

He says the English way, not the German way.

We're rolling.

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Henry Birnbrey on October 22nd, 2015 in Atlanta, Georgia. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Birnbrey very for agreeing to speak with us today to share your story and your experiences.

As I explained off camera, we're going to be talking in the first part of our interview a lot about your family, your pre-war life, your background, the forces that shaped you, and the people that influenced you. So I'll start off with the most basic questions. And the very first one is, could you tell me what was your name at birth?

Heinz Birnbrey.

Heinz Birnbrey?

Yes.

Is that how it's said in German?

Yes.

OK. And what was your date of birth?

November 29th, 1923, which happened to be the day the German inflation hit its peak.

Is that so?

Yeah.

In the Weimar Republic?

Yes.

Oh my goodness. Well, there was a sad occasion and there was a happy occasion.

Also, the United Nations partition of Palestine into Israel and Palestine was also on November 29th.

Really? Tell me, where were you born?

In Dortmund. Dortmund, Germany.

Can you describe for me a little bit about Dortmund and where it is in Germany and what kind of a place it is?

Dortmund's in northwest Germany in Westphalia. It is famous for its steel, mainly for its beer. It has many, many breweries. In Germany, you see Dortmunder beer all over Germany. And there was coal nearby. So coal, steel, and beer. It was a very industrial city.

Was it a pretty city?

Some parts of it are very pretty. How's the big stadium, which was the main stadium for shows and major sports in Germany called the Westfalenhallen.

Oh, really?

Which was really a major place for that kind of stuff.

Did it become the place where Nazi rallies were then later held, like in the Nuremberg stadium that was so famous that we see on film?

I don't know. I couldn't tell you.

OK. Tell me a little bit about your parents. Could you tell me your mother's name and maiden name, and then your father's?

My mother's name was Jenny Jacobson, and my father was Edmund Birnbrey, and it was a second marriage. My mother's first husband got killed in World War I, and she lost a child in World War I.

Wow.

And then she got married again in 1922, and I was a result of that second marriage.

Do you have brothers and sisters?

No.

You were an only child?

Only child.

OK. Was your mother from Dortmund?

No. Both my parents came from Pomerania.

And where is that?

It's in eastern Germany. Germany is called Pommern. In English it's Pomerania. And both of them came from there.

And did they still have family back there?

Yes. My mother was one of 11 children. My father was one of three children. And of course, everybody got wiped out except four first cousins. Four first cousins survived. My father's family was in a town called Stettin, which is a capital of Pomerania. And my mother came from a small town in Pomerania.

What was it called?

Hm?

What was it called?

Falkenberg.

Falkenberg, OK. And Stettin, if I think of my geography, is that close by the sea?

Yes, it's on the Baltic. Yes.

It's on the Baltic Sea.

Yes.

OK, so you were close to the Polish border.

Yes.

And Stettin, I believe, changed border a couple times.

Yes. Yes.

OK. Did you know your relatives? Did you meet your relatives from Pommern? Did you ever visit them?

Not often. Things were never so good, but we did a lot of traveling. And the people in Stettin I never visited. And my mother's relatives I did visit a couple of times. They later moved on to Berlin.

I see. I see. So Pommern didn't hold any place in your mind as the root of the family homes, for example?

No. I mean, I went back a few years ago, but no, I did not.

Not at the time?

No.

OK. How did your father support your family in Dortmund?

He had a small textile business. Actually had two businesses. He had a textile business with a circle of customers, and he also for a while operated a commissary for a labor union.

Oh, really?

Mm-hmm.

I forgot to ask one question. How did they come to Dortmund? How did your parents come to Dortmund?

It's an interesting story. My half sister was having a malnutrition problem. In World War I, food wasn't easy to get. And an aunt of mine who lived in Dortmund had a cow. And because of that cow, my mother moved to Dortmund so the little girl could have milk.

And it didn't help, though, because she died.

No. She died at age three.

What was her name?

Ruth.

Ruth. And what was her last name?

Neumann.

Neumann. So your mother's first husband was named Neumann?

Yes.

And do you remember his first name?

I think it was Herman.

Herman. And did she ever tell you how it is that he died? Did she know herself?

He was also killed in World War I.

Yeah. Was somebody able to tell her the circumstances of that?

No.

OK. But fighting.

Yeah.

Fighting in the military.

My mother lost her husband and three brothers in World War I.

Oh my goodness. And a child.

And a child.

OK, so that's what brought her to Dortmund. What about your father there?

I assume her mother. I don't know. I don't know of any other reason.

OK, do you know how they met?

No.

OK. So your father operated a textile business and then a commissary for a labor union.

Yes.

I want to have a little bit more explanation on both, but the second really intrigues me. Anytime I hear labor union I hear politics.

He was very politically involved.

OK. Can you tell me about his involvement and what views he had?

Well, I don't know, have you ever heard of the Reichsbanner?

No, I haven't, actually.

The Reichsbanner was the elite corps of the Social Democratic Party.

Reichsbanner?

Yeah.

OK.

And they did special things. Like if there was big riots and stuff, they'd go with the police, and that sort of stuff. He was very, very involved in politics.

Well, this reminds me of a question that I often ask later on, but I'll ask it now. And that is, as you remember in your family home-- and there were then the three of you, a small, nuclear family-- what was the discussion about around the dinner table? Was politics discussed? What kind of topics usually were talked about in Europe as you were growing up?

I know my father was very involved in politics and talked about it, but I don't remember much else. I honestly don't.

So when Hitler came to power, was that something that you talked about?

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, we remembered very distinctly how the whole atmosphere in the city changed. All of a sudden people started appearing on the streets wearing Nazi uniforms, and the Nazi flags were flying everywhere.

OK.

It was impossible to ignore.

OK. So we'll come to that section a little bit later. Let's go back now to your family and your father. So tell me a little bit about this commissary business. What did that involve?

Well, he had an inventory of merchandise and I guess the members could buy a little cheaper there. That's what the commissary usually is. A translation of it is it was an association of employees.

I see. And how would it be in German?

[SPEAKING GERMAN]

OK. And was it located as a physical place close to where his other business was?

It was in the same premise, basically.

Oh, I see. So he operated out of the same area, just a different--

Yeah.

OK. And do you know what kind of products he sold?

As far as I remember, it was mainly linens and some clothing. It was a typical textile store.

No, I'm talking about the commissary part.

The same thing.

Same thing?

Yeah.

Oh, so was it such that he took some of the production, some of the other items that he sold, and that was then--

I couldn't tell you.

You wouldn't know. You wouldn't know. OK. And then for the textile business, was it a retail business?

Yes.

So he had a store?

He had a store, but once a week, he would commute to a town near, Dortmund and he had a circle of customers and he would deliver goods and take orders there.

I see. So it was a textile business. Was it, as you said, household linens and clothing, things like that?

Yeah.

And where were they usually manufactured?

I couldn't tell you.

You wouldn't know. OK. OK.

I have no idea.

All right.

