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Tell me when.

It's rolling now.

OK. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Gerald Silver on June 19th, 2014 in Forrest Hills, Queens. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Silver, for agreeing to speak with us and to give your testimony.

My pleasure. We're going to be talking today about your experiences as part of the US military of being a Jewish-American in the military during World War II, what you saw when you were in service in Europe as the war was drawing to a close. But before we get to all that, I want to start at the very beginning. So I'd like you to tell me your name at birth, your date of birth, and where you were born.

I was born in Brownsville, New York. I was born on April 6th, 1923.

OK. And your name at birth was?

My name is Gerald-- G-E-R-A-L-D-- Silver. I'm better known as Jerry, or in Hebrew, [HEBREW]. I speak fluent Yiddish, so.

Did you learn it from your parents?

I learned it from parents, from grandparents. And I always had an interest in learning it, and I enjoy speaking. Not too many can speak fluent Yiddish. at least that's what I've been told.

It's true. It's true.

Yeah, but I find it interesting.

So tell me a little bit about your family.

My dad came here-- I was telling Jim. My dad came here in, I believe, 1913 from Ukraine. My grandfather, his father, sent him from Russia because he didn't want him to go into the Russian Army.

So he came here, but he did. He was drafted into the American Army in 1917. So he was a World War I soldier and I was a World War II soldier. I've always thought that was interesting. And my mother came here as a one-year-old infant. My grandparents came from Kiev.

Also Ukraine.

Yeah. My mother, though as a one-year-old, was raised as American. She was a high school graduate. She spoke fluent English, and was more American than European. But strangely, enough she spoke a beautiful fluent Yiddish, too. I had a sister, Miriam, younger than me. Unfortunately, she passed. I think it was a week before Jim and Barbara's wedding.

What year would that have been?

1982?

Yeah, I think it was about 1982. Unfortunately, she passed. She had breast cancer.

Very young, though.

Yeah.

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Yeah.

I have two nephews.

Her sons?

Her sons, yeah, Richard and Jeffrey. They're fine. I speak to them, see them occasionally.

So your sister and yourself were the only children?

Yes, we were, the only children.

And you were the older brother?

I was the older brother. Yeah, I was five years older, I believe.

Well, it's very interesting when you say that both sets of grandparents came from the Ukraine, because that's the territory where Sholem Aleichem, I believe--

Sholem Aleichem.

Right, lived, and we know that Fiddler on the Roof is his creation.

Yeah. My mother's father, my grandfather, was a kosher butcher here.

Did they talk about those old days in the Ukraine at all?

Not in my presence very often, no. They never discussed European growing up.

[PHONE RINGING]

Let's cut.

Let's cut for a second.

That's my phone.

Yeah. Did you cut?

Rolling.

OK. So we were talking about your childhood and growing up, and how much of Europe parents talked about and where they came from. And you're saying not so much.

Not in my presence, anyway.

Was it because, you sense, that it was a hard life and so they didn't have anything really positive to say?

Not that I'm aware of, no.

OK.

They never spoke of hard life in Europe. Well, my mother knew nothing of it. She came here as an infant.

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Right.

And my father had a very good childhood. He has four sisters and two brothers, and they did very, very, very well in life. Became very successful, financially and otherwise. My dad's oldest sister-- he was the oldest, but his oldest sister, she met this man I think before they left Russia.

And he had some friends, at least that's what I was told, that told him if he would leave Russia and come to South America, there were chances for people to become very successful financially. And this man went to South America, Columbia, South America. And he was there for a year or so, did whatever business he was in. I don't know.

And he wrote back to my aunt and said if you would come to Columbia, we could get married there. I am in business there, and so on. She did that. They got married. She then wrote back to her sisters and brothers, come to South America. You will do very, very well.

Sure enough, the rest of the family went there. They became literally millionaires. They all went into business. I was told, I don't know how true it is, that they were the second or the third Jewish family to settle in Colombia. I'm going back to the early 1920s.

From there, because they were so successful in business-- my original uncle George, who was the first one there, he literally had a sugar plantation, a coffee plantation. I was told that he sold the sugar plantation to Coca-Cola. I don't know how many years ago, and at that time was given $4 million.

Oh my gosh.

It's probably equivalent $400 million today, whatever. I mean, he became so successful. He and my aunt, they had a home in Paris. They had a home, I think, in England. I'm not that sure. And my Aunt Paulina would come here. They lived in Forrest Hills for a while. They had one son, George.

The rest of the family were also very Zionistic. At the time that Israel was being formed and all, they literally sent boatloads of ammunition and everything to the Jewish people, the Haganah people--

Right.

--before the forming of Israel. They supplied arms, ammunition, and so on. And when the Jewish state was formed, they came to Israel. They bought a lot of real estate. They had orange groves. They had homes in Tel Aviv.

My cousin George, to this very day, lives in a penthouse in Tel Aviv. He was here last year. He does business in New York, and he came here. He was here for an hour or two with me and he was telling me about the rest of the family. My aunts and uncles, of course, are gone by now, but there are cousins who I've never met that are still in Israel. There is no more family left in Colombia, South America. It's a very interesting family.

Yes, it is, and at a very interesting time. It was true that in tsarist Russia, a lot of people ran away because they didn't want to be part of the tsarist army.

That is true, yeah.

In your particular case, it sounds extraordinarily auspicious for your father, because even though he was an American soldier in World War I as part of the US Army, the Russian Army experience was much different, and it was a four-year war rather than a one-year war.

Oh, sure. It was probably the reason why his father sent him away from there. He didn't want him going into the Russian Army.

So what happened with your grandparents, your father's father? Did they stay or did they eventually come as well?

They finally migrated to Israel, and they are buried in Israel.

They did this in what year, do you know?

No. I was extremely young. I remember we were living in an apartment, I think, on Bristol Street in Brownsville. I believe that's where it is. And I was quite young. But I do remember both my grandparents, my father's parents, coming to see him, saying goodbye before they left to go to the state of Israel. It was before there was a state of Israel.

When it was Palestine.

My aunts, my father's sisters, bought them my house. Believe it or not, I remember the address where they were in Israel. It was Sharabi number 6.

Oh, wow.

Tel Aviv.

Wow.

That's where the house was that my aunts bought their parents, my grandparents, in Israel. My grandmother died before my grandfather died.

Would this all have been before World War II?

Oh, yes. It would have had to be. Sure, I was a youngster. I remember them coming into the house to see my father before they left. I wasn't even in my teens then. I was that young. It struck my mind very vividly, and that was the only time that I saw and met them.

So that means they came from Russia to the United States first and then went to Palestine?

Yes.

OK.

That's right, Palestine, not Israel.

And then if you were a young kid and you were born in '23, that means that this would have been in the '20s or early '30s.

That is correct. It would have had to be in the '20s.

And one of the reasons I'm going after dates is after the Bolshevik Revolution, I wonder how many people could have left the Ukraine after 1918.

Interesting. So maybe they emigrated before then? And if they emigrated after 1918 from that part of Russia, Ukraine, and so on, then they would have had a story, because it was a very tumultuous place.

Oh, I'm sure it was.

And they got out in time because of the Ukrainian famine that happened in the early '30s.

Yeah. They all got out in time, my father's sisters and brothers, and so on.

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And here's then another thought that comes to my mind as you're speaking, is that we're interviewing you as a Jewish-American person who is going to be experiencing something during World War II. But there are roots in Europe, which we're talking about now, roots in Russia, where the German occupation and the Nazi occupation-- the same at that time-- extended. And when I'm hearing you talk, it says to me there were no family members of yours who were in the territories that were at some point occupied by the Nazi forces.

No.

Because those who stayed, of course, had a very, very different fate.

No, I know of no family members who were left behind, at least to my knowledge anyway.

Tell me, how did your father make a living? What was his education and his profession?

My dad was actually-- he had one store after another. He tried very hard. Originally, I think it was a clothing line. I'm trying to remember what he did. Dad was a cutter, at least in the clothing-- whatever a cutter does in clothing manufacturing.

But when that went poorly for him, he decided to go into retailing. He had a dairy stand, a dairy store. I try to remember, on Avenue U in Brooklyn. We lived on Bedford Avenue, near Avenue U, and he had a dairy store.

He gave that up after a while. From dairy, he went into an appetizing store selling all type of smoked fish, and what have you. From there, he finally ended up in Brooklyn on St. John's place in Crown Heights near-- St. John's, near Buffalo Avenue. I remember that. And it was of Silvers Sweet Shop.

Oh, wow.

It was a store. He carried all type of nuts, all forms of candy, boxes of chocolate, halva. And it was very successful. He did very, very well in that. And I think that was the last store that he owned. But from there, they were able to buy a nice family house in Near Eastern Parkway, and they did quite well at that point.

Well, you literally grew up as a kid in a candy store.

Yeah. I would come in there and help myself to dates and nuts and chocolate, and you name it.

Oh, wow.

Yeah, Silver Sweet Shop. It was known all over. And he also had a picture in the window of his cousin, also my cousin. If you've ever heard of Phil Silvers, the comedian.

Yes. Yes.

When my dad came to this country, he had one relative, his uncle, who happened to be Phil Silver's father. My dad came to this country. His aunt was pregnant then. And when she gave birth, it was to Philly.

Oh my.

And my dad had his only relative, his uncle, so he lived with them for a while. He used to hold Philly in his arms as an infant. When Phil grew up, he used to refer to him as Uncle Sam, not his cousin.

Oh.

Philly was Phil Silver, but people, when he went into show business, they would call him, hey, Silvers. Hey, Silvers.

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[PHONE RINGING]

Hold that thought. So Phil Silver.

Phil was often referred to-- because they called him Silvers-- hey, Silvers, how are you? He kept the S at the end of his name, but the name is Silver, really. The family name in Russia was Srebrenik. Srebrenik in Russian, I was told, means Silver. That's how we got the family name of Silver.

Oh.

My dad's name, Samuel Srebrenik.

Got it. So tell me, your relatives, your aunts, who were so well-off, it was because of one of their husbands, that is the man who went to Columbia to begin with and then invited your aunt to marry him?

Yeah.

What was his name?

George Machunik.

George Machunik.

Yeah.

And it was through him that arms were sent to Israel to Haganah?

All my aunts and uncles were very Zionistic. They sent boatloads of arms and ammunition to them.

I'm just trying to find-- OK, then if there were more family names, could you tell us who they were, the other aunts? Their maiden names were silver, or whatever it is in Russian. I can't pronounce it.

Srebrenik.

Srebrenik.

But they later on, I mean--

They married.

One named Fishman was a last name. Rosita, because they all kept their Latin names from living in Colombia. So my aunt Rosita, which, afterwards, was Rosie.

Right.

She married Heschel Fishman, and so on. But my father's two brothers was Enrique-- Hanok in Hebrew. I mean, those are the names, as I still recall some of them, you know.

And they were Silvers as well. Enrique was a Silver.

Sure. Sure. Gavriel, his other brother. Gavriel-- Gabriel-- was also. Sure.

