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Obermayer for coming here today to the Holocaust Museum to talk with us about your experiences, your witness of some of the tail end of World War II. I want to start by saying that this is an interview with Herman Obermayer on June 21, 2010, here at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

And Mr. Obermayer, I'd like us to start a little bit in the beginning so that we can get a full context of your story. Please state your full name and your date of birth.

Herman J. Obermayer. September 19, 1924.

OK. Can you tell us a little bit about your background, the family you were born into, where it came from in Europe? What are your early years and your most vivid experiences and impressions from those early years?

Yes, I can. I will tell you a little about my background, who I am, and what I am. As I said, I was born in 1924. And I was named for my grandfather, Herman Obermayer, who was a Confederate soldier, who fought at the Battle of Antietam. And so I have deep roots in American history and a deep feeling for American history.

I was born in Philadelphia, where my father was a very prominent attorney. And my mother, one of the first-- maybe the first-- female bacteriologist in the United States. She was a graduate of Columbia in 1920 and worked as a research bacteriologist at Mount Sinai Hospital, now Mount Sinai Medical Center, in New York until she married my father in 1923.

I was their first child in a very happy family that was both very positively Jewish and rather well assimilated by many of the world standards. I attended public school in Philadelphia. And I graduated from the Central High School of Philadelphia, which happens to grant a degree and be the second oldest public high school in the United States.

I attended Dartmouth. And at the end of my freshman year at Dartmouth, I was drafted into the army. I had to be drafted almost immediately after the passage of the 18-, 19-year-old draft act-- I was 18-- because my father was chairman of the draft board. And when they appointed draft boards in 1940, more than a year before America went to war, there was no thought that he might have to face drafting his own 16-year-old son some years later.

I can imagine. Yes.

However, all of us knew that that was his duty, my duty. And I became an enlisted soldier.

And that was in what year?

1943.

And had you established a major already in Dartmouth?

No.

I had finished my freshman year in April. And I was drafted in May and then given a two-week furlough, as was custom, and then became an active soldier in June of 1943. And I should comment that part of the uniqueness of that war and that draft is that everybody was included. And the figures about Dartmouth and my own class demonstrate this.

I entered in the fall of 1942 with 575 men. The college had 2,400 students in September, 1942. 18 months later in March of 1944, there were 270 undergraduates in all of Dartmouth College, including about 20 wounded veterans. That is fewer than they had had since the administration of James Monroe and fewer than they had had during the Mexican or Civil Wars. This was a draft and a war that took everybody. There were no exceptions.

So does that mean that World War I was not like that? World War I was a war that had only a selected draft? Or was that also one of those that was across the board?

The closest was World War I. The draft was fairly inclusive. Not as inclusive as this one. But it drafted men from 21 to 31. I might have been out of college. I certainly would have been a senior in college and I think had acquired this skills and the knowledge to have been an officer-- or at least to have had an easy job.

Part of the unique story of World War II is that particularly men like myself who went in the army's specialized training program because we had fairly high IQs, where then they discontinued the program and we became cannon fodder. And Stephen Ambrose in one of his histories in World War II talks that this is one of the great unfairnesses of World War II was that really the brightest 18-year-olds had no qualifications to be officers or to do anything very special. And they were on the front lines.

Tell me what kind of cannon fodder they made out of you? Can you explain a little bit about your experiences when you went boot camp?

Yes. I am just terribly fortunate. That I escaped being places where most of my comrades were killed is just-- I was blessed. I was lucky. I've lived a charmed life from the beginning. When the army specialized training program was discontinued in March of 1944, I was at the College of William and Mary in that unit. And all of us were transferred to the 95th Infantry Division. No, many of us were transferred at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania.

In my particular section at the 95th division, there were 40-some men remained. And the rest of us were transferred to other units. I was transferred to what was considered a far more dangerous assignment. I was assigned to an airborne engineer battalion in a glider company. And glider soldiers don't live very long.

However, they discontinued my group. And I did something else. And of the 40 men who remained-- 40-some-- in the 95th division, at least nine of them are buried in the United States military cemetery in Metz. And others may still be languishing in veterans hospitals and buried in other places or suffered wounds that led to early deaths.

So in other words, the disbandment was one of those lucky strokes for you? Is that correct? Could one make that assumption?