Did you ever know how it is that he started this business? Was it something that had been in the family?

No, it had definitely not been in the family because we had no other family in Dortmund. Our relatives lived elsewhere.

OK. I misspoke the question. It was, was it something that he knew about because there had been a family business in textiles elsewhere?

Not that I know of.

Not that you know of. OK. So in many ways, it could have been brand new and he started it. How large was it? By [NON-ENGLISH], by employees or so.

I doubt if he had more than one employee. It was a very small business.

OK. And did you live close by to him?

Probably three miles.

OK. Did you visit him at the business?

Very seldom.

Really? Was he there a lot? Did he work not only regular hours, but even more than that?

Well, he worked it, except one day a week when he went to this other city.

OK. Let's turn to your home in Dortmund. Did you live in the same place from where you were born and grew up, or did you move?

No. We lived in a very nice apartment house, and one day the landlady decided she didn't want Jews living in her place. And we were kicked out with no notice and moved into a house, which I guess in today's standards would be a slum,

just a roof over our head. And it happened to be almost across the street, but it was a big difference between our lifestyle then and our lifestyle after we had to move.

What year was this when she kicked you out?

I'm just going to guess. I would say '35 or '36.

OK.

OK. So I'd like to get a picture of what your life was in this place before that happened. Can you describe? Because this was your childhood home.

Yeah.

OK. Can you describe a little bit about the neighborhood. Was it in the center of Dortmund, in the residential area? Just in your mind, describe what it looked like.

It was a residential area, but very close to the downtown. Not too far. It was a very nice building with a nice apartment, plenty of space.

Was it one of those 19th century buildings made of stone that are often found in German cities that have several stories high?

I guess so. It was either a three or four story building, no elevator.

OK. You had modern conveniences in it?

Not on today's standards, no.

OK. But describe to me what was a modern-- for example, there was electricity?

Yeah, we had electricity.

And how is your heating? Was it by coal?

Coal.

OK, so you had coal ovens?

No. Yes, yes. In the cellar of each building, each tenant had a place for their own coal pile. And we used to go down there, bring coal upstairs for the oven, and so on.

OK. So did each room have one of those coal ovens that had decorative tiles that one often finds?

I don't remember.

You don't remember. Can you tell me about how many rooms the apartment had?

Well, the first one we probably had four or five rooms. In the second one, I actually slept in the same bedroom with my parents.

It was quite a difference.

Yup. It didn't even have a toilet in our apartment. We had to go up a half a flight to use a communal toilet. And no

showers and no bath.

OK. And it's right across the street?

Yeah.

So you see, one could see the difference both, I suppose, in the standard.

Yeah.

And also the times, that still, in those years, were such places.

Oh, yeah.

I'm jumping ahead of myself a little bit, but how is it that you were able to go across the street and at least find this? Did that belong to somebody else?

I don't know how we found it. My parents panicked and we needed a place to live, and they let us in I guess.

OK. What about all your furniture and your household goods and things like that?

We basically took it with us, yes.

Do you remember the name of the lady, the landlady who chased you?

Yes.

What was it?

Kornhagen.

Kornhagen. Frau Kornhagen. And before that happened, did you know her well? Did you see her occasionally?

We saw her. We were never friendly, but we knew her, saw her, sure.

Did she live in the same complex?

Yes. Yes.

OK. So she was not only a landlord, she was a neighbor?

Yes.

OK. What about other neighbors in her building?

Well, one of my aunts lived in there. The one aunt that bought my mother to Dortmund, she lived in the same building. And then across the hall from us was a family who was not Jewish, but the daughter married my uncle, so we became very close with them also.

And they were also neighbors in the building?

Yeah.

So was it a mixed neighborhood, as far as Jewish and Gentile?

I would think so, yeah.

OK. OK. And what happened to all these people when you were thrown out? Were they thrown out at the same time?

Well, my aunt, before we were thrown out, had already emigrated to Israel, to Palestine then. And the neighbor across the street [? Romanian, ?] of course they were not Jewish.

I see. I see. Did you have any other neighbors who were either Jewish or Gentile that you were close to and associated with?

Yes. Oh, yeah.

Can you tell me a little bit about these people?

Next door to us was a bakery, and their children and I were very close all the time. And as a matter of fact, I visited their daughter about 15, 20 years ago in Germany.

Oh, really?

She was still alive. There were several neighbors that we remained friendly with, except I couldn't go to their house during the day. I only went in there when it was dark so nobody could see us go into each other's houses.

And this is after Hitler came to power?

Yeah.

And what about before?

Oh, before I had a lot of friends in the neighborhood.

OK. So life really changed, not only by the new people you saw on the streets with the uniform but in your neighborhood itself?

Well, most of it by intimidation. I mean, these people who still played with me were intimidated that they wouldn't be seen publicly playing with me.

For a small child, you were still a young boy at that point. How did you understand that, or not understand that?

Well, it was not too difficult not to understand it. I mean, we saw what was going on. It was very obvious, and we talked about it all the time.

At home?

Oh, yeah.

And how did your parents explain things to you?

I don't know.

OK. OK. I wonder, did you ever come to them in some sort of perplexity and say, what's going on? This happened today, or something else happened.

I just don't remember anything like that.

OK. Tell me a little bit about your parents' personalities, both your mother's and your father's.

Well, my mother was very intellectual. She knew Greek and Latin and French, read books. But she was not very healthy the whole time. She had a bad intestinal problem, the name of which I just can't tell you. I know the German name for it but I don't know the English name.

What is the German name?

Darmverschluss.

Darmverschluss. So yeah, intestinal--

Yeah. Yeah. And she had to be on special diets and was weak. And my father generally saw me at the desk, keeping his books at night and doing a lot of paperwork. That was about it.

Had they gone to any kind of higher education?

Not that I know of.

OK. So your mother spoke those languages, learned those languages.

I don't know where.

OK. All right. Did she have help at home?

We had help in the first apartment, and then of course, people couldn't work for Jews anymore.

OK.

In the second apartment we had nobody helping us.

OK. So in the first apartment, were there any people who helped out that you interacted with that you were closer to that meant something to you?

Well, yeah. We had a lady who worked for us who became very close to us. Yeah.

And who is that? Can you tell me about her?

Huh?

Can you tell me about her?

Well, she almost was like part of the family, you know.

What was her name?

[COUGHING]

Well, let's pause for a minute.

[COUGHING] I think--

Let's pause for a minute. OK. OK. So before we had a short pause, I was asking you about the people who might have

worked with you, helped your mother out at home. Can you tell me about who that would have been, whether you were close to such people, and so on?

Yes. She was with us so long. I guess she started with us when I was a baby, so we were very, very close.

What was her name?

I think it was Margaret, but I'm not sure anymore. It's been too long ago.

OK. And what was her role at home, in your home?

Well, she did all the clean up, housekeeping, took care of me, and that sort of stuff.

Was she a German non-Jew?

Yes. Yes.

OK. And your relations were close relations?

Oh, very.

