

OBERMAYER, Herman
Domestic Interviews
English
RG-50.030*0574

PREFACE

The following time-coded notes are the result of a videotaped interview with Herman Obermayer conducted on June 21, 2010. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

The reader should bear in mind these notes have been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from these notes without first checking it against the taped interview.

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Herman Obermayer, born in 1924 in Philadelphia, describes his work serving in the United States army during and immediately following the end of World War II in France, Belgium, and Germany. He focuses on his relationship with the chief army executioner and gives a picture of the day of the Nuremberg trials that he attended. He describes how his time in the army affected his perspective and decisions made regarding various post-war experiences, such as his breaking the journalistic quarantine of George Lincoln Rockwell's activities.

[01:] 00:27 – [01:] 08:43

00:00 – 8:16

The interviewee introduces himself as Herman Obermayer, born on September 19, 1924, in Philadelphia; tells about his family's status as a well-assimilated Jewish family with a long history of living in the United States; describes his father's occupation as a prominent attorney and his mother's occupation as a research bacteriologist; mentions attending Central public high school in Philadelphia; tells that he attended Dartmouth and was drafted into the army at the end of his freshman year in 1943, immediately after the passing of the eighteen and nineteen year old draft act; claims that being drafted directly after the passage of the draft act was due to the fact that his father was the chairman of his local draft board; describes how he was terribly fortunate not to have been placed directly on the front lines during the beginning of his service; lists Paris and Frankfurt as the places at which he spent the most time at during the army.

[01:] 08:44 – [01:] 14:46

8:17 – 14:19

He describes the experience of complete government control over his life, as it could draft people and then have complete power over their actions as doing anything that goes against orders is deemed desertion; tells of his first assignment in the army as a part of a medical battalion; remembers being notified that he was going overseas in November 1944, and then in late December 1944 boarding a ship in a 55 ship convoy, sitting along the coast for a while before sailing from the United States to France.

[01:] 14:47 – [01:] 20:45

14:20 – 20:18

He recalls landing at the Battle of the Bulge on either the 16 or 18 of January 1945; describes going to Camp Lucky Strike along the coast of France immediately upon landing, how the camp had close to 100,000 men and inadequate facilities, although he spent very little time there before

moving onto a reinforcement depot in Chartres, France; tells about the mining of all of the equipment on the ships in the harbor near Camp Luck Strike.

[01:] 20:46 – [01:] 27:23

20:19 – 26:56

Remembers starting out in a medical unit, attached to an engineering battalion, which was then broken up, sending people to various places, and he was reassigned as a medic to an engineer petroleum distribution company; explains that the United States needed a minimum of 500,000 gallons of gasoline per day in 1945 to run the trucks, tanks, jeeps, and airplanes necessary to fight the war; tells about the gas pipeline that had been constructed to pump gasoline from England to France and elsewhere so the Allies could get the necessary fuel; describes his work on the pipeline as a medic who worked with those injured through their work on it; comments on how sometimes the pipeline would break and gasoline would leak out, probably because French people open the pipe to steal some of the gas and then do not properly reseal it, which could cause injuries as people would go to light a cigarette near the pipeline and the proximity of the gasoline would cause a fire or explosion; mentions the presence of a black market in France from the oil stolen from the pipeline, where people would put the oil in five gallon cans and then sell it.

[01:] 27:24 – [01:] 31:40

26:57 – 31:13

After being asked the question of whether the inability to get fuel hindered the progress of the war, he responds that General Patton claimed that the war could have been concluded at the end of 1944 before the Battle of the Bulge and gigantic loss of life could have been avoided if they had enough gasoline to move a third army away after their victory at Paris at the end of the summer of 1944, but they could not do so because they did not construct the pipeline there until shortly before he arrived at his placement near Verdun in February 1945; he discusses his assignment on pumping station 53 on the gasoline line which began at Cherbourg Harbor in France; describes that there was a pumping station every fifteen miles on the line, and that the station that he was at ran around the town of Verdun so it would not burn down the town if something happened to it.

[01:] 31:41 – [01:] 33:50

31:14 – 33:23

He remembers his job on the pipeline as being there to take care of people wounded on the pipeline, who got injuries such as cut hands; recalls incidents of people stealing items such as painkillers from his medical kit that he left underneath his bed.