Yes, certainly, my being taken out of the 95th division was a very lucky stroke, because I went to something that was considered more dangerous-- glider companies. And I actually volunteered for the paratroops, because it was considered safer. And then the army needed the paratroopers that were part of our unit in a jump in Holland, which was futile and fatal. And almost all American soldiers were killed.

And they disbanded the unit and made us into combat engineers, because the people who had the talents in the airborne business had been killed-- have been called away for a special mission in Europe. So by luck, I ended up being a clerk in the provost marshal general's office in Paris and later in Frankfurt.

Well, can you tell us-- I want to go back a little bit to the time after your furlough and you're just going into, let's say, boot camp. And what were your first impressions? Because if you say it was an across the board draft, it was probably also the first exposure to kids from all over the country and different places, different backgrounds. And so was that your experience?

Oh very much so. But I had gone to public high school. Although an elite high school in terms of academic requirements for admissions, it was a citywide high school. And it was the high school that poor boys attended, because

it was a way to get a scholarship. And so I had a broad range of friends. Now, I never was associated with them in quite the same way you are in the army, where you drink and eat and do everything in the world together.

And much more the part of basic training and the experience that bothered me, I believe all my life, was the loss of freedom. Suddenly, I couldn't go out on Saturday nights because I live behind barbed wire. And my government had taken my liberty. And at almost a caprice somebody read from a clipboard at six in the morning. And I went to the airborne engineers-- could commit me to a contested barricade where I would likely die.

And suddenly this has made me very conscious and very much aware and very fearful of government power. There it is. It was for a good cause and the right cause. And I don't question that the draft was appropriate. But I do know that the power-- I was exposed to government power in a way that nobody future generations in the United States has been.

That seems to be in some ways a theme that goes through some of the experiences that I read about that you've already written. And we will come to those. Right now I'd like to have you describe how it is you got to Europe. And what dates did you get to Europe? And under what conditions did you get to Europe?

I got to Europe in early January 1945. We landed. When the airborne engineer unit broke up, I was assigned to a combat engineer battalion and ultimately to the medical detachment of that battalion, chiefly because I had gone to college for a year and I was better educated than most of the people. So the doctor who really selected people for his medical battalion selected me.

We were notified in October of 1944 that we were going to go overseas. We had no idea whether we would go to the Atlantic or the Pacific. And people in the United States-- the people forget that once you were notified you were going overseas you had the same status as a company that was overseas. Therefore, if you went AWOL to do anything and not return on time or go out with a girl or whatever, it became desertion, because once you were notified you're going overseas, the risks became they became specific.

We boarded a ship in late December of 1944 in New York Harbor. And then for at least a week-- and nobody really knew-- our ship languished along the Eastern shore of the United States until they put together a convoy, which I until I did research for my book *Soldiering for Freedom* thought had 20 to 25 ships in it, because you could always see that number. And the troop ship I was on, which I will describe in a minute, was the center.

I have subsequently read that there were 55 ships in this convoy, all of which protected each other in various ways. And they went up from New York to Norfolk. And I probably passed ships that came out of the harbor of Philadelphia or Baltimore until they had assembled 55 ships that in a unique formation crossed the ocean and landed in France.

We were the first convoy-- we were the first troopship, on which there were 5,000 men, to land directly in France.

What part?

This was after the beginning, and quite a while before it was concluded, the Battle of the Belgian Bulge, in which as you may know more American soldiers were lost than on the beaches of Normandy. It was--

Bloody.

It was bloody. With all the historical wisdom of hindsight, evidence of the German's great military skill. They had lost the war, but they were going to exact a price before they quit. And it was a heavy price.

Can you tell me what your first views-- do you remember your first views of European soil and the day that you landed? And did you get any of the wounded from the Battle of the Bulge? Because you were part of a medical unit.

Yes. You asked me to describe our landing and what our relationship was after we landed with the Battle of the Bulge. We landed on approximately the 16th or 18th of January of 1945 when it was very cold. And they had not yet built docks in the port of Le Havre, which was a major port for the Germans. And we destroyed it. And we had not rebuilt

most of the facilities.

And so the ship we were on put down anchor several hundred yards or maybe a mile from the shore. We then went into a landing craft to near the shore and then waded ashore in the middle of January when it was terribly, terribly cold. And we had our packs on our backs. And nobody was shooting at us. But it was a very difficult climb. And we were wet and cold. And we got in trucks, where we sat around for a long time until they collected a convoy.