And what happened when the ruling came out-- I don't know if it was a law or a regulation-- that Jews could no longer employ someone. What happened then?

We had to let her go.

And did she stay in contact with you?

Yes. We saw her periodically, yes.

OK. And she lived close by?

Yes.

OK. Did your family have time or the inclination for a social life? It sounds like your father was always very busy and your mother wasn't very well.

Honestly, the only thing I remember, they belonged to-- you know what a landsmanshaft is?

I've heard of it. I've never heard of what it is. Tell me what a landsmanshaft is.

People that came from a certain part of the country, and they belonged to what was called a Pommern verein, an association of people that came from Pomerania. And that used to be their social life until that stopped also. But that was 90% of their social life.

So keeping in touch with those who would have been part of their early years, the same place.

They came from the same place and they met once, met periodically, and had dinners together and that sort of stuff.

And so that would have been Jews and non-Jews?

Oh, yes. And of course, that, too, stopped at a certain point. And my father was also very involved in the war veterans groups, both the general one and the Jewish war veterans, and he continued to be active in the Jewish war veterans groups.

So he had fought in World War I as well? Your father?

Yes.

OK. Did you know what his service was about? Did he ever talk to you about it?

He was in the infantry is all I remember. And he came back with a very bad case of rheumatism from being in the trenches and so on.

Do you know what front he fought on?

Yes, in French, in Verdun and all of those battles.

Was he much of a storyteller?

Yes. He was very proud of his service. He had the Iron Cross, was awarded the Iron Cross, and that sort of stuff.

You said your mother had this affliction.

Yeah.

Other than the affliction and her intellectual pursuits, did she have the time, the energy for any other kinds of activities? Did she go out of the house much? Tell me more about what she was all about.

She remained active. The only problem was once a while she had to go to the hospital for surgery.

Wow.

And she had to be on a special diet. I think during my lifetime she had six surgeries on her intestines.

Oh my goodness.

But other than that, she was very active. On Sundays we used to take hikes in the woods.

So tell me a little bit more about your father's personality. He was he had these interests and belonged to these groups. What kind of a person was he?

I don't know how to describe it.

OK. Was he an extrovert? Was he an introvert? Was he somebody who was gregarious and people swarmed around, or was he more shy and more intellect--

I don't know any of those really fit him. He wasn't over anything. You know, just a plain, normal--

Person?

I don't remember anything, other than that. Except when he came to politics, he used to get very involved.

OK, so that was sparked a passion for him?

Yeah. And did he talk about Social Democratic politics and about what it meant to him at all?

No, but I do remember that one of the people who was running for prime minister or whatever was in Germany. My

father made campaign speeches for him.

That's pretty active. That's pretty active. And then also is quite a bit of energy going there when he's also running his own business.

Yeah.

Did your family own a car?

Did he what?

Did you own a car?

No. No.

So you had a comfortable lifestyle, but not an overly well-to-do lifestyle.

That's right. Very few people owned cars in those days. We used public transportation constantly.

OK. Which of your parents were you closer to?

Probably my mother.

OK. Were you a religious family?

It's hard to explain that in today's terms. We are not religious from a standpoint of observing all the Jewish laws. On the other hand, we did go to synagogue every Saturday, and my father was on the board of the synagogue also. We did go to the synagogue Saturday, and I went to a Jewish public school. The public schools in Germany were Catholic schools, public schools, and Jewish public schools. So part of the curriculum was were Jewish topics.

I see. It was all under the public school system.

Yeah.

Which if we were to make a parallel here in the United States, that would never be.

No, it would never be.

It would never be. It's a secular system.

Yeah.

So that was, again, one of my questions. But I want to stay on the religious question a little bit, or the synagogue. You said that most of your parents social life, 90%, would have been in the verein of lanzmanschaft for Pommern. That is, the association of those who came from Pommern. What about other families in the synagogue? Did you associate with them or not really?

Not much that I remember.

OK.

But we did go there every Saturday.

OK. And in what way would you say your parents didn't observe all the laws? What does that mean?

Well, they didn't observe the Jewish dietary laws.

So you didn't keep kosher home.

No, did not keep kosher home.

OK.

I do now.

OK.

We did not observe the Sabbath, not doing the things you're not supposed to do. It is a complicated way to explain it. As a matter of fact, I get asked this question often in Jewish circles, because the synagogue we belonged to was considered reform, yet the services were exactly like our orthodox services here in Atlanta. Men and women sat separately and the service was in Hebrew. And what made us reform was because we had an organ.

Really? So everything else-- the content was orthodox, the layout?

Yeah. And the fact there were an organ there made us reform.

Let's talk about school a little bit. Can you describe for me your memories of the school you attended?

Well, the school-- I still tell people this nowadays. The teacher I had was the best teacher I had in my whole life.

Really?

And when we went from first to second to third grade, we didn't get new teachers. The same teacher stayed with us, so we became very close to him. And I still consider him the best teacher I ever had.

What was his name?

Anduin, A-N-D-U-I-N.

That's his last name?

Yeah.

Anduin?

Anduin.

OK.

School was a very good school. We had a very good curriculum. And when the Holocaust began, to prepare us for immigration, just in case, they did start teaching us English, some English.

I see. What made Mr. Anduin special to you?

He was just the kind of person-- he was a father kind of person. We loved him and he loved us and we learned a lot from him.

So he had a vocation to be a teacher?

Was very close, yeah. And then-- I don't know exactly when, probably in fifth, sixth grade-- we were forced to abandon the school building. We were in a nice building on a nice piece of land, and they made us move into a substandard building that had been probably condemned. But the government made us move out, and that's why I ended my education in Germany.

OK. Before we get to that, I'd like to ask, what was the name of your school?

The Judische Volkshochschule Schule.

Judische Volkshochschule Schule. Do you remember the street it was on?

No. I know where it was, not the name.

What about the neighborhood?

It was not a residential neighborhood. It was near the train station.

Judische Volkshochschule Schule near the Central Train Station in Dortmund?

Yes.

OK.

And like I said, we were in a beautiful building. And what I still marvel at, our math courses were so far ahead of where we are in the United States, when I came to Birmingham at age 14, they tested me and they said I was ready for college sophomore math.

Because that's how intense and that's how advanced it was?

My final exam was where we had to measure one of the pyramids in Egypt, and we had learned about specific weights. And we had to calculate, based on the cubic feet of this particular pyramid, how much it weighed. That was my final exam at age 14.

Oh my gosh. And you still remember it.

Yeah.

Do you ever know what happened to Mr. Anduin?

Just by pure coincidence, yes.

OK.

About 20, 25 years ago, The Jerusalem Post had a supplement of What About People, and they had a supplement about Anduin and his family.

Really?

And I sent letters to the editor and found his children living in Jerusalem, and we met.

Oh my goodness. So what had happened to him?

He just died a natural death. He had gone to Israel and died.

OK. So he escaped the Holocaust?

Yeah.

OK. You said it was a very beautiful building.

Yes.

Can you describe it for me? Was it a modern building?