[01:] 33:51 – [01:] 38:24

33:24 – 37:57

He comments on being a Jew arriving on German soil for the first time, and fighting against those people who persecuted Jews so heavily; when questioned about how much did he know

how complete the Nazi persecution of the Jews was, he responded that he left the pipeline because he could type well and had a connection so he was able to get a job at the Theatre Provo Marshall General, and in the course of his work there went with some people to Germany for several days, and also that Buchenwald was free in April of 1945 before he visited Germany; recalls liking the German soldiers as people much more than the French because they were much more orderly; describes traveling to Frankfurt in July 1945, how before he arrived the city was severely bombed and so now was basically destroyed; explains the role of the Trümmerfrauen, how every day at four pm the Germans went outside, and cleaned up the wreckage street by street, and filled up cars with stones from the rubble; compares this to the city of Rouen, which was still a mess in January 1945 even though sufficient time to start on its reconstruction was passed as it was bombed one week before D-Day.

[01:] 38:25 – [01:] 42:05

37:58 – 41:38

He talks about going to Germany after the war ends in early July 1945; comments on the wounds of war being very fresh, with only one bridge still surviving over the Rhine; tells of the United States forces moving to the I.G. Farber building.

[01:] 42:06 – [01:] 47:34

41:39 – 47:07

When being asked how his duties changed when moving to Frankfurt despite still worked for the Provo-Marshall, he responds that he typed out various documents regarding death sentences while in Frankfurt; mentions how overnight he changed from working on the medical unit to working at the Provo-Marshall's office; remembers how United states officers and the law enforcement officials of the area that the United States armed forces occupied would arrest troops due to being too rowdy at a bar or engaging in other dishonorable activities while being stationed at a reinforcement depot after returning from the front; comments on the unfairness of how the both the arresting officer and the arrested officers were from the reinforcement depot, but that the arrested officers would stay in prison while the arresting officers would have to leave the depot to go fight on the front lines, while the arrested got to stay in prison, not wanting to leave prison because that meant that they would have to go back to the front; recalls a congressman finding out about this way to evade going to the front lines and how Congress subsequently made a deal with the army in which they released all prisoners and closed all prisons down after the war ended; describes his job as a clerk who helped facilitate the closing of these prisons; recalls the location of the Theater Provost-Marshall's office as first being in Paris, and then was later moved to Frankfurt; describes an office set up with a ten person team to help sort the felons out from the people who just committed petty crimes when discharging people from the prisons.

[01:] 47:35 – [01:] 54:39

47:08 – 54:12

He discusses his contradictory feelings regarding the Germans, how on one hand they persecuted the Jews but on the other hand they were very orderly and good enough people; adds that most

American troops had an “us and them” attitude about Americans and Europeans, but he did not subscribe to that point of view; tells of several family members who died in concentration camps; remembers being brought up with German refugees constantly around his house; comments that he does not think there were deep feelings of outrage against the German soldiers among his army peers; recalls how his coworkers had mixed feelings about the first German girl hired as a typist, not because she was German but because she was a woman, although ultimately they were okay with her getting hired because it meant that an American soldier got to go home; describes most American soldiers as being deeply ambivalent, that the German soldiers should sort everything out on their own and the Americans should be allowed to go back home to live their own lives.

[01:] 54:40 – [02:] 01:56

54:13 – 01:01:29

Remembers trying to find out about what happened to his family in Germany after the war ended; tells about arriving with another soldier to the village near Rothenburg ob der Tauber that his grandfather was from, the chief reaction among the inhabitants being that of not wanting to know or help them find out what happened to his relatives, although he did meet some people who claimed to know his father, and he searched the dilapidated yet undestroyed graveyard for information about his ancestors; describes the stories of his grandfather’s and great uncle’s immigration to the United States.

[02:] 01:57 – [02:] 08:10

01:01:30 – 1:07:41

Explains how the soldiers deemed serious criminals by the provost marshal’s office when emptying out the jails were tried by court marshals and ever given appropriate types of sentences, even a few were executed; remembers typing orders which stated that the soldiers were singled out as only physically and not officially being involved in the European Theater of Action, and of not being in the army anymore; recalls having contact with the chief executioner, which is also pertinent to Nuremburg; explains if one was guilty of a military crime, the one is executed by firing squad, and if one was guilty of a civilian crime then one is hanged; mentions that at Nuremberg after Colonel General Yodel, Admiral Keitel, and Admiral Doenitz were sentenced, they appealed to the court, stating that they were being punished for doing their military duties and that they should be executed by firing squad, however the court refused, so they were hanged; recalls typing cables to be sent to parents of American soldiers who were executed, which gave the cause of death as judicial asphyxia; talks about knowing the chief executioner and did not know if he was the only one, and that they would talk about what time to carry out executions.