And we then went to the largest camp built in France by the United States Army, called Camp Lucky Strike. I will add all of the camps were named for cigarettes. There was Camp Chesterfield. And I came home through Camp Philip Morris.

Who knew?

At any rate, that's the way they were named. And at Camp Lucky Strike, they hadn't completed building it yet. I have since gone to see the site. And it was built around what previously had been a small German airfield for small airplanes. So there was a landing strip. And on either side of that, they built a camp where I believe at some point they had close to 100,000 men.

And they had inadequate toilet facilities. And it was deep in mud. And it was cold. And you heated this tent. I was in a tent, and everybody else the same kind of tent, with about a dozen men. And you had a coal stove. And every morning, one of you took his helmet down to some little depot where they filled your helmet with coal. You brought your helmet of coal back and put it in the stove.

We did very little there except mark time until we went to another-- I will back up. A combat engineer battalion includes a fair amount of heavy equipment, because combat engineers build bridges, roads, work behind lines. And they have tractors and equipment. And the ship with our equipment got mined in the Havre harbor. And therefore, we had to be broken up as a unit, because although all the men were there, the equipment which had been assigned to us was in the bottom of the harbor.

It went poof.

Right. It went poop, poof, whatever. At any rate, it was no use to us. And we went to a reinforcement depot near the town of Chartres Not near, actually in where the great cathedral is. And then we were assigned a different kind of thing. We sat around there for a long time. The most memorable thing about Chartres was-- we did go to see the great cathedral but the famous stained glass windows had been removed and were in safekeeping somewhere-- was they had a portable shower unit. And we all got a bath.

The things you remember from the army. The things that are important.

Right. There are other stories about a bath in my book that are interesting, I guess. But a bath was just terribly, terribly important. And the only way until then with one exception was that you bathe in your helmet. You put the helmet on the stove and you had soap and you had hot water and maybe had a wash rag. I doubt it. And you then washed where you had to wash. So my chief recollection of that is that we took a bath.

And then the total unit was broken up, and five men were assigned to this unit and seven to another and all kinds of different places. Throughout the army, they had reinforcement depots throughout Europe. When units were decimated with killings and maimings, they found replacements in reinforcement depots, where they had just kept people sort of like an inventory supply closet of people.

Now, when you started out being attached to a medical unit--

A medical unit attached to an engineer corps, engineer battalion.

OK. So when it got all reconfigured, does that mean that you no longer were attached to this medical unit which was

attached to the engineer corps and you were assigned somewhere else?

That's correct. You asked what happened. So in the reinforcement depot, I was assigned-- Of the members of our medical detachment attached to the engineer corps, which was engineer battalion, which was then going to be broken up, they were assigned many places. But I was assigned as a medic to what was called an engineer petroleum distribution company. And so I was a medic with an engineer battalion all over again.

The engineer petroleum company is terribly interesting in the light of today's news. The United States needed a half a million gallons of gasoline a day in 1945, '44, and any rate in the war minimum to run trucks and tanks and Jeeps and airplanes. And the United States Army built tank farms on the Normandy beaches on the second day, because they, again, had trucks and tanks and Jeeps on the other side of that cliff.

And the pipeline began in Cherbourg harbor. We later learned that part of it began actually in England. And they ran pipes under the channel, but soldiers I was with had no idea really where it came from. And we fought a war, and I have a chapter in my book called "Waging War Against the French."

And so the gasoline went into the pipeline. And the pipeline was laid on the top of the ground with 20-foot sections of 6-inch pipe-- might've been 8-inch. But anyway, not very big pipe. Three of them next to each other. So it'd be 18 inches or 20 inches. And they were held together with a steel gasket and a rubber coupling. And all you needed to steal a little gasoline was a butter knife and a monkey wrench.

Well, there's the black market right there.

Well, it was a gigantic black market. And it also would leak or break periodically, because of engineering difficulties similar to what the world is experiencing right now.

By right now you mean the BP oil spill?

With the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Correct.

On our pipeline-- not where I particularly was, but one of the reasons I was a medic-- at least several times the pipe would break and you would have a geyser. The pressure of the gasoline would be great.