Well, you know, modern for the '30s.

For the '30s, yes.

Yeah. We had a huge playground, a huge piece of land. It was just a nice building.

About how many students were there?

I'd have to--

You wouldn't know.

--guesstimate. I would say about 300 or so.

OK. Across how many grades? Would it be 13 grades, 12 grades?

Oh, no, no, no.

This would be--

Seven.

I see. So it was a--

Elementary school.

--primary school. Only primary.

Yeah. Because high school, you had to go to private. There were no public high schools in Germany. You'd have to go to gymnasium, which was very costly. There were no public high schools in Germany.

Oh, I didn't realize that. When people talked about gymnasium, I always thought that they meant the public high school.

Oh, no. Gymnasium was private. You had to pay tuition.

How many grades did you finish?

Seven.

Seven. So you went through the entire seven years. Now, were most of your friends from school or from the neighborhood?

Both.

OK. Are there any childhood friends that are of particular importance for you, say, any boys that you knew who either stayed behind or were able to leave as well?

I have not found anybody, except for one person by sheer coincidence, by an accident.

OK.

And that's a story that you won't believe.

Well, tell it to me. What was the person's name?

Rosenbaum.

OK. Shall we cut for a second?

I'll just get a sip.

You'll just get a sip. OK.

You're not going to believe this story.

OK, but tell it to me anyway.

I was sitting in a taxicab in Tel Aviv, behind his bald-headed taxi driver. And I don't know what made me say it. I said, are you by any chance Fredo Rosenbaum?

And mouth went this wide open. He turned around and said yes. That's the only person I've ever met.

And how did you know Fredo Rosenbaum in your early life?

We went to school together, lived in the same neighborhood.

Oh my goodness.

Yeah.

And this was what year?

Probably the mid-'80s.

Mid-'80s. So it would have been decades afterwards.

Oh, yeah. I don't know what made me say that.

He didn't look like Fredo Rosenbaum?

I told my kids, I don't know what made me do it.

OK. And what had been his story? How did he get out?

I don't remember. I don't know.

OK. Did you keep in touch with him later?

No.

So from all those children that you went to school with, this is the only one--

That I've run into, yes. I think all the rest of them were killed, as far as I know.

So in your neighborhood, it was a mixed neighborhood.

Mm-hmm.

By the way, what part of town did you live in? Was there a neighborhood name?

No.

During the Weimar years, you would have been a little boy, five, six years old, and so on by the end of the '20s.

No. No. I was 10 when Hitler came into power.

Yeah. I realize that, '33. But until then, did you ever hear or know of something called the Nazi Party?

Oh, yes.

OK. In what way?

Well, they were one of the parties in Germany, and sometimes they even had parades. And they were on the ballots for the election ballots. We didn't take him serious, but we sure knew about him.

OK. And your father, being active in the Social Democrat Party, would have been very aware of him?

Oh, yes.

Do you remember where you were when Hitler came to power? Was it a date that was memorable for you, a day that was memorable for you?

Well, it was January 30th, 1933. We were in a state of shock, because in no time people appeared on the streets with Nazi uniforms or insignias, and Nazi flags were flying everywhere was almost immediate.

So sort of like they come out of nowhere.

Yeah.

What happened with your father's business?

I know he was not in business much longer. In about 1935, he went to this town that he went to once a month. And he told him, told his customer, that I was unable to get the textile goods that you ordered from me. And his son was standing in the premises in a Nazi uniform.

And he kept trying egg my father on, was the reason he couldn't get it because the Nazi regime? And my father said, I don't know why I couldn't get it. But this guy kept egging him on, and then finally went to authorities, told them my father had made statements against the government. He was arrested, and we didn't know where he was for three days.

Oh my goodness.

My mother and I went to the train station, waiting every train looking for him. Couldn't find him. And about three days later, he came home. And the story he told us is that he went before a judge-- and there were still judges who were decent. And this judge asked--- my father's customer testified. This guy testified against his own son, told him that my father had not made anti-government statements.

And the judge, who also knew my father from somewhere, took him aside and said, look, if I do nothing, I'm going to lose my job. What I'm going to ask you to do is not come back to this town so they think I sent you to a concentration camp. And that was the end of our business.

Oh my goodness.

And my father came home and told us that whole story.

That's a shock.

Yeah.

That's a shock. And he could have very easily, like so many others, gone to this concentration--

Oh, yes, absolutely.

Was he ever a target, not only because he was Jewish but because he had been active in the Social Democratic Party?

I don't know.

Because so many political enemies, Social Democrats, ended up being arrested as well.

As far as I know, I was already in America. I came to American in April of '38. And on Kristallnacht, he was arrested, and that was the end of that.

What do you mean by it was the end of that?

Well, Kristallnacht, they beat him up pretty bad, and he needed medical attention and no hospital would admit him. And then finally, a Catholic hospital in a town nearby took him in, but he died shortly thereafter from his wounds. I don't know what the extent of his wounds were or anything. Kristallnacht that was November 9th and he lived till February 1st.

When did you hear of this? When did you learn of it?

Well, my mother sent a telegram to Birmingham, and I was already in Atlanta. My father had been dead about six weeks when I first learned about it.

Till you learned about it--

We didn't have communication like we have nowadays, with cell phones and stuff.

That must have been-- you were alone here.

Yeah.

What a shock.

Yeah. And then when I tried to get restitution, under the German restitution laws, they told me that nobody by that name was in that place and turned me down. And many years later, about-- [INAUDIBLE].

Let's cut for a second.

So I'm sorry for the interruption and the noise, but please tell me about the aftermath of when you learned your father had died from the wounds that were inflicted, and what happened later when you tried to get restitution.

Well, they said that nobody by that name was in this place, so I visited the place myself, which is now a Holocaust museum in Dortmund.

This Catholic hospital?

No, no, no, no, no, no. There's the Gestapo headquarters, where he was beaten up.

I see, OK. The Gestapo.

And the Germans kept very good records on everything. They can't deny anything. And when I looked at the microfiche, looking for my father, I found out that they misspelled his name. They spelled it B-I-R-E-N-B-R-E-Y. And the German authorities use this as an excuse that nobody by the name of B-I-R-N-B-R-E-Y had been in that place.

And later, my kids wanted me to take them there. They wanted to see everything. So when I took them to this same museum, former Gestapo headquarters, when we reached the torture chamber, I suffered a heart attack.

Oh my God.

And the ambulance took me to the hospital that I was born in.

Oh my god.

But they denied that he was even in that place, and his name was misspelled and they used that as an excuse.

And that was never corrected?

Well, it was too late by then.

What a bitter thing.

Hm?

What a bitter thing.

That was postwar Germany.

I can't imagine what that was like for you.

When I found that microfiche, I couldn't believe it. Had the correct home address, correct age, everything, except my last name was misspelled.

And so there's something very cynical about that.

Yup. Well, when the [NON-ENGLISH] began, a lot of the judges were judges before, and they still had sympathy with the former government. There's no question about it.