[02:] 08:11 – [02:] 12:33

01:07:42 – 01:12:06

Describes the appearance and military background of John Wood, the chief executioner, that he took great pride in his work like a craftsman would, and made efforts to make his executions as quick and painless as possible; recalls never witnessing a hanging during his service tour;

comments on how the Army treated Woods very well since he possessed a unique skill even though he only did 30 executions a year.

[02:] 12:34 – [02:] 16:27

01:12:07 – 01:16:00

Remembers coming to Frankfurt when there was not yet a new German government as the United States still governed; mentions some allied military court trials of German soldiers at the end of 1945, including one for four German men who were executed in a hanging that took place in a military prison with military officers watching; comments that he did not feel a conflict of principles regarding the American actions, he thought that retaliation for American deaths was right as those who committed the crime need to be punished; describes his differing current views on the issue.

[02:] 16:28 – [02:] 21:32

01:16:01 – 01:21:07

Discusses the hangman's life further, that he was given special privileges in disproportion to his Master Sergeant rank even though relatively few executions were done, not only because of the uniqueness of his job but also because the Army was so sensitive to the morale and other problems that executing German soldiers in Germany could cause; adds that in the American troops' eyes, many German soldiers did not do anything wrong beyond protecting their city; mentions an example of the special treatment that the executioner received when he was late meeting a General and others before going on to a hanging, and when he finally was received, the General did not act mad, and greeted him in such a friendly way completely disproportionate to his rank; tells that the executioner got away with a lot, although he never heard about any great failures on his part.

[02:] 21:33 – [02:] 26:37

01:21:08 – 01:26:12

He comments on Woods' mysterious death in 1950 on the Enewetak Atoll in the Pacific, for which accidental electrocution was the official cause of death by contact with a live electrical wire in the course of his work as a carpenter, but he believes that former Nazis murdered Woods.

[02:] 26:38 – [02:] 32:35

01:26:11 – 01:32:08

Obermayer recalls being fortunate enough to attend the Nuremberg Trials, what he saw and what he took back with him.

[02:] 32:36 – [02:] 40:50

01:32:09 – 01:40:23

Recalls being able to attend the trial because one of the lawyers on Justice Robert Jackson's staff was a family friend; remembers the letter from his father which told about how he saw Maurice

Wolf and how he should call his son, Bob Wolf, who was working on the trials; explains how they got in contact with each other and how Bob said that if Obermayer could arrange to get through the security process then he could arrange for him to see the trial; remembers being the youngest out of all the visitors at age 21 since these seats were highly coveted and mostly went to older, high ranking government and military officials; comments on being the last American alive who observed or took part in the trials; described the problem of the tight security that one needed to pass to even enter the Nuremberg Security Zone, and how one needed to have business to be there; mentions the process of arranging to receive credentials; comments on staying at the Grand Hotel even though enlisted men officially were not allowed to stay there; recalls having a pass for the 139th session of the trial, where they demonstrated that the Germans displaced and killed Jews en masse; discussed the leadership qualities of Hermann Goering; remembers his first impression being that these were all just a bunch of old men, and that the vanquished really are vanquished forever, with the only exception being Goering, who really seemed like the leader; discusses how the record of Anglo-Saxon law was created at Nuremberg; recalls during the day he was there they showed evidence that the German army moved a huge number of people, mainly Jews, from Poland and Czechoslovakia to slave or death camps; mentions how his Nuremberg experiences were consistent with Justice Jackson's; discusses Jackson's cross-examining of Goering, and Goering's personality and manner of acting.

[02:] 40:51 – [02:] 51:59

01:40:24 – 01:51:32

Tells other observations about the trial, such as about how security was extremely tight inside the Nuremberg area and how one was constantly escorted by a guard; described an almost fraternal ease between the Russians, Americans, French and British, even as problems with the Russians were growing; discusses his doubts about the trial because he doubted the value of a trial with the purpose to create a historical record rather than provide justice to all involved parties; questions whether trials done by the victors of the losers are really expressions of justice, not of power, and how he thinks trials of this kind tend to distort law because the victors have the privilege and generally executed the vanquished if it suited their purpose, and in this way is not sure if this is a good example of Anglo-Saxon law.