Let's go back to your cousin Phil, or for you he would have been an uncle. Is that right?

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No, a cousin to me, too. My father's first cousin, but he used to call him Uncle Sam because he remembered him as an infant, when my father-- you know, when he was born.

Yeah.

He was actually my father's first cousin, but he always referred to him as Uncle Sam because as a little infant, my father was a grown person already.

Right.

But when my dad had the store in St. John's place, Phil sent him a big picture of himself. And my dad put it in a window, Phil Silver, my cousin.

Did you meet him? Did you know him?

I met him when he was in-- I forget the show on Broadway. He had me come to see him backstage. I'm trying to remember what the show is. Isn't that something? Come on, Jerry, wake up. Phil Silvers, High Button Shoes. High Button Shoes.

Raz and I, we went backstage. Oh, my wife was, oh. Yeah. And he came through. And he was very nice to us, you know. But when I went into service, he sent me a letter, if you're ever transferred to California, come stay at my home. But I was never shipped there. Yeah.

How interesting. How interesting.

Yeah. Because he had two brothers, Saul, and I forget the other brother's name. The other brother was an accountant, I believe, or a lawyer, one of the two. But when Philly was in show business and in New York, he was the softest touch for anybody who needed money. Hey Phil, you got this?

And his brother-- I forget the brother's name, that was this attorney. I think he was an attorney. He gave up his practice to be his manager, because otherwise everybody on Broadway owed Phil money.

Oh my.

If you needed money, you went to Phil and he gave money all over the place. But his brother couldn't stand it anymore so he became his manager, and because of that, Phil ended up fairly well. But otherwise, he would have been dead broke. He was a soft touch. If you needed money, go to Phil.

Oh my.

But he was very successful in burlesque, and then ultimately in Hollywood.

Yeah, I remember seeing him in films.

Sure. Sure.

Yeah. Forgive me for putting it so bluntly, and it's so self-evident, but how Jewish was your family? That is, how--

Oh, my dad was quite Jewish. My dad was quite Jewish, very learned in that. He went religiously to synagogue on Saturdays. Oh, he was quite religious, to that extent. He was very knowledgeable in that.

And as a youngster, I went to Hebrew school. I was bar mitzvahed and all. I was a member when we lived-- we had our house in Hillcrest. I was a 36-year member of the Hillcrest Jewish Center on Union Turnpike, 183rd Street and Union Turnpike. A beautiful synagogue. I was quite active in that synagogue.

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Was your mother religious as well?

Yes, my mother was religious. Her father was a kosher butcher. My grandparents were extremely orthodox.

And did you know your mother's parents quite well?

My mother's family?

Yes.

Sure, very well. My mother had two brothers. They were very successful in business. And oh, sure. I was very close to my aunts, my uncles, my cousins.

Even though there was only you and your sister in your own family, you really come from a large extended family.

That's right. That's very true.

OK, that's the impression I'm getting.

That's very true. My mother was very close. She had several cousins in this country. We're a close-knit family.

Was your social life mostly in the family or did you have friends outside?

I had friends from the neighborhoods.

OK.

We lived for quite a few years in-- I'm trying to remember the street-- in Brooklyn.

Was it a Jewish neighborhood?

Yeah, it was between-- Sterling Place, Sterling Place between Howard and Ralph. That's where I grew up in my teens. And there were quite a few guys on the block that we were very close, and played a lot of punchbowl in the street and a lot of stickball in the street. And I went to public school, 144 on Howard Avenue. And from there I went to junior high school, 210 on Rochester Avenue. They were good years.

Did you have any friends who weren't Jewish?

Who were what?

Who were not Jewish?

Not that I recall, no. We always ended up with a Jewish crowd. Not that I looked for it, but it just happened that way.

Yeah. Well, a lot of people in different neighborhoods.

Right. The neighborhood at that point was pretty much all Jewish.

So I want to segue a little bit now. In 1933, you were 10 years old, having been born April--

26th, 1920.

Right. And it's in 1933 that Adolf Hitler comes to power in Germany.

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I remember reading about that very strongly, yes.

Tell me about that. Why did it stay in your mind?

Because of the fact that so many Jewish people were being persecuted, it told me, even at that young age, that this was a bad situation. And I used to follow it. My dad got a Jewish newspaper The Day. There were two Jewish papers that I'm aware, The Forward-- called The Forverts in Yiddish-- and The Day, Der Tog. My dad used to read Der Tog.

Did it have some sort of political--

I learned how to read the Jewish newspaper. I used to read the Jewish newspaper religiously, and I followed the happenings that were taking place in Europe at the time.

Interesting.

I was very, very knowledgeable, at that early age, of what was happening in and around Europe.

Well, that's very interesting, because most of the people, I wouldn't say all of them, but many of the people who ended up drafted in the US Army knew of some things going on in Europe, but they didn't really follow.

I was very well versed in that, even at that young age.

And the newspaper that your father subscribed to, Der Tog as you say, did that have a political slant? Forverts was a socialist type of paper. Did Tog have--

Yeah, politically, it was probably quite leftist, I would imagine. Yeah. And also, my dad, by the way-- it just comes to mind to me as we're talking. Jerry, wake up.

It happens. That's normal.

As we're talking, I wanted to tell you, my dad also, in his earlier years, was one of the founders of the Jewish Usher's Union.

What's that?

The Yiddish Stage. Now it comes to me. My dad was an usher at the Jewish Stage, the Parkway Theater on Eastern Parkway. He was an usher at the Second Avenue Theater, the Public Theater in Manhattan. And I grew up, as a youngster, being taken to the Parkway Theater to see the Jewish--

Plays.

Jewish plays. When I was older, I became a substitute usher on weekends. If an usher would take off for the weekend, I would take his place as an usher at the Jewish Theater. I would get $1 for the day I was an usher. A big dollar I used to get. And I saw many, many Jewish shows.

In Yiddish? Were these in Yiddish?

In Yiddish, because I spoke Yiddish. I understood Yiddish, and I enjoyed it. And I remember Jacob Jacobs and his wife.

So your knowledge of Yiddish, it's not something that was augmented by any formal training? It was all from just growing up in the environment?

Exactly. Listening to it, hearing it, and becoming interested in it.

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And so reading the newspaper.

Yeah, I probably could still read it today if I was given it. I think I would.

So that was also training?

It was training, yeah. I was taught how to write it, but that's one thing I forgot very early. But I never forgot the reading of it and the speaker of it.

That makes sense. That makes sense, because writing is the final stage of fluency.

Exactly. But I had no reason to write it, so that's probably why I forgot it that early.

Outside the home and in school, were events in Europe discussed as you were going through--

At home?

Yeah.

When I was still living at home, yeah. I used to hear my parents discuss the events that were taking place. And then, of course, my father was always getting letters from his sisters and brothers, wherever they happened to be. They would also write their letters. Obviously, they would write about the political events that were taking place where they were. So my father was quite versed and interested in knowing the happenings of the day.

So most of them were still in South America in the 1930s, is that right?

Sure, they would have had to be. Yes, they were.

So they were--

But they were beginning to become so successful financially they began their traveling. And they would come to stop in this country to see us, whoever were the ones who were here, and that's how we got to meet some of my aunts.

Tell me this. During World War II, that is, before the United States entered the war in 1944, but in the early years of the war, were your relatives still in South America or had they moved to Palestine by then?

Palestine was formed in what, in '48?

Well, Israel was formed in '48.

I meant Israel in '48.

'48.

They were more, I think, in Europe than they were in the Middle East that I can try to recall, although their parents had been there at a very early age in Palestine. But I think they were already involved in the machinations of the Haganah or the Zionist movement.

This would have been right after World War II, after '45.

Yeah.

But I'm wondering, if they were so aware of what was going on and had the financial means--

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Oh, they were very well aware of what was going on.

So during World War II, as Jews were being slaughtered and trying to get out of Europe, do you know if your relatives--

I had no relatives, to my knowledge, that were ever lost in the Holocaust.

But the relatives that went to South America, do you know if they were involved in any kind of rescue efforts, if they had prepared any papers for anybody?

I'm unaware of any of that. To my knowledge, it was never told me or it was never discussed with me. I don't know that.

OK. OK. But the sense that I'm getting is that your childhood and youth you really are spending in like the golden age of New York Jewish cultural life.

Oh, absolutely.

Yeah.

Oh, completely, completely. I mean, between my dad's knowledge of it, my dad being in the Jewish theater, and seeing Jewish theater as a youngster--

[PHONE RINGING]

Let's cut. Excuse me. We're rolling. What were we talking about before? It was about--

Family.

Family and growing up in a very culturally rich--

Yiddish.

Yiddish.

Atmosphere.

Yeah. As you're going through school, how are your interests developing? In the late '30s, you're already a teenager. What are you doing? What are you studying? What are you interested in at the time?

I actually never really thought about what I would do as an adult, for some very ridiculous reason. I don't know to this very day. I can't tell you that I had an urge to want to be studying law, medicine, you name it. Nothing ever really struck me as, gee, that's what I want to do, for whatever stupid reason.

Did your parents emphasize education?

And I went through school. I did fairly well. I was not the top student nor was I the lowest student. I was an average student. Also, as I was getting older, I became aware of the fact, hey, there's a war going to be breaking out.

So even though--

And that really took my mind off what I would be doing as an adult here. So the war, the events that were taking place, clashed with some of the ideas that I had growing up. Yeah, some of the guys that I knew, even though we were in the same atmosphere, some of them became successful accountants, law, whatever. I, unfortunately, did not fall into that realm. I did end up doing fairly well as a sales person. And when I got out of service--

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Well, that's after the war.

Yeah.

OK, I'm still talking before the war, but if you want to continue, go ahead.

Well, before the war, I went into service at the very beginning of '43.

OK. Between 1939, when you would have been 16 years old, something like that--

I was still in school.

Right. So World War I, excuse me, World War II broke out on September 1st, 1939. You would have been 16 and a half.

That's right.

Do you remember hearing or reading about it?

I was very interested. Those things interested me greatly, what was taking place. Oh, yes. I read the newspapers very, very, very-- there wasn't a day went by that I didn't read or listen to the radio to what was taking-- no, that to that extent, I was quite interested and very knowledgeable, for my age, to what was taking place in those years. Yeah.

So when you found out about the war breaking out, was there also news at that time of what was happening to European Jews, whether they were in Poland or in France or in the Netherlands, in those first four years, from '39 till '43 when you were in the Army? But in that interim period, how much knowledge-- I guess I'm trying to get a sense of how much knowledge was there about what was happening to the Jews.

I personally was knowledgeable about it. A lot of the fellows that I knew, my friends, was never discussed amongst us. But myself personally, I followed that very closely. I knew of no one in the family that was being persecuted, but it interested me to know of it. I was good about that.

So tell me, do you remember what it is you knew about those events? Did you know of disappearances? Did you know of concentration camps?

Yes, I knew of that, as much as I could read about or hear about on the radio. Yes, I followed that.

I guess one of the three reasons I'm asking is how much news was there about these things? How much could there have been information? I mean, were newspapers writing about the camps?