And that's one of the blots on postwar west Germany, is the judicial system.

Well, they couldn't establish a judicial system without taking the old people. There was nobody to do it.

And yet this is one of those kinds of consequences.

Yeah, that's right.

So this was in the 1980s when you had applied for this restitution?

Oh, no. The restitution laws was much earlier. That would have been in the '50s or '60s. It was in the '80s when I made the discovery.

Oh, OK. So then for 20 years, you're in a fog, your hands are tied, and then you see from the space of one letter.

Yeah.

We've jumped ahead a little bit, because you were telling me how your father and the business was affected after Hitler came to power with these two very pivotal and tragic incidences, the first when he goes to the village, and the village judge does not do what he could have done but finds a way to let him off.

Yeah.

And the second one is the final act, and by that point you're in the United States. I want to go back a little bit and now talk about your mother, and then we'll talk about other things. So your mother is left when she sends you this telegram, and you're already there. She's still in Germany. What happened with your mom?

Well, she couldn't make a living here, had no source of income. And she actually became a maid to a disabled Jewish woman to take care of her until my mother herself died. And I don't know what the cause of death was. I assume it was the fact that she had to be on a strict diet and couldn't maintain her diet. But I have no idea from what she died from. She passed away that same year in September, September of '39.

So within the space of less than a year, you lose both parents.

Yes.

How did you find out about your mother's death?

Her brother went to the funeral and sent me a letter. Of course, by the time the letter got here, it was [INAUDIBLE], quite a while. You probably wouldn't know this. There was a movie called Address Unknown. Have you ever heard of it?

No, I don't.

Well, the same thing. A person sent a letter to his family and the Germans sent it back Address Unknown because the people were no longer living. And I actually got one of those. My letter to her came back with this Address Unknown letter on it.

Was that before you learned of her death, that is the Address Unknown came back?

I think it was afterwards.

Afterwards. Yeah. So for all intents and purposes, you're all alone in the world.

That's right.

When your father-- I'm backtracking a little bit-- when your father came back from this experience in the village, this place where he sold his linens, how did things at home progress? How did the discussions at home develop? How did they talk? Did they say, we have to get out of Germany now? Did that question come up?

It did. Later, after my father died, even more so, my mother applied for visas to countries that I never heard of. What most people don't know, in those days, there was no problem getting out of Germany. The problem was getting a visa to other countries.

So it was the other countries that were the stumbling block?

Sure. I mean, the people applied for visas right and left. I mean, my mother applied to some Latin American countries, and so on, and just couldn't get a visa.

While you were still there, did that process start with your parents?

No.

OK. When your father came back from this experience in the village, what happened then within your family?

Well, we lived a very poor life from then on. I mean, I don't know how in the world we had put food on the table. I just don't have no inkling.

OK. But they, somehow or other, even though he had no income coming in-- did he close up shop?

Yes. He wasn't allowed to be in business anymore.

OK. And then what happened, as far as before Kristallnacht? I want to take the development, the progression of events, in your family in Dortmund, from the moment he comes back till--

They probably, because of my age, shielded me from all this information. My parents acted as if nothing was wrong. Put food on the table, but I swear to God, I don't know how.

OK. When did the question come up of you leaving?

Well, what happened is I wanted to leave. My parents wanted to get me a visa to Palestine or any other place. I think it was February or March of '38, the Nazis invaded Austria.

That's right.

And some people thought that a war was imminent. And at the last minute, the US government said they would let 1,200 children come in. And we got a phone call from one of our social agencies that they could get me a visa to America, but I had to be ready to leave in 24 hours. So it was 24 hours, get used to leave my parents and say my goodbyes and all that.

And I was directed to go to Stuttgart, Germany, where the American Council was, for a physical exam. And the night before, I ran a high fever. And my mother knew that part of a physical exam, if I had a fever, wouldn't give me a visa.

So she packed with cold compresses all night. When morning came, my fever was gone. They put me on a train and I went by myself to Stuttgart. And I met two other kids who were in the same program, and the three of us went from there to Hamburg and got on a ship.

So you went south and then you went north?

Yeah.

And when your mother, the morning that you woke up, after she had put the cold compresses on, that's when you said goodbye to your parents?

Well, they took me to the train station. We walked. We couldn't use public transportation. And told me their goodbyes, so I got on the train.

Did they expect that they'd be able to join you soon?

They had hoped to. I guess they were trying to make me feel better. They hoped that we would meet again, but we never did, of course.

In some ways, thank God you didn't know it at the time.

Yeah.

So you went to Stuttgart and you passed the physical exam. Do you remember anything of the process?

No. I really don't.

OK. And the other two kids that were on that train, do you remember their names?

I have to think about it. No, not at the moment.

OK.

We did not stay in touch.

OK.

So had you traveled much outside of Dortmund as a child? I mean, you told me you went hiking and so, but I don't recall that you mentioned any trips outside the city.

Yes. I went to Berlin twice to visit my aunt by myself. And then, again through the social agency to get kids out of Germany, I did spend a summer in Holland. It was in the '30s. I think it was in '36. And I spent a wonderful summer in Holland with a family.

OK. This was a Jewish social service agency?

Yes.

I'm going back now, because this is something that we were going to cover. When you went to Berlin to visit your aunts, off camera you had told me that it was right after the Olympics.

I met a cousin there. And she couldn't get over, with all the racial laws in Germany-- she said she saw a whole bunch of blonde German girls walk down the street arm in arm with Jesse Owens, and she couldn't get over that.

[CHUCKLES] The irony of it.

Yup.

The irony of it. What kind of impression did Berlin make on you?

It made quite an impression on me. I had several uncles and aunts still living there and then they took me around. I had

an uncle who ran a photo shop there, and he taught me how to work in a darkroom and to develop pictures and all that. It was very, very interesting.

And of these relatives, these are your mother's siblings?

Yes.

None of them survived?

None of them survived. And I've been doing a lot of research, and the only fate, I don't know, is one of my mother sisters that I could never find anything on, and the children of one of my uncles. Other than that, I have a complete record for what happened to all of them.

Can you tell me?

Well, I mean, it's--

I know, it's a lot.

It's on my computer.

From memory.

Well, the [NON-ENGLISH] happened to be the very first town where the Jews were sent off to ghettos. It was the very first, so all of them went to a ghetto called [PLACE NAME], or something like that, in Poland. The ones in Germany, they were left in Berlin. Most of them died in Auschwitz.

You were able to trace that back?

Yeah.

OK.

Because the German records are just unbelievable. I mean, there's no way they can deny it.

Yeah.

And I say I have two missing link, that's all.

From your large family that your mother was part of?

The cousins that I've been looking for, they were twins and they married twins.

Wow.

And these girls were from Poland. So when the Poles were being expelled, they went with them to Poland. But that's only hearsay. I never found any evidence or what happened to them afterwards.

So you wouldn't know where they would have gone to Poland?

No, and I don't even know their first names.