[02:] 52:00 – [02:] 56:09

01:51:33 – 01:55:42

He describes his family's perspective on the trials, how they encouraged him to come up with his own opinions about the trial; explains how his father agreed with him that there was something wrong with America participating in and sanctifying a procedure which produced an end that could have been accomplished by some other means; discussed Justice Jackson's opinion that the trial was not about retribution but about making a record of it so it never happens again; comments how history may decide the trial was an act of retribution which helped to assure that all of the top Nazi officers were executed or committed suicide.

[02:] 56:10 – [03:] 00:09

01:55:43 – 01:59:42

Says that attending services was what brought the Jewish soldiers in the U.S. army together; when asked about the presence of a community with other Jewish soldiers while they were stationed in Europe, he responded that there both was and was not a community that existed; describes going to services almost always when they were anywhere that had services; recalls how he helped clean up the synagogue in Verdun with other soldiers both from his unit and others; discusses getting to know rabbis and taking a one day pass to visit Luxembourg; tells how in Frankfurt they held services for soldiers which he attended, and in Paris he went to a few synagogues; discusses the difficulties in arranging trips and excursions to attend services or other Jewish events because of the way the army is structured one cannot simply leave, one must obtain permission to go to any events, and he had no transportation without making a lot of arrangements; recalls being aware of a Jewish community while stationed in Europe; remembers having services on the ship coming to Europe, and that there were at least two Jewish soldiers in his unit when he first arrived in Europe, although when he was on the pumping station there were no Jews; remembers that from then on, he did not have any recollection of a close relationship with other Jews; recalls making a conscious effort to associate with Jewish events and there was never a warm feeling about the state of Jewish life in the army because it just was not possible.

[03:] 00:10 – [03:] 09:29

01:59:43 – 02:09:02

Remembers an important experience with a rabbi involving the entire Jewish community in the armed services when stationed at William & Mary; this situation focused on a service when a Jewish chaplain delivered a pro-Zionist sermon saying that there were rich German Jews who were traitors to all Jews and they did not really want to support the Zionist movement; he remembers thinking that the chaplain was referring exactly about his situation because his family was not in favor of Zionism, and told them about this in a passing in a manner in a routine letter to them, not expecting any action to come out of it; comments that his family brought the sermon up to their rabbi and then to the American Council for Judaism, which was an anti-Zionist organization which Obermayer was brought up into, and his rabbi told him that giving a speech like this went against the rules of the Jewish chaplaincy because one is not allowed to get involved in controversial issues; recalls that this situation ended up going so far that they gave him the option to eject the rabbi in question from service, but he did not want to go that far and so does not sign the papers authorizing this; adds that the American Council for Judaism offered him a position after the war and wrote him weekly throughout the duration of his service overseas, however during this time, he changed his mind on this topic and did not want to work for the organization.

[03:] 09:30 – [03:] 13:36

02:09:03 – 02:13:09

Describes the total change in his point of view, from anti-Zionist before World War II to pro-Zionist in 1945 after going to a sermon in Paris at a liberal synagogue, where a rabbi spoke about the current state of Jews in Europe, which he characterized as pessimistic but true; details the topic of the sermon as being about how the European Jewish life will never be what it was like before the war and that they have to leave Europe, with the only safe place for them to go being Palestine; comments on how this really affected him even though he questioned the logic used by

the rabbi; discusses what made him change his opinion of the Zionist movement, namely being exposed to the war, being away from his structured firm familial roots, and also just being a Jew abroad during the war; explains how he was never in a firm community during his time serving overseas and that the Jewish community was the closest community he had, and he came to identify with a broader Jewish community during this time and realized the value of community which Zionism represented; mentions that he feels strongly about this still; comments on how he was in favor of the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, that the American government was in favor of this because it established another democracy in the Middle East, and that Jews supported it because they supported the idea of Palestine as a haven.