And probably some peasant was trying to steal a little gas for his tractor. And he pushed it aside, and he couldn't push together right. And so there was a little leak. And you had a geyser of gasoline. Or maybe it wasn't. There were errors in building it. There were many reasons. But I think the major reason was stealing.

And so at least 2 times-- I was not part of it, but I'm aware of it, and it's confirmed by history-- they would have a geyser of gas and a cloud of gas by a little town. And somebody would light a cigarette, and you'd burn up a lot of people and a lot of houses. And we had censorship then and nobody knew. And this was part of our war, to keep the French from doing this.

And because of I believe our high-level decision that we wouldn't prosecute thieves-- I think it was generally thought it would be very bad PR that we would end up prosecuting some poor peasant who wanted to five gallons of gasoline for his tractor. And so a public open black market existed when you breach the law with impunity. And I will not go into any contemporary conclusions on that. It becomes everybody breaches the law. So stealing gasoline became--

At any rate, I was part of this. And I think the entire business about the hazard of gasoline, the dependence on gasoline is a lesson that our presidents deliver speeches about and it was what our generals were fully aware of and built a very large and complex infrastructure to take care of in 1944.

We later built two more pipelines in France-- one down in Antwerp, Belgium, which is a port, and one up from

Marseilles or someplace near Marseilles on the Mediterranean coast-- because the need of gasoline was just gigantic. The risks were great. And the engineering problems-- A pipeline, you don't pour gasoline from a tanker in Cherbourg harbor, when we built a special floating dock so we didn't tie up dock space with these tankers. They required tank farms to level them and tank farms to distribute them and what they call decanting centers.

They would go to units in five-gallon cans. So you take 100,000 gallons of gasoline and put them in cans, this takes lots of people.

And lots of time.

And you spill lots of it on the ground. And you've got to regather the cans. Now, at airports, they put it in tanks. But the entire procedure required lots of skills. The commanding officer, was a lieutenant, of my unit was previously some sort of roustabout in an oil field. And he wasn't a very well-educated man, but he was there because he knew what he was doing. He knew how to order more pressure, more this.

So I just tell you it's part of the history that we're living through every day-- that we need oil. And we need it in gigantic quantities. And its technological demands were-- we pushed technology as far as we could push it in 1945. And we're doing the same thing in 2010.

In 1945, with all of the problems that you encountered there, did it impede the progress of the front, the ability to get the fuel? And how did the front change do you think? And where did it go? Where did it move in one direction or another? Can you explain a little bit about that?

Yes, I can.

And did you move along with it? In other words, right now--

No, I didn't.

--we're still in Chartres. And I need to find out where you go next. So two different questions.

OK. There are two questions.

Yes.

How did this affect the progress of our war? And where did I fit into the-- how did I get from here to there?

Correct.

The progress of our war-- General Patton, in his memoir and in public speeches after the-- He died shortly after the war. But immediately after the war, he claims the war could have been over in the fall of 1944 instead of in the spring of '45 without a Battle of the Bulge and gigantic losses if they'd had enough gasoline for him to move the Third Army from its great victories before the liberation of Paris in August 1944.

But General Patton, his army stood relatively still for six months-- and that may not be right exactly, maybe four-- but for the autumn of 1944, because he didn't have gasoline. Didn't have enough gasoline, and the gasoline couldn't move forward. And that's history. And I was at a level in the army where I really read about this after the war was over.

But you saw it. You saw the bigger picture, you read about the bigger picture later. But you saw the specific picture.

I knew that my unit was organized. I was near Verdun-- which is where they fought one of the great battles of World War I-- which was 30, 40 miles from the Rhine. And we didn't get the pipeline there. I was there in February, I guess, of '45. We didn't get the pipeline there until shortly before I got there.

And the movement of troops was way beyond that. And the generals, I now know from reading about it, were constantly complaining that we couldn't keep gasoline available to them. Gasoline, I go back--

So the answer is I went from Chartres to Verdun by truck. And I was assigned to a pumping station, Station 53, on this pipeline that began in the Cherbourg harbor. And they had a pumping station every 15 miles. After their bad experiences of burning down some towns in Normandy and near and in Western France, they went around every town so they didn't run the risk of burning down a town.

They did not run the pipeline through Verdun. They ran it around Verdun. And although I was very near Verdun, I actually worked in a field seven miles from the nearest blacktop road-- where we lived in a couple of tents-- because by that time, the army had decided it couldn't afford the risks A, of burning down and killing a lot of people and the morale problems and B, the theft potential in a city is infinitely greater than the theft potential in an open field.