Wow. And I think what you're referring to is that one of those laws, or regulations again that was passed, that Jews of Polish origin-- that is, Polish citizens-- were expelled from Germany.

Yeah.

Yeah. And in Holland, let's go back then. So any other impressions of Berlin, besides your cousin talking about marching down, Jesse Owens, and the blonde girls.

No. I mean, I did a lot of sightseeing, and it was very, very great for a young kid to see.

Yeah.

And even today, Berlin, unfortunately, is probably the most exciting city in Europe right now. I hate to say it, but it is.

Well, yeah. It is a city sewn back together.

Yeah.

And a lot of development.

Incidentally, Checkpoint Charlie.

I know it well.

My uncle lived in that very house that's at that checkpoint.

Really? The one with the photo shop?

No.

Not that one.

The one I'll show you when we leave here, in the other room, because he was an artist. I have some of his art in the other room.

Well, he certainly lived in the center of Berlin.

Yeah.

So he lived on that place?

That's where he lived, yeah.

OK. Wow.

Exactly where Checkpoint Charlie is.

Tell me a little bit more about your summer in Holland then.

That was wonderful. First of all, there was freedom. There was good food and wonderful family. It was just very exciting for a young kid.

What part of Holland was it?

You know 's-Hertogenbosch?

Vaguely.

The Dutch call it Den Bosch. It's not too far from Arnhem.

Uh-huh, OK. I lived myself there for a while, but in the southern part. So this sounds like it was more in the middle of the country.

I guess so. When I was back there, the first Allied troops were both in Holland and Belgium in World War II, but that was up in the panhandle area, near Maastricht.

That's where I lived.

You lived in Maastricht?

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Well, we took Maastricht.

OK.

And I was in Heerlen.

Mm-hmm.

Heerlen, we took Heerlen on Friday morning. And we found out there was a synagogue that the Germans had turned into a stable. And for some-- I don't know where the hell these people came from, came out of the woodworks-- we had Friday evening services in that place in Heerlen.

Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness.

I loved Heerlen. At one time, I spoke very good Dutch, but not anymore.

In that summer, is that where you started learning it?

Mm-hmm.

OK. So these experiences, this sort of relief-- it sounds Heerlen certainly because it was not under German control at the time-- was a breath of freedom.

Oh gosh, yeah.

So the atmosphere must have been very tense and dark back in Dortmund in these years.

Oh, yes. Oh, yeah.

Let's go to the ship. You're up in Hamburg. You've passed the physical in Stuttgart at the other end of the country. Tell me, what is the ship like and who are the people on it and how do you get it there? What do you remember from that?

It's something very odd. Most of the staff on the ship wore a swastika insignia. However, because it was an international thing, people of all countries were there and the Germans wanted to make a good impression on the rest of the people. We were treated first class.

Really? What did that entail, being treated first class? Literally in the first class or treated well?

Oh, no. They treated us like any other passenger. There was no discrimination or no if you're a Jew, you do this. They treated us as nice as they could because we were told they wanted to make a good impression on them.

There are these three kids, you and two others. Were there anybody accompanying you?

No.

Really?

No.

So it was three kids all by themselves. And what was the sponsorship here? Can you repeat that?

It was a Kindertransport.

It was a Kinder, but not to England.

No, no. 12,000 went to England, but 1,200 came to America.

OK. And under the auspices of what organization?

Well, I was sponsored by the Birmingham Chapter Council of Jewish Women.

OK. So it was it that various Jewish organizations around the United States agreed to sponsor children?

Yeah.

And the social service agency that had called your parents, was that the local Dortmund Jewish social service agency?

Yeah. Yeah.

OK. Can you tell me the name of it?

No.

OK. OK. But it was the one that you knew of and dealt with?

Yeah.

And you only knew that it was the Birmingham-- did you know that it was the Birmingham women's?

No, my father told everybody, when he saw the Alabama, he told everybody I was going to Alahambra.

A little different.

[CHUCKLING]

Very different, yeah.

So what do you remember from the passage over?

It was very pleasant.

Yeah?

Very pleasant. Very nice. I say we were treated first class.

Was it a large ship?

Yes. It was one of the largest, the Hansa Europa.

Hansa Uropa.

Europa.

Europa.

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

It was in a regular passenger line?

Yeah, yeah.

Where did you sail into?

New York.

You see the Statue?

I tell you, that was one of the most emotional experiences I've ever had, when I saw the Statue of Liberty.

Yeah?

I thought she was the most beautiful lady in the world, better than Miss America. It was quite an experience.

Yeah.

Who else was on the ship besides the three of you? What kind of people?

I don't know.

OK. Did you talk to anybody else?

I don't remember.

And what about the three of you?

Oh, yeah. We were, yeah.

You kind of banded together?

Yeah. Yeah.

All right. And when you landed in the United States, were you met by anybody?

Yeah, I was met by a social worker, and we spent a night in New York. And then the next morning I was off to Birmingham.

By train?

By train, with the social worker. And when we got to Washington, I couldn't figure out what the hell was going on. I saw were people going to the back of the train, to the front of the train. And the social worker tried to explain to me about the Mason-Dixon line and the segregation. And I honestly couldn't understand what he was talking about, but that was my introduction to the South and to segregation.

Oh my goodness.

It wasn't several months later till I figured out what this was all about.

How sad.

Yes.

How sad. Did the social worker speak German to you?

No.

By this point did you speak some English?

We did the best we could.

OK.

Like I say, when he was trying to explain that to me, I couldn't understand what he was talking about.

OK. But there were darker people going to the back and lighter people coming to the front? OK. Let's cut here. Here we are.

OK, so before the break, we were talking about everything before you came to the United States and your eventual journey here, seeing the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, taking a train together with a social worker, who was barely able to explain to you why, in Washington, some people of darker skin moved to the back of the train and some to the front. Take me from there. Where did you go? What were your next impressions and steps and memories?

Well, I went to Birmingham, Alabama and they placed me with an old widow lady that didn't work out. I wasn't happy and she wasn't happy, so they found me another home, and I lived with a family until I left Birmingham to come to Atlanta.

And I entered school. They put me in the fourth or fifth grade, and every two weeks I got promoted. And then in the fall I entered high school as a sophomore.

So you were, at that point, 14 years old?

Yes.

So you started in the fourth or fifth grade and you ended as a sophomore?

Yes.

And what was the family that you moved to? What were their names?

Cotton.

Cotton? Like the cotton?

Yeah.

OK. Did they have children?

Yes, they had three children.

Were they about your age?

The two were older and one was about my age.

OK, boys or girls?

One boy and two girls.

OK. And how did you feel in this family? How did you integrate?

I felt very good. Everything was fine. I didn't have any problems, until suddenly they told me I was being moved to Atlanta.

And when did you move to Atlanta?

In January of '39.

Oh, so it was very soon thereafter?

Yeah.

OK. And do you know why you were moved to Atlanta?

Well, the social workers that were in charged were stationed in Atlanta, and I guess it made me easier to be handled.

These social workers, who did they work for?