[03:] 13:37 – [03:] 17:18

02:13:10 – 02:16:51

Recalls that his conversion to a pro-Zionist point of view did not occur suddenly, it was a slow process of change that took place throughout the course of the war; discusses how this part of his character was formed by being in the army, as being away from his family made him be this way, whereas if he had gone to Dartmouth College he might not have begun to think this way; tells of how one of the great formative experiences in his life was being in the army, and that he has a particular view on the role of Israel in his life that results from the three year period of his life there.

[03:] 17:19 – [03:] 24:10

02:16:52 – 02:23:43

Describes coming back to the United States and going to work with newspapers; recalls working as a reporter for several newspapers in his twenties, then wanting to make more money so he got a job selling newspaper advertising in New Orleans; says how he became a newspaper publisher and editor in two markets, in New Jersey, and in Arlington, Virginia; discusses the fact that Arlington was the location of the headquarters of the American Nazi Party in February 1963, when he purchased the North Virginian Sun.

[03:] 24:11 – [03:] 29:23

02:23:44 – 02:28:56

Recalls being at the newspaper for less than six months when he started getting irate letters from the American Jewish Committee, the Arlington Ministerial Association, the Anti-Defamation League, and other groups and organizations regarding the media quarantine of the American Nazi Party; describes the American Nazis, and how the media believed that giving George Lincoln Rockwell publicity was aiding and abetting him, so they were quarantining him even though he only had about 50-100 supporters; explains how the newspaper that he purchased previously followed the quarantine rule but that he thought that one should report on Rockwell's activities, especially as a local paper, because his activities were known and were part of the fabric of the community; discusses his feeling that one must expose the antics of a rogue to the community for the public to ultimately reject; elaborates on the fact that anytime Rockwell did anything newsworthy, the other newspaper would not cover it but Obermayer did; mentions how he reported on Rockwell's regular visits to the Arlington school board meetings where he

opposed anything regarding integration; explains how Rockwell was a white supremacist as he believed that any racial, ethnic or religious mixing corrupted the “purity” of the line, and wrote books elaborating these beliefs.

[03:] 29:24 – [03:] 34:01

02:28:57 – 02:33:34

Recalls getting a letter from Feinberg at the American Jewish Committee, stating that if they did not stop following the policy of quarantine, they would expose those of his views deemed unsavory to the committee; describes refusing to comply to their demands by letter, and so the committee sent Feinberg down to meet with him in person; remembers explaining to Feinberg about his belief that a local publisher has a different obligation than the national news sources, Feinberg understood this point of view and accepted that it would be okay for him to continue acting in the same manner; recalls an article from the *Colombia Journalism Review* published in 1966 about the policy of quarantine, and about writing a response to that article, stating that he found Rockwell’s behavior abhorrent but it would be more so not to report on it; tells how he donated the clippings about this to Harvard University.

[03:] 34:02 – [03:] 39:03

02:33:35 – 02:38:36

When asked how his role as that of an owner of a news organization relates to the role of the propagandist and to Goebbels’ role in Hitler’s regime, he responds that in Goebbels one learns how people successful in the manufacturing of information and consent can succeed in turning a nation of highly sophisticated and urbane people into a nation of monsters; explains how the real question is about how did the Holocaust happen and how can we keep it from happening again, that personality and the individual are all part of the dissemination of information and that objectivity is to some degree an illusion so one should not seek it.

[03:] 39:04 – [03:] 43:18

02:38:37 – 02:42:51

Describes the American Nazi Party’s last major event in 1983 at Arlington High School, in Virginia; recalls the parents feeling as though they did not have the right to protest against this event on the grounds of free speech, however they could have protested from a different angle such as prohibitive insurance costs, or the feasibility of using a high school for such a function, but instead they gave up against him; discusses the idea of news reporting as objective as being a farce, especially when reporters are stationed overseas as there are so few of them being sent to places like Iraq when they do not even know the language, which he views as being equally subjective as bloggers.

[03:] 43:19 – [03:] 51:20

02:42:52 – 02:50:53

Explains how the traditional news sources only get their news from a couple news sources, so it is almost a monopoly because an estimated 80% of newspapers make up their pages based upon

what the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* runs, and when one looks at this the potential for a situation such as the one Goebbels created seems greater and greater because all that needs to happen is for these organizations to be bought by those who lack good intentions; discusses how changes in the media industry including the rise of new media, are positive because they increase the number of gate keepers and bring more people into the news cycle.