About the camps themselves, I cannot say that I know of anything that was intimately taking place in the camps. What I did know was the fact that there were camps.

OK. OK.

Beyond that, I knew of no one that wrote about what took place in the camps.

Being here in New York, there were a lot of German-Jewish refugees coming to New York right after Kristallnacht or before Kristallnacht. I mean, they were fleeing Germany. Did your path ever cross with a refugee from Germany?

No. Not that I recall. German-Jews, no.

OK. So it wouldn't have been that you could have found things out, even in a very personal way, through some kind of

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contact?

No.

OK.

No. Never got that close to me.

Let's cut again.

Rolling.

OK. So by 1939, you're in high school. By 1943, you're already then about 20 years old. When did you finish high school, and did you work at all?

January 1940, I graduated Thomas Jefferson High School. And Raz graduated in 1941.

That your wife?

We went to the same high school. I didn't know her then, but we went to the same high school.

And what did you do afterwards?

In 1940, when I graduated high school, oh, I think I-- that's a very good question. What did I do? I don't think I went to-- no, I--

Did you work in your dad's store?

I worked in dad's store. Right, that's correct. I worked in dad's store and I was ushering on weekends at the Jewish theater. And basically I knew that I'm going to be drafted into the Army, so it was just a sense of waiting until I was called in.

So tell me, were people just absolutely sure that the US was going to enter the war? Is that the conversation of those years?

Oh, sure. It was a God-given thing that it was going to take place. Yeah, sure.

OK.

Listening to President Roosevelt talk about it, I knew that we were going to go into war. It was common knowledge.

Do you remember where you were when you learned of Pearl Harbor?

1941.

December, 1941. Do you remember hearing of the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

Oh, by all means, of course. Of course. It's all everyone spoke about. Yeah, it was common knowledge. We're going to be there any day. We're all going in. We're going to fight the Japs.

So when you were waiting to be drafted, you really wouldn't know whether you'd go to the Pacific Theater--

No, in those years, you never knew that. You never knew that. You had the chance to volunteer, if you wanted to, to go into the Navy or the Air Force, to be an air cadet, and so on. But as a nice Jewish boy, I wasn't interested in leaving

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home. I was waiting to be called. And mommy and daddy wanted me that way.

Of course. Of course. [SPEAKING YIDDISH]

[LAUGHTER]

And what did you speak at home, English with one another or Yiddish?

Basically English. Basically English. But if my parents were speaking to themselves, it would usually be in Yiddish, and occasionally an English word was thrown in. That was my normal way of listening. It never dawned on me that they should only speak English and all. To me, that's the way that they should speak.

OK. So when were you finally drafted?

I was drafted in February or March of '43. I was called earlier, but when I went to the draft board-- it was probably at the very beginning of '43, but they didn't reach my number until around February or March, and I was drafted then and was sent to Camp Upton out in Long Island.

And from there, I was shipped to Fort Dearborn, Illinois. And it ended up as a 40 millimeter anti-aircraft battalion unit. 397 AAA automatic weapon, 40 millimeter, anti-aircraft.

Wow.

And it was very interesting. It was great because it was right on the shores of Lake Michigan, and Fort Dearborn happened to be a regular Army post that went back to the early 20th century. It was a beautiful, beautiful regular Army post on the outskirts of Washington, on the shores of Lake Michigan.

Outskirts of Washington? Was there a town called Washington?

No, did I say Washington?

Yeah.

On the shores of Lake Michigan. On the outskirts of Chicago, excuse me.

OK.

What did I say, Washington? My God.

It's OK.

And it was great. As a matter of fact, the commanding officer, the colonel, happened to be the former basketball coach of DePaul University, which is out in the Chicago area. But it was really great. I enjoyed it because on weekends, when we got our passes, I would spend one weekend in Chicago and another weekend we would go to Milwaukee.

Oh, wow.

Oh, it was really great. Chicago was a great soldier town, because when you went into a bar, they would not let you pay for anything. Because as a soldier-- Chicago was really a sailor town because it had the-- what was the base of-- the Great Lakes Naval Station was there.

So it was a sailor town, loaded with sailors, but very few soldiers. So when we went into a bar, hey, you don't pay for drinks. It was really nice. And I liked Chicago very much. It was great.

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That's quite a compliment, coming from a New Yorker.

Yeah. It was a great town. They treated us nicely. Milwaukee was nice, and I liked it.

Did you, in the service-- excuse me for just interrupting here-- did you meet other people who were not Jewish background? Was this the first time you really were--

Yes, the first time. Right. I had no problem. We assimilated very well.

OK.

Yeah. We didn't look at each other as you're not Jewish or you are Jewish. No, that never even came to play.

Was there any anti-Semitism that you ever felt?

Not that I was aware of.

OK.

At least not directed at me then. It was directed at me-- I'll tell you about it-- during the war. If you read that thing, I'd like you to see that.

OK, we'll talk about this incident that you're talking about later on.

Later on? OK.

OK. But remind me of it if when it comes to that area. So this is the first time you're really intensively involved with meeting people who are of different backgrounds.

Absolutely. But basically, my outfit was basically a New York outfit. We all were shipped out at Camp Upton. So the guys that I met, some from Brooklyn, from the Bronx, some from Amsterdam, New York, upstate New York. It was a New York outfit, so we all assimilated very well. Our backgrounds were fairly similar, being New Yorkers.

Right. Right. So tell me this, how did you end up being in that anti-aircraft training? How did that happen, that you became a machine gunner, anti-aircraft machine gunner, right?

Yeah.

Was it something you were assigned to?

Yeah. They told us you're going to be a 40 millimeter anti-aircraft unit. We didn't choose it. We were told what are were going to be.

Got it.

Yeah.

OK. And how long were you in that base close to Chicago?

That's a very good question. I think we were there pretty much until we were going to go overseas. Oh, no. Before we went overseas, believe it or not, we were shipped out to West Hampton, Long Island. At that time, there was no such thing as the Hamptons that we know of today.

There were two houses in West Hampton. And I saw them, and I was told one was owned by the Vanderbilt family, the

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very wealthy Vanderbilt family, and one other I don't know what, but extremely very highly social alto--

Family.

Family. That was solely what the Hamptons were, West Hampton Beach. And we were sent there because we were going to do anti-aircraft training. Planes that were in the air were towing targets behind them, and we were firing at these targets that the planes were towing. That's how we were being trained to fire at airplanes that were going to attack us.

How did it go? Did you guys hit them all?

It went fairly well until one of our guns started almost hitting the planes that were towing the targets. At that point, that was the end of the firing. We almost shot down our own plane. But that's how we did our training. And the Hamptons, West Hampton Beach, had two houses, period. There were no such thing as going to the Hamptons in those years.

So the training's on this beautiful beach.

Yeah. And after that, we were pretty much sent out across to England.

On what kind of a ship?

I don't remember the name of it. I remember sleeping in a hold. We all slept in a hold. We landed in Glasgow, Scotland.

Did you have any issue or thought of mines as you were crossing?

Yeah. I was extremely seasick. It's the only thing that interested me, was puking into my helmet.

Oh, gosh.

Fill it up, empty it, and fill it up again. I was not the greatest sailor in the world. But we landed in Glasgow, Scotland, and I remember traveling by Jeep from Glasgow to Wales. Wales, super-- super-- I forget the name of where we were, but it was a very colorful, beautiful area in Wales. And from Wales, we did our training. I didn't know it at the time, but we were being trained to land, to go over.

How were you being trained? What was the training like?

They would take us to an area that had water. We were put into small boats, as a matter of fact. And they would take us out and then bring us in toward the beach. And as it turned out, that was preparation for landing on a beach. But at that point in time, we had no idea what that was all about, for D-day. We had several months of that training, and I really liked it because--

Well, what did it involve? You're going on the beach in these boats. Were they similar types of boats that were used in the actual--

Yeah, but we never had our anti-aircraft guns with us for some very reason, which I never did realize. But we set up our guns. We did very little target practice before we left England that I'm aware of.

So the training was basically how to land--

But what happened was for D-day, I think it must have been 50 or 75 of us were detached from our outfit. I was one of them. And I was told that I would be attached, I think I was the 16th infantry first division.

Mm-hmm.

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I wasn't told why I was being transferred to that outfit, but I was told that I am being transferred to that outfit. We couldn't ask questions of why, but we were told that's where you're going to be attached to. As it turned out, we were attached to them because after we hit D-day onto the Omaha Beach, we were then--

The plan was after the beach was secured, they were going to build a jetty that was going to go out from the beach onto the English Channel. And on that jetty, they were going to then put anti-aircraft guns so that the guns then that would be on the jetty would be able to protect, in case the Germans were going to strafe the beach. Our guns were going to be able to provide anti-aircraft fire for the beach.

But you didn't know that at the time?

Right. We did not know it at the time, but after I landed on the beach, I found out why that jetty was going to be beat and why we were then transferred to the 16th infantry. We were going to be the guys that were going to be on the jetty to fire the guns, in case the Germans strafed the beach.

OK.

It never really took place because half the guns ended up in the English Channel. I saw the jetty after it was built, but I was never on the jetty. I never manned it. And afterward, I was then shipped back to my old outfit.

OK. So when you were transferred to this special unit--

I remember when we left England on an LST.

What's that?

Landing ship tank it was called. It was a boat that carried tanks, equipment, and so on. And from that boat, as we were in the Channel going to cross a D-Day, when we reached a certain point in the channel, we were told that you would climb down a rope ladder from that boat and land onto an LCVP, which was a landing craft. It was a small boat that you climbed off the big boat, down a rope ladder onto this landing craft.

These landing craft then circled for six hours in the channel before the flares went up, were shot up into the sky, which meant now these landing craft could go to the beach. But in those six hours, we all puked our guts up, because on these little boats on the channel, I don't have to tell you, seasickness took over.

Oh my. Oh my. So there you are in the middle of the ocean.

Middle of the English Channel.

Yeah.

And then we landed on the beach.

Hang on.

And got blown to hell.

Hang on. I want to get there, but I want to precede it with a few questions. So by the point that you're put on that first big boat with the tanks on it, do you then know at that point that this is the invasion, this is D-day?

No, not to my knowledge. But we all knew that something was taking place. What was taking place, where were we going I did not know. None of us knew that we're going to cross the Channel and go to Omaha Beach in Normandy. No.

We knew something was taking place, and we knew that because of the equipment that we shot. But the reason being

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there-- we were not told you'll be going on to Normandy, no.

What were you told?

We were told that we're going into action, but we didn't know where or what.

You didn't know how big--

No. We did not know it, no.

OK. And so when you're in the English Channel, there's no danger from any German artillery or any German guns or planes.

Yes. I lost one of my friends, Jimmy Speredakus. On the English Channel, a German U-boat, or some German ship, attacked one of our boats. And I found out afterward one of the guys that I knew that was on that-- a very good friend of mine, I always missed him, Jimmy Speredakus.