The German-Jewish Children's Aid.

OK. Did you ever meet any of the people who were part of this organization?

I just met the social workers, basically.

OK. And can you tell me anything about that German-Jewish Children's Aid, how it formed, who was part of it?

I have no idea.

OK. Did you always have the same social worker?

Yes, I think so.

Do you remember that name?

Mrs. Weil, W-E-I-L.

W-E-I-L. And did she speak German?

No.

How long did it take for you to really pick up English so that you could understand what was going on?

Except for a few problems here and there, I think after five or six months I was doing pretty good.

OK.

I mean, every once in a while I ran into problems. For example, in school, when they talked about a schedule, first of all, I tried to pronounce it the German way.

And how would that be?

Schedula. And I didn't know what they were talking about. And the biggest faux pas I did was when I was still in Birmingham. And they told me, if I go to town by myself, which bus to take to go home. And I guess I was smarter than them, because I had seen a bus pass by that was marked garage. So I got on one of those and ended up--

Guess where?

Guess where? I mean, I had a few those fiascoes.

But yeah, at age 14, one picks up a language fairly quickly. So you had arrived in 1938 in-- remind me again the month.

April.

April. And by January of '39, you were in Atlanta.

Yes.

And you were in a new family?

Yes.

And who was this family?

Well, first of all, this family, we actually became family. Everybody in their family considers me cousins and brothers, and so on, so it's been a very wonderful relationship. Her name was Fanny Asman, A-S-M-A-N. And she had two children, one whom we just celebrated their 100th birthday last week.

Oh my goodness.

And I've been very close to the family all my life.

So was it a mother and two children, or was there a father also?

No, it was a mother and two children.

OK. And what were the names of her children?

David and Ruby.

All right. And you were closer in age to which one?

Well, Dave is the closest to me. He's about three years older than I.

OK. And then Ruby is the one who just celebrated 100th?

100th, yeah.

Tell me a little bit about your life in Atlanta then from January '39.

Well, first, I always wanted to be an engineer. So we had a tech high school in Atlanta, which was strictly property for Georgia Tech or anything in engineering, and I just never felt comfortable. So the following year I went to Commercial High, which got me started with accounting, and so on. I got involved in Jewish youth groups and had a very full life here.

Was Mrs. Asman and the whole family also Jewish?

Oh, yes.

And were they different than your own family back in Dortmund, as far as keeping kosher or rituals, and so on?

Yes, they did. Yes, they did.

OK. Did you continue going to the synagogue then every week, like you had before?

Well, actually, I don't know if you familiar with the custom of Kaddish.

Tell me about it.

When a parent dies, we say Kaddish, and that's a daily requirement. So I went to synagogue every day. And since my mother died so closely afterwards, I was going every day for about 18 or 19 months.

For both of your parents?

Mm-hmm.

When you found out about your father, was there anybody with you? Was Mrs. Asman with you or the children with you?

Yes. Mrs. Asman and her nephew took me to a park. I had no idea why I was going. And we sat on a park bench when they read the telegram to me.

So they knew already before you did?

Yes, but they didn't know how to break it to me.

Did you feel very alone?

Yes. It was a very helpless feeling. I don't know how to explain it, because I always harbored hopes that I'd be able to find a way to bring them to America. I was not ready for it.

In the days and the weeks and so on that came after, how did you handle this? Did your grief express itself in any way?

Not that I know of.

Did saying Kaddish everyday help?

Yes. Like I say, I did for about 18 or 19 months, which is a long time. Because usually it's for a year, but the two dovetailed one another.

And when news of your mother's death came, how did you receive that? Were you with someone again?

No. It was a letter from my uncle telling me that he just attended the funeral of my mother.

And you got that on your own?

Yeah.

Nobody was around. Did you feel the need to talk to anyone?

I don't know. I don't remember.

I mean, the sense that I'm getting is that you kept a lot inside.

Oh, yeah.

You were 14, 15 years old when you lost your parents. 15.

15 then, yes.

15. Did you feel at that point that you're no longer a child?

[CHUCKLING]

I know, it's a tough question, but it's like not everybody loses their parents in these circumstances, and I want to get a sense of your inner life, at the same time without prying too much.

The only way I changed, I mean, I wanted to be on my own, at least for spending money, so I used to work in a retail store every Saturday as a clerk.

OK.

And my first paycheck was \$2.30.

Was it? OK. How much did people in Atlanta know about what was going on-- I'm talking about the Jewish community and then the larger community-- know what was going on in Germany?

I don't think anybody fathomed how bad it was. In all honesty, although there was some talk about it, I think it came as a shock to the world when the war ended and they found out how many people had gotten killed. People sensed it. Some people even talked about it who came from over there, but I guess nobody wanted to believe it. And I don't think the real story of the Holocaust came out till the war was over.

OK. And in the Jewish community in Atlanta, were there other children from Germany?

Yes.

Many?

Quite a number of them, yes.

All right. So within the community itself, they would know more. They would know more of what was going on in Germany.

No, no, no. What I'm saying, we knew what kind of Germany we left, but I don't think any of us had a sense of the extent to which the Holocaust went.

After you left?

Yeah.

OK.

I mean, the figure six million was a total shock to everybody.

OK. Did the children who came from Germany and live together in Atlanta, did you, somehow or other, have ties to one another?

Yes. They even tried to build an organization of the ones that came, and we had events about three or four times a year, like a swimming party, that kind of stuff.

And did you form friendships with any of them, or not really?

I had a relationship, but not close friendships.

OK. What was school life like? How were American kids, teenagers-- in your eyes, were they much different from the ones you had left back in Europe?

Oh, it was totally different. Totally different. I mean, first of all, school itself was different. I never heard of recess in my whole life. I didn't know what that was. I didn't know about the football part of high school. I mean, it was a total difference.

And also, we were educated. And the methods they used, and so on-- I hate to say this, in all due respect to the good teachers I had in America, the teachers in Germany were way superior in intellect and just general knowledge.

How would that express itself? Could you give me any example of this?

Well, I remember having an English teacher who didn't speak good English, grammatically and so on. I mean, there were a lot of teachers who were just-- the teaching profession was, and in some sense still is, the lowest profession in America, I mean pay-wise and the kind of people that go in there.

The School of Education in Georgia a few years ago had the lowest average of any school in the system. Teaching in America has been an easy outlet, rather than a lifetime vacation. I mean, I hate to be this critical, but this is a fact.

Well, you have some basis of comparison.

Yeah.

You saw how it could be.

Yeah.

So how did your schooling continue?

Well, I went to Commercial High School and then I went to Georgia State, and went in the Army. When I came back, I

took some more courses at Georgia State and then started at the John Marshall Law School.

OK. We'll come to those sections in a little bit. At this point, I want to go back to 1939. It's the month that your mother passes away. It's also the month that the war starts, with Germany invading Poland on September 1st.

Yup.

Do you remember how you learned of the war beginning, where you were at the time?

Oh, well, in America, the news was immediate.

OK.