Well, what was your job here? Were you taking care of wounded that happened from these accidents?

No, I was just there really to take care of people on the pipeline and to take care of the potential for a fire. So I had medical kits. And if they cut their hands and caught their fingers in machinery and what have you, I took care of them. And I took them into the base hospital. And I had the experience that's just part of war, I guess. I left my medical kits under my bed in case somebody got hurt and I was out on a truck or somewhere.

And every couple of weeks, you had I think two dozen morphine syrettes, which are sort of like little toothpaste tubes. You put the needle in, you squeeze it, and you have morphine. And it it does away the pain and life eventually if you give enough of it.

That's right.

And mine disappeared every couple of weeks. And I went to the base section hospital and explained to the pharmacist, who I'd gotten to know, that I needed more morphine. And he joked about it. And I said I have no idea. And he said that's war. He issued me another 20 morphine syrettes.

Now, whether 1 of the 10 men in those three tents we occupied-- two I guess and one for cooking and what have you-- was an addict. I don't know. Or he sold it on the black market. I don't know. And if you live with 10 other men in this kind of condition, being a snitch or a smart guy is not something I wanted to do very much. I assure you if I had discovered it, I might also have found my hand in a gear someday.

That's another aspect of unit life and war life.

Yes. Edmund Burke said, "Men don't die for king and country. Men die for the platoon."

Yeah. Tell me, there are a couple of other tracks I'd like to follow. And one of them will be where you were, again, as the war progressed. But you're there towards the tail end of the war. If we're talking February, March, the war is going to last only another couple of months.

Right.

And I want to switch gears a little bit to this-- to both when was the first time you saw German soil? And what was your experience of it? And number two, sort of like as a leitmotif that you have in a musical opera, you were there and you were a Jew. And you are in an army where we're fighting Nazis and we're fighting fascism. Had you any idea at that point, when you were there, just how severe, just how complete the war on Jews was going on from the enemy side? I'd like to get a sense of that kind of atmosphere from your memories.

Well, there are a couple of answers. The first time I actually entered-- I'm going to back up. I went from the pipeline because I could type and I fortunately knew a friend to working for the provost marshal general. And then I went up to Germany, not with the general, but with some people for several days.

First of all, we read Stars and Stripes every day. And Buchenwald had been freed in April of 1945. And General Eisenhower had been to visit it. And the papers were full of this. And so there weren't any shocks.

No surprises?

Well, not really. And the other thing is-- and I say this and I think most of the GIs I knew really got to respect the Germans and liked them a great deal better than the French. The Germans were orderly. The German city--

I was in Frankfurt in July of 1945. And Frankfurt was literally a mess. And in front of the train station, it was still-- It had been severely bombed. And there were piles of bricks and stones and whatever. And we worked in an office building right in the center of Frankfurt. And it was six- or seven-story building. And you could go to the fourth or fifth floor where we actually had an office. And you could look for 10 blocks around and there wasn't another building standing. Why this one stood, I don't know.

But the Germans every day-- now, we may have made them do it, I don't really know that-- at 4 o'clock or some hour, they had pick up stones duty, so to speak. And they would be out there picking up stones and putting them in little cars. And they built a narrow-gauge track down the main street. And they'd pick it up and go to another street and fill these cars with hand work. And Germany was orderly.

I was in Rouen, which I will add it. And I did the research for my book to confirm this. We killed more people-- we, the British and the American air forces-- in the week before D-Day in Rouen, city of 109,000 people, than we lost American soldiers on the beaches at D-Day.

Wow.

Now, we have soldiers who may have died two days later, but nonetheless, that's an amazing number. And the French had lost 18 people to Wehrmacht four years earlier. And now, there's no way they could like us much.

But when I was there in January of '45 in Rouen, it was a mess still. There were areas where we had bombed, where the streets had not been cleared. And you couldn't drive. We didn't drive. You couldn't drive there. You couldn't do anything there. They showed you what a mess it was. When you went to Germany, they were cleaning it up.

They called them Trummerfrauen.

Ina? Ina, this should be in the tape.

OK. They called them Trummerfrauen. Sort of like getting the-- This doesn't have to be on tape.

OK.