We used to call him, hey, Greek. That was his nickname. He came from one area. Which is the Greek area here? Astoria. That's where he came from. Jimmy Speredakus. Handsome as could be, the nicest guy in the world. He and I were very close friends. We were real buddies. I think I shed a tear that day when I found out that Jimmy is gone.

And so that was even in the middle of the English Channel?

Yeah, we were attacked. I know of no other boats that were hit or lost or whatever.

So out there, was this the middle of the night when you were climbing down those ropes?

No, I think it was 6:30 in the morning.

OK.

Yeah. H hour was 6:30.

H hour means what?

H hour means the hour that we hit the beach. H hour, 6:30 in the morning, were the flares went up and we were told, get these boats heading toward the beach.

But then before then, for the six hours previously, you were circling in the channel, is that correct?

Yeah. We were circling in the Channel. It was pretty dark. Yeah. But as the dawn broke, we were told, hit the beach.

And so what did you see?

And that's what happened. A lot of these landing craft, which were stretched all across, some of them were hit by shellfire before they even-- I know when I hit the water, I was pretty much probably waist deep in water when I got off that landing craft. And then I remember seeing, hey, we're being shot at.

You know, it was noisy as hell. It was firing going on, the shells hitting the water, guys being hit by bullets, and so on. I remember ducking down behind-- there were things in the water. I forget what they were called, but they had mines on them. If a bullet hit that mine, it blew up and all.

As I was being in the water, I was helping guys who were hit. I would reach over to try and pick them up and help them, and so on and so forth, and help myself get onto the beach. And as I was almost on the beach, I remember, geez, my

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foot felt stiff. And I looked down and I saw some blood, not terribly. But I realized that I was hit.

And my foot felt a little numb, but I said, hey, I still have feeling. I'm OK. I'm OK. I'm wounded. And I remember my arm also had a couple of pieces of shrapnel. I forget which arm it was. My left foot I know, my thigh.

And I was able to crawl onto the beach. And I kept crawling up onto the beach until I reached the seawall. And once I reached the seawall, the Germans that were up on the top of the beach at the cliff looking down, they couldn't see me there, because when I was up to the seawall, behind me, when I turned my back, the whole beach was behind me.

So you had made it?

I made it up to the seawall and I was able to crawl up to it. And then as more and more of the guys were able to get up there, the whole seawall was full of guys that were able to get onto the beach. And once I got onto that, then I turned around and looked and see what I could do to help others get up to it.

So what I did is I crawled around as much as I could. I was able to pull wounded guys up with me. And then I realized that then somebody said, hey, what if they attempt to gas us, the Germans? Do we have gas masks?

I had my gas mask, and I made sure that everybody that I-- do you have a gas mask? Do you have a gas mask? So what I did is I crawled around from guy to guy, if the guy was wounded, I said, do you have your gas mask? Do you have your canteen of water?

And if they said no, I crawled around to several dead guys. I knew they were dead already. I took their gas masks off them. I took their canteens off them. And I went, here's a canteen. Here's a gas mask. I did as much as I could.

Even I remember this. Lieutenant Ralston, he was even a nice guy. He was in my outfit. I don't think he was on my landing craft, but when I saw him on the beach, I saw he was badly wounded.

So I said, do you have a gas mask? I made sure he had a gas mask and a canteen. He was the only officer that I knew on the beach. I think he was ultimately evacuated. I tried to find out later on. I think he was evacuated to England.

To my knowledge, he lived. He didn't die, at least as far as I know. But a couple of the other guys in my outfit that I saw I saw badly wounded. I think most of them died.

Anybody you knew?

Outside of Jimmy that was hit on the Channel, I didn't know the other guys. Now, what happened with this ultimately, later on after the beach was secure-- oh, no?

OK. Hang on.

All right.

But what you're pointing to is a framed letter. I'm just saying that for the camera. And the letter reads-- let me see if I can pick it up here. We will film it later. But let me read it and then you can explain what it was.

Go right ahead.

It is headquarters 49th anti-aircraft artillery brigade. It's signed, it's dated, excuse me, 9th of July, 1944. And the subject says, "Commendation." And it's to Private First Class Gerald Silver, 32822439 397th AAA W Battalion, APO 054 United States Army.

"Number 1, on the occasion of the invasion of the French coast, 6th of June, 1944, I desire to commend you on your exemplary and magnificent behavior under enemy fire. Number 2, through your unselfish and heroic actions, you were

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responsible for saving the lives of wounded comrades by rescuing them from the rising tide on the invasion beach. Your action under the prevailing conditions bespeak the highest credit to you and your service.

Number 3, a copy of this letter will be sent to the Office of the Adjutant General, Washington DC by this headquarters." And it's signed by EW Timberlake, Brigadier General, USA commanding. What an honor, and congratulations.

The reason that this came into play, after the beach was secured, a couple of weeks after that, I was told there was a meeting of officers and non-coms to decide if any medals are to be given out. I was told this by someone who was I was friendly with who was at that meeting.

When my name was mentioned to be given the Bronze Star and, I remember, stripes to be made-- I was a PFC then. I was to be given the Bronze Star and stripes to become a buck sergeant. When my name was mentioned, one of the officers said, not the Jew boy.

This is what I was told by my friend. When I said to him, who was it, he would not tell me which officer said that. In lieu of that Bronze Star and getting the stripes to be a sergeant, this ultimately is what I received. That's the story with this thing.

How bitter. How bitter.

That was the anti-Semitism that I ever ran into in the Army.

Yeah. I'm so sorry.

But I value this more than any medal.

It is quite a distinction. I mean, without knowing the back story, it speaks of such honor.

Yes. I helped as many of the guys that I could.

And they lived to testify and to say that. I want to finish up before we break about why wasn't that jetty ever built?

Excuse me?

Why wasn't that jetty ever built? Why wasn't that jetty ever built, the ones that you would fire from?

That's a very good question. I think they realized afterwards that the beach was so secure that the Germans were nowhere near able to strafe it or anything. Because right after that, we started moving inland across Normandy, and there was no reason afterward to build that jetty because the Germans were nowhere near us. We had knocked out most of their aircraft. They had very few planes left already.

Also, the very fact that those of us who hit the beach would, for months, speak of the problem that General Eisenhower and his brain staff screwed up on. When we were crossing the English Channel, the sky was black with our planes, who were flying overhead, going inland to bomb the Germans inland. They never ever, ever strafed the German positions overlooking the beach.

We did not have to lose 3,000 dead and 9,000 wounded that day on D-Day. That was the biggest screw up of the war. It was never publicized. I never read about it. I never heard about it, but we who were there saw it.

Those German positions overlooking the beach, if they were strafed and bombed that morning, we would be able to walk right onto the beach instead of crawling on and blood. I can attest to that fact. I saw it with my own eyes.

You saw all those--

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That was the screw up of D-Day. Never never, to my knowledge publicized, but we who laid on that beach in blood knew of it. Those Germans on a cliff were looking right down on us and just shooting at us.

Like fish in a barrel.

That's right. They should have been blown to head that morning. The bombers were going overhead. I never saw so many planes in my life as that morning, all going inland to bomb Germany. Did they-- go ahead, you were going to say something.

No, that's OK.

How did you make it up that seawall?

I crawled onto it. I crawled up the beach.

Yes, and then after that?

Oh, after that, once we realized that-- I forget which unit it was or which outfit it was, but they were able to blast a hole through the barbed wire, and whatever other things that were there that the Germans had put there. They were able to blast that apart.

And once that was blasted apart, the guys were able to go through. And by that time-- also, what saved us on the beach-- I just realized it. Excuse me for going backwards.

It's OK.

But I just realized there were two destroyers going up and back in the English Channel. I believe one was an English destroyer and one, I don't think it was an American destroyer. I think it was a French destroyer. By going up and back on the beach, in the Channel, they were firing onto the cliffs where the Germans were and knocking out these German gun positions. That is what saved all of us who were able to reach the beach safely.

But these destroyers, when they knocked out the German gun positions, after blasting it was through, all of us on the beach were then able to move inland and start to get inland, and then--

[PHONE RINGING]

--the Germans were knocked out then.

Let's cut.

Rolling.

All right. So you are saying that some of the destroyers also helped save lives on the beach.

Those two destroyers saved the whole beach.

OK. Tell me, the Rangers were a very special unit.

I did not know any of them, no. I assumed they were Rangers who were at the end of the beach, at this Pointe du Hoc, who were scaling it to get up to the very top. I was able to see not too much of it because I crawled a ways.

And then when I saw it, then I crawled back the other way. That's it. But that's the only thing that I know about of that end of the beach. But my end of the beach is where we saw a lot of our action.

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Now, what happened was after the beach was secured and the rest of my-- because only some of us had been detached from my outfit. The rest of my outfit still had to be brought over from England.

[PHONE RINGING]

Give me this phone right here.

OK.

I'm sorry.

That's OK. It's OK.

Now, what happened was those of us who were able to survive on our unit, until the rest of our unit could be brought over from England, we acted as beach masters. In other words, the officers, or whoever was responsible for the landing there, they would tell us which outfits are being brought over from England to land on to France onto the beach.

So as a beach master, I was told, when this and this outfit last, tell them to take that road to go inland. This road, go here, go there. And I did that for a week or two. Every morning, I was given a list of which units are coming across the channel, where to send them, and so on and so forth.

Because we were already starting to move in across Normandy. And so I did that for a while. It was interesting to see that. And then when our outfit landed, we rejoined them and we spent the rest of the war going inland-- France, Belgium, Germany, Holland.

I'm going to want to get to that, but I still want to step back a little bit. I want to step back to that moment, to those moments, when you are--

Let me say this.

OK.

When I was wounded on the beach, realized I was wounded, I was lucky enough to spot two guys who had medical. And I called them and I said, I have some blood here, and so on. Thankfully, one of them happened to be actually a doctor. So he pulled my pants down and he said, oh, you have shrapnel here. He said, I think I can do something for you.

Sure enough, he took out what I would call a plier. It was a miracle instrument. And he was able to pluck out as much as the shrapnel that he saw on my leg. And he took out of my arm. He did that.

Then he put some kind of a sulfur or whatever onto the wound and he bandaged me. And he said, now you'll be OK. And he took my name, my unit, my outfit and everything. And sure enough, later on during the war, I got the Purple Heart--

[GASP]

--for being wounded. And I'll show it to you. It's hanging in my room. Because I am a Purple Heart soldier. I mean, I was wounded.

Oh my God.

I often wondered what would have happened had I not stopped him on the beach, if these wounds would have been gone. But actually, what did happen, way after the war, 20, 25 years later, it did affect the nerves down my leg.

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Did it?

And that's what caused a drop foot. And now both of them are that way, because I use this leg so often. It's acting as two legs instead of one, that this also is now a drop foot, which is why I need the walker. I cannot walk without them. If I stood up and tried to walk, I'd fall on my face. I can't walk.

How long have you had that situation?

Oh, it started 20, 25 years afterwards. But then I started to use a cane for a while. And then I went to the VA and I had them examine me, and that's how, ultimately, I ended up with an 80% service-connected disability rating. Actually, in my own heart I feel now I deserve 100%, but I don't have the strength to go to the VA and be examined and go to doctor to doctor. I'm not that strong anymore.

And now you walk, you say, with the brace, that is, your foot has a brace?

Yeah, the foot brace. A doctor told me to put this brace on, and this is in--

And it helps you?

It helps me a great deal, sure.

So that's one thing that happened. When that doctor came over to you, were you still in danger from the bunkers above?

No. I think when I saw him, it may have been the next morning. We all slept on the beach that night, the next night. No, when I saw him it was the next day. Most of the firing had ceased.

I mean, it's hard question to remember the answer, but do you know how long you guys were under fire on the beach?

Oh, for hours. Hours on end.

Yeah?

Hours on end that first day. It was early in the morning. We were under fire all day. And until those two boats were able to knock out some of these gun positions, then we were fairly safe then. By that time, we were able to even bring down some prisoners already.

OK. So until then, you were all kind of huddled at that--

Oh, sure. We were all at the seawall.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And the Rangers you saw climbing, was that after the gunships, the destroyers?

Yeah.

OK. OK. I have to come to a hard part. Most of us who were born later had no idea of what the impact was of the experience of D-Day and what these young guys, young kids sometimes, faced in Normandy.

And the closest we ever came to it is through Steven Spielberg's eyes when he filmed Saving Private Ryan. It was the only glimpse. So I want to ask you, what was it like? And was anything accurate, or not?

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Now, before Saving Private Ryan, there was this movie, The Longest Day.

Correct.

When that picture was released, I happened to be going to the VA. And I'd never forget that day, because I had to see a medical doctor, a neurologist, a psychiatrist. When I came to the psychiatrist's office that day, I started yelling and screaming at the top of my voice, how could they have the nerve to make that picture and bring all these memories back to us?

Do you realize what that did to us? I was screaming and crying. And this neurologist, this psychiatrist, easy, Mr. Silver. Calm down. It was a movie.

I said, what do you mean a movie? Do you realize the memories it's bringing? I think they must have heard me all over that big veterans hospital on 23rd Street and First Avenue, the VA hospital. And I think it was afterward that part of that 80% disability rating is from that screaming that I did that day, The Longest Day.

Now, when the movie comes out occasionally now, I watch it for about 10 minutes. And I shut the goddamn thing off and I cry for an hour. And then, of course, Saving Private Ryan, I can only watch it for about five, 10 minutes. I have to stop it because I get very-- I don't sleep that night. I cry a little.

To this very day and some of these things, I still cry. I don't sleep for a week. It brings back too many memories. I see faces that I forgot, names that I forgot. It doesn't do me any good. I like the acting, but I can't watch it.

Yeah, well, for those of us who have never been in that, it's vicarious.

Oh, sure.

But for somebody who has, it's real.

Yeah. Oh, yeah, it's very real.

And when you were huddled against that wall, what happened to all those other bodies of people who didn't make it?

Ultimately, they brought in a graves registration. I forget what they were called. Believe it or not, it was an all Black unit. In those days, that's what they used these poor Black guys for. And they were the ones who collected all the bodies. And ultimately, they were all buried in that cemetery overlooking the beach.

How many--

I was in that-- I was at the service when that cemetery opened that day, and that's where all the guys that were lost on the beach are laying there today. I was in the observance, the ceremony-- I forget the name of the cemetery-- overlooking the beach.

I forget how many years ago. I convinced Raz, my wife, I would like to go back in Normandy to see the beach and go over the cemetery and see how many of the guys I knew are there. We had reservations. I forget what year it was. We had reservations to fly there. Oh, and I think Raz took sick. I forget why. I had to cancel that flight.

But I often, often had feelings to want to go back to see the Omaha Beach. I never did go, but I would have liked to have gone and walked the cemetery. I think it would have done me good, but I never did go.

So when you were there at the beginning, when you say there was a service, how soon after--

I don't really remember how soon after the beach was secured that the cemetery was built or formed, whatever you call it. I wish I could remember, to tell you. I don't know how long after D-Day it was.

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But it was before you moved out further inwards?

I think we were probably a good part across Normandy before that service took place. I'm sure that many of our men had gone inland already across Normandy. But I don't remember how soon after D-Day they started to form the cemetery. I know it's on a cliff overlooking the beach.

What is it in your mind that makes it hard to speak about that particular ceremony?

Because that's where I know a lot of the guys that I may have known are laying, and even some that I didn't know, but who I helped on the beach. I helped quite a few that day. I'm not a doctor, but I know a lot of them that I helped did not survive. And that's what always makes me want to go back. While I didn't know them personally, I do know that that's where they're resting, and that's the feeling that I always had.

Were they already buried by the time the ceremony happened? Were there already markings?

Yes. The day that I was there, yeah, many were buried. In other words, this beach, this cemetery, had already been-- I didn't know it, but that cemetery was already being formed, and that's where a lot of the bodies were brought.

From your unit, how many people made it and how many people didn't, in rough numbers, do you know?

Only a handful of my unit was lost. We were lucky. We were lucky. But poor Jimmy wasn't lucky, the guy that was hit on the Channel. No, we were lucky. Most of us survived. Wounded, but survived.

And a lot of us, believe it or not, were so spread out that morning when we hit the beach that most of my outfit were not with me. We took all along the length of the beach. A lot of the First Division that had to be on my side were on one end of the beach.

The 29th infantry that was not supposed to be near us was with us. That's what happened that morning. The boats were all spread out. And the way it was planned did not take place that day that it happened.

When did you realize that this is not only that you're seeing action, but that you are taking part in this entirely historic occasion?

I knew enough that on the other side of the Channel was France. That's when I realized that I was in France. I knew I was in France that morning. I didn't know what part of France, but then I as the beach was secured, then I was told we are in Normandy. I didn't know what part of France I was in.

And you didn't know yet that it was D-Day, or did you already know that?

Well, it dawned on us, hey, this is D-Day and we're in France. Where in France I couldn't begin to tell you. I didn't know of where I was. But we were then told you are in Normandy, and that's it. Things began to gel, but it took a while.

When the burial detail came by, you say African Americans took part and they were the ones assigned for this. Were the bodies all on the beach? Were some in the water?

Some of us went down. I was one of them that did go down the next day and I pulled bodies out of the water onto the beach. But I didn't do that much of it. Other guys did a lot of it that were able to do it more.

Is it because of your wounds and stuff?

Yeah. I didn't want to open up the wounds or anything. But I pulled a couple, but not many. I wasn't that much of a hero then.

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Sad. Gruesome. Young people, you know, gone.

Most were my age. Most were young guys. When I met a guy that was 30, I would stare at him. Most were in the early 20s.

How long did you stay on the beach itself?

No more than a couple of weeks at the most, at the most. I mean, we pitched some tents. We were sleeping in tents at night on the beach. And as the outfits came in, they set up a field kitchen so we had some food to eat, whatever they gave us. I don't remember. We had water.

What happened with the German prisoners that were captured?

I remember that when they captured the German prisoners, they marched them along the beach. And I remember going that day to see what they looked like. And I remember walking up to a couple of them and saying, [GERMAN]. I wanted them to see what a Jew was.

They were too scared. They didn't even turn their head to look at me. But I remember grabbing a couple of them by the arm and banging them and saying, [GERMAN]. And they would look at me and turn their heads away. It just made me feel good that day to do it. I would look at them closely.

But I do remember, when we were inland already and doing some of the fighting, I remember one German officer near me, I saw he had his pistol on his-- I took his pistol off. It was a nine millimeter revolver. I carried it with me during the war, and I remember bringing it home.

And when I showed it to my wife, she said, Jerry, I don't want a gun in the house. So I took it down to the basement. I threw away all the ammunition in the garbage. And I kept it for a long time. And then in the house, I would never show the kids where it was. And I remember at that time, the police said, anyone that turns in a gun, no questions asked.

So I brought it to the 77 precinct in Fresh Meadows. And when I brought it in, I put it down on the table. When these cops saw a nine millimeter gun, look at this thing. They all ran to it. And one of the cops took it, I remember. But I got rid of it. Raz felt better that it was out of the house.

How many years had you kept it?

Oh, I kept it for a long time, till we bought the house. Because originally, we lived in Glen Oaks before we bought the house. We bought the house in '59.

So until '59 you had it?

Yeah.

Yeah. And was that German officer a prisoner of war?

Yeah. Yeah. I don't know if he was a captain. I don't remember his rank, but he was an officer.

Did you go up on top of the cliff and see some of those bunkers that they were shooting off of?

I remember passing it, but they were all blasted to hell. I did look at them, yes. I didn't go into it. I didn't want to go into them. I didn't know what was laying in there. But I did look down at them and they were pretty well hit.

Is there anything else about D-Day itself, about what happened in your experience, and the things that you saw that you want to add?

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No. That was pretty much it. The firing died down slowly, slowly. And it was just a matter of gathering our wits and being able to get inland as quickly as we can and get off the beach. But as the units were coming, they were all shipped inland, inland, inland, and that's how we started to cross France.

I think what we'll do--

But most of my recollection was the D-Day recollection.

Yeah.

I was happy that I can tell you as much as I recall.

Well, I'm very grateful.

Yeah, but I'm calm now. I was a little-- before, but I'm all right.

Well, I'm grateful--

I'm glad I was able to recall some of the things for you.

Thank you.

I'm just sorry I've forgotten them, but I recalled as much as I could for you.

Well, I'm grateful on two accounts, one that you recalled it and one that you were a part of that force that saved us.

I'm glad I'm here to tell you about it.

Yeah. What we'll do right now is we'll break and then we'll come back later to talk about the rest of the things that you saw in Europe, OK? We're going to break.

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Gerald silver. And before the break, we were talking about D-Day and being on Omaha Beach. And before we go further, I wanted just to ask a few more things about the landing itself and about some of the things that happened.

When the boats were open, did you have a gun with you? Did you have other kinds of equipment? What were you all carrying?

Well, we all had either carbines or rifles. Some wore pistols, ammunition belts, anything and everything that you could possibly need once you hit the beach. But unfortunately, so many of us landed in either chest-deep water-- and quite a few, believe it or not, depending where they landed and how much equipment they had, quite a few drowned.

From that?

Yes. There were many people, many guys, who drowned because the equipment they had carrying and how far back they were from the beach.

So they were so laden down.

You see, what happened was if the fire was really tremendous, some of these guys who were captaining these LCVPS, when they saw the shelling was real hard, they said, get off now. Get off now. They didn't want to go in any further, not realizing that they were making guys get into the water over their shoulders. And many guys literally drowned.

What a terrifying--

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It was a disaster.

Yeah.

It was a disaster. Thank goodness for those two destroyers, otherwise it would have been complete failure.

When you started pulling bodies out of the water, were there any people who were still alive?

Oh, sure. They were wounded. They were moaning. You knew if the person was alive. You didn't have to be a doctor to know that. You could tell.

And was this still under fire from the cliff head?

The first couple of hours were. After I did it once or twice, I realized that it's time to stop. Don't be a hero. But it also bothered me to see people in need of help. But as the day wore on, and as more and more of these guys on the top were killed, it made it easier to get down on the beach. Instead of crawling, I was able to almost run down to the beach. And my leg didn't bother me all that much.

And this was before it was patched up?

Some of this I did before and some afterward.

Were other people doing the same thing?

Oh, sure. I was no hero. A lot of guys--

Well, everybody was a hero.

A lot of guys were looking to help each other, sure.

And what about those crossbars? I think that called them asparagus, those iron things on the beach?

Oh, those are the things that I-- initially, when I got off my landing craft, I hid behind one of those, not knowing that there was a mine attached to each one of these. That's what the Germans did. And if one of their shells hit that mine, the whole thing blew up. But who knew it at the time? I thought, hey, I could hide behind this.

Oh my.

It was later on that we realized what these things were.

I mean, once the beach was secure, the place was still mined, correct?

No, once the beach was secured, as more or more units were brought in from the mainland, you began to clear everything up.

OK.

Sure. There were specific outfits brought in to do nothing but just straighten out the beach.

I see.

Then after that, it was up to everybody to get inland and cross France and go after the Germans.

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So tell me, when you found your unit, that is, they came over later and you were a beach master and were directing people and you rejoined them, what were your next orders?

I don't remember exactly. We were given specific places to go to across France.

Where were you sent?

We were in France. We were from France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, all of these places that we would set up our units in defense of certain activities that were going to take place, certain maneuvers, certain battles. And we were supplying the anti-aircraft protection that they may have needed.

So tell me, did you face that kind of action still in France?

Very little. There was very little German aircraft to fire at. We fired at a few, but hardly any. And once we cleared the beach, my outfit, literally, while we were part of the American Army in all these countries, we did not see that much direct action. There was some, but not continuous action.

And tell me, when you were traveling through France, did you have any interaction with local people?

I tried to on my own. Yeah, at times I would, sure. If we were going through a town and we would stop-- I remember knocking on a door one time. I think I was asking them to go to a bathroom, if they had a bathroom. But in the interim, I would speak to them in my broken French.

And how did people respond to you?

Oh, they loved Americans. The French, they idolized us. There was no question about that. I had no problem in France.

Did you have any in Belgium or Germany or Holland or the Netherlands?

No. In Belgium, I think we saw some action in Belgium. And in Holland, no. We didn't have problems in Holland. They were nice people, and the Dutch, I liked them. I'm trying to remember where we-- oh. At the time, the Battle of the Bulge was taking place.

The Germans had dropped a parachute battalion, and several of them were picked up near our outfit. I personally didn't see them until they were captured. But some in our outfit did capture some German paratroopers, and I went to look at them.

And what did you see? What kind of impression did you have?

They were hard-looking guys. They didn't look at us. We put them behind barbed wire until they could be taken away to some prisoner of war camp. But they were tough-looking guys. The think where I didn't like, I was in Dachau--

We will talk about that, too.

--shortly after it was liberated. And as much as I saw during the war, what I saw here is hard to describe to you.

I want to hold that thought for a minute. Let me get back to the military actions. I take it that from the time you were drafted until you hit the beach in Normandy, that whole time when you were in military service, did you have the opportunity to read newspapers, to hear what the news was of how the war was going?

Sure.

OK. And what about the situation of what was happening to the Jews?

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I don't recall seeing a paper when we were in England already.

OK.

But prior to that, sure. When I was in the States, I was able to read a paper.

Was there more news of what was happening to the Jews?

That's a good question. Not particularly, no.

OK.

No.

And I know that during the break, you remember the town that you had been in in Wales.

Weston-super-Mare.

Weston-super-Mare.

That was the name of the town in Wales.

OK.

Picturesque, beautiful little town.

OK. You also said that you had some sort of excursions near Bristol, that there was some kind of activity going on? What was that?

The Bristol Channel, at the time, they took us out on a water in a boat and then they turned it around, practicing disembarking from a boat onto a beach, not realizing this was a rehearsal for a D-Day landing. There was no mention, we're doing this because you're going to land in France. Of course not. We were told it was a maneuver. Whoever knew that they were anticipating an invasion?

Well, talk about the best kept secret, and the daunting task of keeping it a secret. So you did these maneuvers in Bristol in the Bay.

On the Bristol Channel, yeah. Very picturesque part of England, too.

Must have been easier to land on those beaches than on Normandy.

I would say so. Nobody was shooting at you.

Yeah. And were you also laden down with equipment in the practicing or not?

No, not that I'm aware of. No.

OK. OK. Now, did you take part in the Battle of the Bulge?

No, our unit was more to the rear. We were kept to the rear for anti-aircraft protection. So the actual Bulge itself, I was not in that. I escaped that, luckily. I wasn't too far from it. There was a place called Malmedy.

Yeah.

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We had tremendous atrocities there. I know we passed that area, and I kept looking to see what I could find. But aside from seeing some fallen bodies or so, that's all I saw.

Well, what part of the Netherlands was your unit in?

I remember being in Venlo.

Tell me about that.

But I don't recall any-- well, it was in Passover, I think it was, in '45.

So it was sort of springtime-ish?

Yeah. A Jewish chaplain came into our outfit, wanting to know, are there any Jewish guys here that would want to go to Passover services? I raised my hand. Why not? And a couple of us went, not many.

And we came to this convent and a group of nuns greeted us, and they had prepared a dinner for us. And during dinner, one of them said, we have a surprise for you. And they removed a carpet that was on the floor and there was a trapdoor there. And they raised the trapdoor and one of them climbed down a little.

And I heard her talking, and she came back up, and a group of men came up under this trapdoor. They were Jewish men that they had hidden from the Germans and had kept them down in the basement. They fed them and they took care of them so that the Germans didn't capture them.

But when they saw us, they froze. They saw men in uniform. We had guns. And I went over 'cause the nun told me, Jews. I went over and I spoke Yiddish to them. I didn't know what part of Judaism they were from, but I was able to calm them down. They were shaking, literally. They saw men in uniform with guns. But then after I spoke to them, Yiddish, Yiddish, you know.

Were they Dutch-Jewish men?

I don't know. I don't know. I don't remember really being able to converse with them. I don't know what form of Judaism they were from.

Did the nuns say who they were?

I don't remember, quite honestly. They did tell us, Jewish men, and they hid them from the Germans. Now, what form of Judaism they were-- all I know is they were terrified when they saw. They literally shook. They were even too scared to speak.

But after I spoke Yiddish and Yiddish and Yiddish, [YIDDISH], then they calmed down. And maybe they said a few words. I don't recall really.

Did they sit down at the table with you?

They came. They sat a little. They ate. And the nuns covered up this trapdoor and put this carpet down again. I don't think they ever had to go back down again. What they did with them after we left, I don't know. But it was a very, very unbelievable experience, to me, to see that. I was shocked.

So you see it at the time when they're free for the first time, and they don't even know it yet.

That's right. I mean, I myself was mystified. I was probably too excited to see any more than just what I saw.

Yeah, because there's so many questions that would come from that. Who were they? Where did they come from?

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Exactly. To this day I don't know.

OK.

But it was an unbelievable experience, to see a trapdoor and out come a group. It was about seven or eight men.

Were they young, old, middle-aged?

I would say middle-aged at the most. They weren't old people, no.

Do you know how long they had been down there?

I don't recall that. That's a good question. I don't even know if we ever asked, or if we did, I don't remember. I don't know.

Did the nuns speak English?

To some extent. A few words, yes.

OK.

Yeah. They knew we were coming because they had already prepared a meal. So evidently, they had seen this Jewish chaplain. He must have told them, I will be here with a group of men.

Do know how long the place had been under American control? I mean, was it a matter of days before the Germans had left?

When we were in Venlo?

Yeah.

There was no fighting when we got there. There was fighting. It was already over with. When we got to Venlo, there was no shooting.

And was Passover soon after you got to Venlo? That is, it was soon after--

Yeah. It had to be around April, I believe. But no, there was no fighting in Venlo that I saw.

And so from there, is that when you first went into Germany itself from Venlo?

I think after Venlo, we finally ended up in Germany, yeah.

And what do you remember seeing?

I'm trying to remember. During the war of occupation, after the war, we were in some town in Bavaria. Kirsenhof? See, stupid me. I don't remember the town we were in.

But it was a beautiful, picturesque town in Bavaria. I know that it had a brewery that made beer. And we made sure that we drank a lot of beer, and these Germans made sure that they gave us a lot of beer.

Now, this is after the war ends?

Yeah. The occupation, after the war, before we were transferred to the different port, where we left for the States.

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Yeah. I want to still go back. When you first crossed into Germany, that's far from Bavaria, because Venlo is in the north and Bavaria is in the south. Did you go to Aachen?

I was in Aachen. There was action in Aachen.

What kind of action was in Aachen? What was going on there?

There was a German outfit there that was being attacked, yeah. And we were always to the rear that action, bringing up anti-aircraft guns. But we didn't partake in the actual fighting. But I was close enough to see a lot of it and hear it.

Did you pass through smaller German villages or towns?

Yeah, sure. I don't remember them. I liked I enjoyed seeing these small areas. It was very picturesque, especially Bavaria. I found it a very nice area.

What were the people like?

Kaufering. Kaufering.

Kaufering?

Kaufering, Germany. That's where we spent-- the Army of Occupation. That town had of a brewery, some pretty girls that we chased and caught.

[LAUGHS]

Oh, yeah. Kaufering. Helda. I never told Raz, but Helda was pretty.

Well, I have got a lot of questions on that one. If the French were understandably very friendly towards the Americans, what were the Germans like, the German civilians?

No problem. No problem at all. As a matter of fact, most of them kept to themselves because they didn't know how we would react to them. I mean, I never walked through the town without a pistol or a rifle because I never knew who would take a shot at me.

I never saw anything that happened though, but I always carried a pistol, at least a pistol, with me when I walked through the town. Most of us did. But the civilians themselves, they basically kept to themselves, or if they had to pass you, they would nod, and that was the extent of their--

So no fraternization?

No. No.

Except for the girls that you could catch.

Yeah, right. A lot of that went on.

Did it, huh?

There were not many girls and too many guys.

It's the Army. For you, where were you when the war ended?

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That's a good question. I remember being in a gun position. Gee, I don't remember what part of Germany I was in. But somebody came by in a Jeep and said, it looks like the war is over, guys. And I remember there was a big roar, you know. Are you sure? Are you sure?

Then there was more trucks coming up the road and more guys saying, yes, the war is over, guys. It's over. We're finished, and so on. And there was a big roar, hooray, and things. But that was the extent of how I found out that the war is over.

But were you in Bavaria, do you think, at that point?

I would have had to been in some part of Bavaria, probably, if we ended up in Kaufering. I would have had to been somewhere there, as far as I can recall.

You mentioned earlier, before we were taping, that there was a place where you surprisingly came upon some Soviet soldiers.

Yeah.

When was that?

I can't tell you. I don't know what part of Germany we were in. All I know is when we heard foreign language and we parted the trees or whatever, and we stared at each other. I realized they were Russian, they realized we were American. And a big cheer went up and laughing and so on and so forth, and then we each turned and went our way. Because there was still some fighting in the area somewhere, but not a hell of a lot.

Was this before the war ends?

Yeah. Yeah. It had to be for them to be so close to us and we so close to them. But I couldn't tell you what part of Germany it was.

Well, I don't know all of the places where your unit was. But if you say you were in Bavaria, Bavaria borders Czechoslovakia.

I was never in Czechoslovakia.

And you weren't any close to the border?

To my knowledge, I was never near Czechoslovakia, that I know of. I never even know the name Czechoslovakia in those years.

It could also, perhaps, be parts of northern Austria.

I was never in Austria then.

OK. If your unit was in Aachen and then goes down towards Bavaria to Kaufering, and all of that is western Germany-- none of it is in what eventually becomes eastern Germany.

Then where would I have met up with Russian troops?

Well, that's a big mystery. That's what I'm trying to go back and piece--

Yeah, I know what you're saying.

Yeah.

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We had to be closer to the Russian border. I know what was closer to that part of Germany, but I don't remember.

That's OK. It's OK.

I'm sorry. I wish I could help you and help myself.

Yeah.

I covered a big part of Germany, that I know. I saw a lot of Germany.

It's interesting, for historical purposes, how far east the Americans really went and how far west the Soviets really went. And it could be well beyond what we know, or it may not be.

I know I was in one big city in Germany. I don't remember the name. It was a pretty good-sized city. It was blasted to hell by our bombers before we got there. It was a good-sized city, but I mean, it was in ruins.

Was it Frankfurt, maybe?

We had bombed the hell out of it.

So when you were with--

With an H. What would be with an H?

Heidelberg? Hanover?

It might have been Heidelberg.

It could have been Heidelberg.

It might have been Heidelberg. Oh, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was literally in ruins.

And yet the villages and towns were not as affected.

No, not the villages. Little towns, little villages. This place in Kaufbeuren, Bavaria, beautiful. Picturesque. No parts of the war there.

So tell me, when you were in Dachau or come to Dachau, was that before the war ends or after?

Oh, the war. Let's see, Dachau was liberated in '45.

Yes, of course.

It had been shortly before or shortly right thereafter. Very close.

So May 1945.

I remember somebody passed the unit and said, hey, the Dacha camp is here. Want to see it?

Did you know what it was?

When I heard the name, I knew it was a concentration camp. And I said, yeah, I'll see it. Sure enough, maybe one or two other guys said, maybe I'll go. Not a bunch of guys-- nobody said, yeah, yeah. I said yes.

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And I got there and I went in. It was shortly after it was liberated. The SS guards were still there behind barbed wire. I said to myself, I want to get over and see what these characters look like.

I walked to the fence, barbed wire fence. And there must have been 15 or 20 of them, laying on the ground, sitting on the ground, talking. They were having a good time, laughing to each other.

I remember one of them stood up. He must have seen me on the other side of the fence. And he was walking slowly, slowly. When he got near where I was, he turned around and he spit through the fence in my face. I reached for my pistol. I was going to shoot the son of a bitch.

One of the guys near me grabbed me. He said, put that gun down. I said, that guy spit at me. I'm going to kill the bastard. He said, do not do that. If you shoot him, you'll be court-martialed for killing a captured soldier. Son of a bitch, he turned around. He smiled. He laughed, and he walked away after he spit in my face.

I'll never forget that. The guy said, don't you shoot him. He said you'll be court-martialed. I wish I could have gotten close to these SS guys. They literally had to be a bunch of killers, from what I saw in this camp.

I went into the showers where they gassed them. I stood in the shower and I looked up. Sure enough, there were gas jets in the ceiling that were turned on. When they told them they're taking a shower, that's when they gassed them.

There were still several people that were too sick to be moved yet. I know they showed me what building they were in, and I did not go to look at them, but there were some former prisoners still too sick to be moved.

I walked around the camp. I looked. I went into the bunk house where they kept them. Disgusting where they had these people sleep, laying on boards. It turned my stomach.

Was it all still all dirty and stuff?

Oh, yeah. It hadn't been worked on yet. There were still inmates still left. And the one sight I saw that stuck with me to this very day that I literally gasped. I saw a mountain, a mountain, of children's shoes.

To this very day I can picture it. I never saw anything like it in my life. Higher than from here to that ceiling, maybe two ceilings up. Thousands of pairs of children's shoes. Do you know how frightening that sight could be? It wasn't anything, people being shot or anything, just a mountain of children's shoes stuck in my mind to this very, very day.

Chilling.

I would lay at night after that and all I would think of-- all night long, I could not fall asleep-- all I kept seeing in front of my eyes, a mountain of children's shoes. Thousands and thousands of pairs. What made these Germans do that? I cannot understand the reasoning.

So I can surmise, you didn't have any chance to speak with any of the former prisoners there?

No. No. I don't know. I never saw them.

Was most of the camp empty by the time you got there?

Yeah. Yeah.

So it was this handful of SS guards behind barbed wire.

Yeah. Yeah.

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And these sick inmates who you didn't see.

Yeah. That's all that I knew of. I didn't spend all that much time there. I was there maybe an hour or two at the most.

Was there anybody who described to you what had just gone on or how they liberated it or anything like that?

No, I never met anybody. There might have been somebody there, but I never knew them or saw them.

Was it clear--

There was nobody there that was like a guide or anything. There may have been, I don't know. But the day I got there, I just opened the gate and walked in, and that's it. Nobody stopped me.

Was it clear that someone was in control of the camp, or not?

I would think so. I would think so. There were several buildings that I know that looked like offices. I'm sure there were people in there that knew about the camp. I didn't go in there and nobody came to talk to me.

So you just were able to freely move around?

I was able to move around. A couple of guys, like me-- I didn't go with anyone, in particular, but a couple of guys like me came to look around. Nobody stopped me. I walked wherever I wanted.

Were there any other sites that you saw besides the shoes?

There was a place where they kept what were described as mad dogs that they would sick on to the inmates. Mad dogs. And there was another place where they had prisoners kneel and they would whip them. I think they were marked so that I knew what I was looking at.

Were the dogs still there, or no?

No. No.

No dogs, OK.

But that's pretty much what I saw, besides the shower, the gas jets.

And how long did you stay?

It was a fairly large looking place. I didn't go over the whole thing. It looked pretty large.

A lot of barracks?

Yeah. There were quite a few barracks.

And how long did you spend, do you think? Was it the better part of a day or just a couple hours?

Just a couple hours, that's all. I had enough when I saw those shoes. I couldn't wait to get out of there.

The camp is very close to a town called Dachau.

I believe that's-- yes, yeah.

Did you go to that town?

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What part of Germany is that in?

That's in Bavaria.

Bavaria, yeah.

Bavaria, and that's just outside Munich.

I was in Munich. I went into Munich.

OK, I'm going to want to ask about that. But first, I want to ask about the town of Dachau itself.

I don't remember.

You don't remember.

If I past it, I went through it. I don't know. I couldn't tell you.

OK.

I don't even know how I got to this camp. Was I that close to walk to it? I don't know. I don't remember if I had been in an Army vehicle. I don't know.

OK.

Oh, and Dachau was in Bavaria.

Yeah, Dachau was in Bavaria. And what about Munich? When did you go to Munich? Was this after the war again?

It might have been after the war that I went to Munich. That was also fairly well bombed out in some parts of the city. It was a big city, Munich.

Mm-hmm.

Munich. Munich.

That's right. That's right.

All these cities had people bombed out.

So when the war ended and this cry came up, you know, when people find out about it, what were your orders after that? As far as being part of the military and so, where were you sent?

We ultimately were sent to Kaufering in Germany.

OK.

I don't know how they picked that area or who did it or how, but that's where we were. And we were there for quite a few weeks, and I liked it very much. It was nice. I used to walk into town. We pitched our tents where we were, and we were free to do what we wanted, when we wanted.

And we would go into town, have our drinks, look for girls, see if there was a place to eat, whatever. But it was a very peaceful area. There wasn't that much of a civilian population, but they minded. They kept to themselves.

And you stayed there for several weeks, you said?

Yeah, yeah. Then ultimately, we ended up going to these camps in England. I forget. Each one had a name, like Camp Chesterfield, Lucky Strike, Camp So and So. And from these camps is where we ultimately embarked to come back to the States. I don't know if it was from South Hampton, or I forget what city that I left to back home.

How long? I mean, was it a month later or two months later? When was it that you--

We were there for a couple of weeks in these camps, and then just slowly, unit by unit was shipped out, and it was OK. We came back on an ordinary boat. I had a chance to be seasick again.

[CHUCKLING]

So a military boat or a civilian, like passenger ship?

It looked like a passenger ship to me. I don't even remember. But I remember, when we came into New York Harbor, we had Kate Smith singing. They had a loud thing of Kate Smith.

When did you get back? What month was it?

December.

Oh, so you'd been in Europe for half a year?

I was in Europe--

After the war ends, you were for a good half year?

No, no, no, no. Wait a minute. That's a good point you bring up. When did we come back here? I was discharged in December of '45.

OK.

Which means we had to come back here in the winter. So I was discharged at the end of '45 and we had to get back here in the winter.

Beforehand?

Yeah.

So it would have been the fall, actually.

Yeah. Yeah.

It would have been the fall.

Yeah.

So it meant that you spent about half a year still in Europe and in Great Britain.

Could well be. It could be. Yeah, we didn't go home that quickly, because the army of occupation. We spent quite a few time in Kaufering.

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OK.

Yeah, so that's true.

And you had been shipped out to Europe the previous year?

Yeah, sure.

So do you remember when you had been shipped out to England?

It might have been around April time.

April of '44?

Yeah.

And so you were in Britain only for a couple of months before D-Day?

Yeah.

OK.

I also remember after Paris was liberated, our unit was sent into a suburb of Paris. Oh, why don't I remember the name of the suburb? It was a working class area of Paris. We set up our guns in case the Germans decided to bomb Paris. Saint Denis.

OK.

The Saint Denis section of Paris. And I remember walking into Paris, and I stood under the Arc de Triomphe, the Arc de Triomphe. I remember that distinctly. Oh, and I spent a great day by myself walking around parts of Paris, and I knew how to get back to the area where I was, the Saint Denis section. It was a working class area.

So this must have been soon after Normandy.

Could have been. But I liked it. I saw a lot of Paris that a lot of guys did not see, and it was very, very interesting. Yeah, I remember talking to myself, I'm under the Arc de Triomphe.

And you saw the Eiffel Tower, all or those things?

Yes.

What did Paris itself look like, I mean the people and the buildings, and so on?

I was in a big city. there were GIs like myself wandering around the streets, guys looking for brothels, you know. That was the big thing you did then. No, but I thought Paris was nice.

I went into a bar. I pointed to what I wanted. I didn't know what to tell him. I pointed, then he gave it to me. I had a glass of liquor and I walked around. I looked around and I enjoyed it.

So that kind of segues into the question that I have, is you were gone for about a year and a half from the United States. We could say from April '44 till the fall of '45.

Yeah, that's quite a time. Look, I went through the war period, no question about it.

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That's what I wanted to ask you.

Not always in action, thank God, but always closer to hear it and see it.

So how did it change you?

It changed me for the fact that Hitler was gone. Narcissism was defeated. Concentration camps were liberated. I did my part. That's what changed me. I was part of what happened. I did my little part of it, and that's the way it changed me. I saw death close up, and I guess it left its mark on me, to some extent.

Well, you were 22 years old.

Yeah, I was an old 22.

One question I forgot to ask about your unit, was your unit moving via wheeled vehicles or tracked vehicles?

No, wheel, all wheel vehicles.

All whell vehicles.

Always wheel vehicles, and we would tow our guns behind the vehicle.

And that was throughout France and Belgium and the Netherlands?

Yeah, we never were on track wheels

OK. OK. So you had as a 20-year-old, come back as 22-year-old, and done your part. Did you did your personality change, or was it pretty much the same you?

I have to assume that some of it changed, but I cannot say it changed to the fact that it left me with some-- yeah, it left me with a lot of memories that come out occasionally, but nothing where I was always in a traumatized state.

When you talk about the hardest part, which one would it have been? Would it have been the invasion itself?

The hardest part would come to me if someone would begin questioning me. Where were you? What did you do during the war? If I was questioned too closely, it would affect me. Otherwise, I would say, yeah, I was in service. But if I was really pressed and all and I had to say something, it would bother me.

Why, because of how they were questioning you?

No, because of the memories it would bring back. I would rather not be questioned that time. But as time went on, you know.

Did your kids ask about it?

No. Barbara and Mark, never, never. They knew I was in service. I very rarely discussed it with Mark, my son. But at some point in time, I think I did tell Barbara some of the things, but she also probably didn't want to question me too much about it at all. I think she realizes now it's easier to question me than before.

That often is the case. That often is the case.

Yeah.

It takes time.

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My parents never questioned me. My father never did, never did. I guess they made it a point not to want to.

Do you miss that they didn't? Would you have liked them to?

No. I'm glad that they didn't. I didn't want to be questioned. I remember the night I came home from service, my discharge in my hand. And at that time, we lived in the Crown Heights, and I used to get off at the Utica Avenue Station. And Dubrow's Cafeteria was on Eastern Parkway and Utica Avenue. And before the war, I used to go there with the guys to Dubrow's. We hung out in this cafeteria.

I'll never forget. I got out of the subway and I said, by God, there's Dubrow's. I went in to Dubrow's to see if any of my guys were still there. I walked in to Dubrow's with the discharge in my hand. And I looked around and I said, well, now I can walk home.

And I remember walking home into my dad's store, and my mother took one look and she fell to her knees. She went into a dead faint when she looked up, saw me. Had no idea I was coming then. She fainted. And I remember picking her up. My father, he just gasped. He didn't faint. And that was my homecoming.

Well, I mean, it must have been that they were worried sick every single day.

Well, my dad was a veteran so he knew some things.

Yeah. Tell. Me a little bit about your post-war life. When did you get married? What did you do?

I met Raz through a mutual friend in 1950. And we dated for a year and we got married in '51. We had a beautiful wedding. I met Raz. She lived in east New York.

Beautiful wedding. We had a little wedding in the rabbi's apartment. That was a 1951 wedding. I'm thinking of his wedding. It was gorgeous.

Yeah? That's your son-in-law's wedding.

But it was nice. Raz's mother was a delight. I met her father twice. And we were coming home from a date one night and Raz, as we turned the corner onto Sheffield Avenue, she said, oh, there's a light on my porch. Something is wrong. And she started running. It was a Saturday night. We were coming home. We had gone to the movies or something.

And she started running, and I ran alongside of her, and we came into the house. And her father, they were big card players. My mother-in-law's family, my father-in-law's family, a lot of relatives lived close to each other in those years.

And they used to come and play poker, or whatever. And they were playing cards in my mother-in-law's apartment that night, or house rather. And my father-in-law was sitting at the table. He put his head down on the table and died. That's how he died. Just put his head down on the table and died.

Then when Raz saw the light on the porch, she said, something is wrong. So I only met him just twice. I may have said four words to him. But my mother-in-law, in all the years and all, she was a doll.

What did you work at after the war?

I was lucky enough to meet some girl that I knew from school, and she had a contact with the US Employment Service. Employers would call them to say we can use somebody in our plant or factory or office and all. So she gave the guy in the USCS my name to call me if something interesting would come up.

And sure enough, this guy calls me one day. There's a job I can offer you at a paper merchant company that sells printing paper to printers, publishers, and so on. And I went for an interview, and they were interested in hiring a

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veteran. And this was on Hutchins Street in Manhattan, Hudson Canal, Graphic Paper Corporation.

And they interviewed me. They hired me. I became the order clerk to the general manager. It was owned by a Jewish firm. Sid Greenberg was the owner. And I worked at that company until one year he decided to sell it to a Midwestern paper company, a large company, Sabin Robbins, who were based in California, in Cincinnati, but they had offices throughout the country.

So they bought Graphic Paper, and they were willing to hire me. And they kept the office in New York for a while, and ultimately, they moved it to Carlstadt, New Jersey. And I went with them and I became a salesperson. And I had my territory. It was a good part of Long Island and Manhattan. Had a couple in Brooklyn.

And I had a car then. I worked my way up. I did quite well. I was with them for many, many years. And I ended up with a profit sharing plan of a couple of $100,000 when I left them.

And literally, though, I still would have kept working, but they insisted that I stopped working at age 66. I said, I'd rather work. No. You better stop now or we'll make you travel every week to Cincinnati if you don't stop.

[LAUGHS]

So I said, you know what? Look, they don't want me here. The hell with them. Give me my profit sharing and let me go, and I left. So I retired for a couple of years.

New York at that time had community boards in the various sections of the city. And we were living in a house, and community board 8 was in Fresh Meadows, not too far from the house. So I called them one day. I said, I'd like to come in and volunteer for a couple of days a week. Sure, come in.

I used to go there three days a week from 9:00 to 12:00 or something, a few hours a day. I would answer the phone for them and so on. One day they came to me and they said, we would hire you as a city employee to get paid.

I said, wait a minute. I don't want to work full-time anymore. What is the minimum amount of hours I could be on a city payroll as a city employee? They said 20 hours a week. I said, you got a deal. And I worked for three or four years doing that, and I was the assistant to the district manager. If I had stayed there, I think I could have ended up running that place.

Oh my goodness.

I enjoyed it, really. When you work for these type of places, you run into all sorts of problems that are happening in an area.

Yeah. You get very well-acquainted.

The community board 8. I used to go out with a building inspector once a week when we got complaints that houses are not being kept right, houses are dirty, illegal apartments and some buildings, and so on. I would go out with a building apartment inspector once a week.

I would go out with a police sergeant from the 107th precinct once a week to see if there are any illegal gambling and things. It was a great job. I enjoyed it. But ultimately, Raz said, Jerry, it's time that we were together a lot more and all.

And I said, OK, so I quit. But that was a smart thing that I did. So I was on the city payroll, but I didn't work there long enough to collect a pension. I needed, I think, two more years.

Oh.

But I enjoyed it. That was it.

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Is there anything else you'd like to add to your story now?

No. You have awakened a lot of memories in me, and I thank you kindly for it.

I thank you. I thank you very much.

I hope what you expected is what you got.

Yes, and more. And more.

I appreciate that. Thank you. This guy helped.

And Mr. Silver is pointing to Jim Finkel, who is his son-in-law. And with that, I will conclude the formal part of our interview and say this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Gerald Silver on June 19th, 2014. And what we'll do now is film the letter, a photograph, and the Purple Heart pictures.

Thank you.

OK. Jim, could you--

All right, I have one final question. I'm sorry I forgot to ask it before, but it's such a self-evident one in the end. How did your wartime experience, how did it affect you as a Jewish person? Did it strengthen your identity? Did it change you?

Oh, yes, it strength-- the very fact that Nazism was eliminated was, as far as I'm concerned, the whole essence of being in the Army. The fact that I was in the Army, only because fighting Germans was a way to get rid of the Nazi situation.

It didn't embitter me at all. It just made me feel glad that, once and for all, there is no Adolf Hitler. Knowing that concentration camps were liberated. There are no more crematoriums. Goodbye, Mr. Hitler. Stay where you are, deep in hell. That's it. It was worth being in the Army if for no other reason.

You knew what you were fighting for.

Absolutely, 100%.

OK. Well, now I'd like to have the camera focus in on the framed letter that you are holding.

You can't see it, [INAUDIBLE]?

No, no. It's too dark in the background, the camera. The light's too dark.

OK, got it.

Just the picture.

Well, no, just the picture, and then Mr. Silver will talk about it. I'm sure that there are days go by when it's absolutely quiet.

It will be quiet tomorrow and after tomorrow and after tomorrow.

You know, Gerry, can you hold it in front of you? Just put on your belt. Yeah. Yeah. Is that OK for you? That's better.

I will ask a question, he will talk, OK? So you just tell me when.

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[INAUDIBLE]

It's fine, just as long as the photo is seen.

It's kind of--

Should I take a look?

We cannot read it.

I want to read it.

[INAUDIBLE]

Difficult?

No. It's not enough.

OK, so should I hold it closer?

No. Let's see what we have, and then to read it, it'll have to be like half of it on the screen.

Why not? It's just--

Can you do it one more time? Can you put it back?

Move it up. No, no, no, move it back-- so that we get the word "headquarters," and we have to catch the signature. We don't need all that white space in between. No, you missed headquarters. Yeah. Let's hold it there. OK.

You don't want to move the camera.

We've lost headquarters. OK, Mr. Silver, tell me about this letter that you are holding.

This is a commendation given to me for what I had done on the beach to help wounded people, and to the best of my ability, to see that whatever I could do to help anyone who is in need is why I was given the commendation.

And it was in place of the Bronze Star.

It was in place of being given the Bronze Star and stripes as a sergeant. But when my name was mentioned to be given those things, one officer said, not the Jew boy. So what happened is this commendation is in lieu of a Bronze Star and stripes.

How do you feel about having gotten the commendation?

I feel very strongly the fact that I was able to help guys that needed the help is all that matters. They can keep their Bronze Stars and stripes.

[PHONE RINGING]

Purple Heart was given to me for wounds sustained on Omaha Beach on D-Day. All GIs who were wounded are always given the Purple Heart.

There's a medal underneath it, too, with the rainbow.

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The medal was given for being in a Normandy campaign after D-Day.

OK. And it looks like you also have a certificate of congressional recognition about that.

Oh, yes. That was given by, I think, at the time a local congressman. Thought I would help him politically to be giving these things out.

OK. Well, thank you very much for sharing them. And we have one more item to go and that is a photograph of yourself and your father, and you'll tell us about that, too. Thank you.

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