We didn't have television then, but between the radio and the newspapers-- and I also happened to be near a friend's radio when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

That was my next question. How did people react? What happened after they heard that?

Well, first of all, me, like many other people, never heard of Pearl Harbor.

OK.

I don't know. We already had some people joining the Army before Pearl Harbor, so there was already a change, people joining the military, and so on. But I don't know what else to say.

When the war started, but before Pearl Harbor occurred, did you meet anybody or hear of American apologists, American isolationists?

Oh, isolationists were all over the place.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah. You know, we shouldn't get involved in a foreign thing, and on and on and on.

Would you meet with such people or you read about it?

No just read about them.

Read about them. OK. When Pearl Harbor happened, you were already 17. That's '41, December '41.

Yeah.

So you're getting close to 18 years old.

No, I was 18.

And when the draft--

I had just become 18.

You had just become 18. That's right, November 29th. I wanted to join the Army, and they wouldn't take me because what happened is when Pearl Harbor hit, people who had German and Japanese passports were considered illegal aliens, and I had to report to the post office once a month.

So I was not eligible for the draft. So I filed a presidential appeal, and that way got into the Army. And I became a citizen before I went overseas, and became naturalized in Norfolk.

And that was in what year?

'43.

So you had been in the country about five years, something for five years.

Yeah.

All right. This also may be one of my stupid questions that may be self-evident, but if you have a way of responding to it, I'd like to hear it. When you left Germany, what did you feel towards Germany? Think about Germany, and then when you wanted to join the Army, what was propelling you?

Well, I had a tremendous bitterness against Germany and that's why I was most anxious to get involved. I mean, there were some kids from Germany who maintained German culture and like to sing German songs. I didn't want to have anything to do with the bastards. I was just really completely, you know what I am saying?

Mm-hmm. Did you speak German again?

Well, I made this discovery later when I was asked to be an interpreter in the Army. My German is the German of a 14-year-old. Well, I never had an opportunity to learn the kind of language that you learn as an adult.

And to give you an example, we captured an aluminum plant in Germany, and the American government thought that the German aluminum process was way ahead of the American aluminum process, and they asked me to be interpreter for the scientists. Well, they threw words at me that I hardly knew the English word, much less the German word. I don't think I ever heard of the word anodizing till that day. And certain parts of language you only learn as an adult.

Also, it's technical.

And technical. But that's when I reached a conclusion that my German, to this day probably, is the German of a 14-year-old. And I never read German books afterwards and I had no way to advance.

Got it. So let's go back to Pearl Harbor in 1941. What happened with your schooling? After Pearl Harbor, did you continue still?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

OK. So where were you going? I lost the train.

I was in high school then, Commercial High School. And I forgot when I graduated. Well, it must have been '41, and then I started at Georgia State, which was then called the Atlanta Division of the University of Georgia.

All right. And how long did you go to Georgia State in 1942?

Until I joined the Army.

And that was when?

In June of '43.

OK. So you had a good year and a half, two years, something like that in Georgia State. And were you studying general humanities in the beginning or something specialized?

No, accounting.

Accounting, OK. So in June '43 is when you joined the Army, and that's when that rule is rescinded about German and Japanese nationals? Is that right?

No, that was before. That's why I was not subject to the draft.

OK. And where did you join up?

When?

Where?

Oh, where. We were inducted here at Fort McPherson in Atlanta.

All right.

Which was only closed about a year or two ago.

OK. So tell me the process. After you were inducted, explain to me what came next.

Well, after I was inducted, I was sent to Fort Eustis, Virginia, which was an antiaircraft camp. And basic training in those years was 22 years-- 22--

Months.

--months. And we learned all the ins and outs of antiaircraft. And another interesting thing happened to me. My rifle coach was John Eisenhower.

No, really? John Eisenhower was your rifle coach.

Yeah. He was at West Point at the time, and they sent some West Pointers to camp to see how to deal with recruits.

Mm-hmm.

And then from Fort Eustis, I went to Fort Devens, Virginia-- Fort Devens, Massachusetts. And then we shipped out on Lincoln's birthday and got to England on Washington's birthday in '44.

So that was, OK, in the dead of winter. Now, a lot of people, a lot of young men that have a similar background to you-- they're young German-Jews-- when they entered the Army in the United States, they got sent to Camp Ritchie.

I had an opportunity go to Camp Ritchie and I wanted to be in combat. Camp Ritchie was too-- but I became an interpreter anyhow, much later, but I was not a CIC agent at the time.

OK. And what fueled your desire to be in combat?

Because I wanted to get back at the bastards. I mean, can't be anymore blunt than that.

OK. OK. So you ship out in February and you arrive in February '44.

Yeah.

Where did you arrive?

In Southampton, and my first camp was in Weston-super-Mare. Then we actually traveled all around England, went from one camp to another. We didn't get up to Scotland, but just England proper. We made a whole circle. And then we left for Normandy out of Bournemouth.

OK. Did you have any additional training during the time that you were in Britain?

Well, I was switched to chief of section of a half-track.

Oh chief of section of a half-track?

Yeah.

OK. What does that mean?

I was in charge of the half-track and the crew. Half track had a quad 450 millimeter antiaircraft guns and a turret on it, and we would shoot at low-flying planes.

Let's cut.

Don't worry, I'm not going to answer it.

OK. So explain to me, what is a half track?

A half-track an armored vehicle that has treads on the back and wheels like an automobile wheel in the front.

And what kind of terrain is it usually used on?

Oh, any terrain.

Any terrain.

Yeah.

What is the advantage of a half-track as opposed to a tank?

Well, it has a different purpose.

OK, tell me.

A tank is for direct shooting against direct targets. We were shooting at airplanes and you had to be open on the top in order to see the airplane.

OK. OK. So the one purpose of a half-track is aircraft, antiaircraft?

Well, ours was. Some of them are just used as troop carriers.

OK. So you were in charge of one half-track?

Yeah.

And how many soldiers would be connected to that?

Four, including myself.

Four?

A driver and a gunner and myself and another assistant.

OK. When did you ship over to Normandy?

On D-4.

So that means four days after D-Day?

Mm-hmm.

When you got there, what beach did you get to?

Omaha, very easy.

What did you see?

Hm?

What did you see on the beach?

Oh, hundreds of dead soldiers, abandoned fort assistants. It was a mess. It was awful. And unfortunately, our half-track was taken over on a British landing craft. The American landing craft took the soldiers all the way to the beach.

The British let us out way in the water because they didn't want to wait for the tide to turn around and go back to England. So consequently, although we had waterproofed our half-track, we had to go through water and still lost a lot of stuff going through water to land on the beach.

So a lot of the equipment that comes with it?

Well, mainly our duffel bags got soaking wet, that sort of stuff.

OK. But how high up in the water did you have to jump in?

We didn't jump in. We were on--

You were on the half-track?

On the half-track. We drove in.

OK. So can you give me a sense of how deep was the water?

See, after it was waterproofed, we had a pipe going from the exhaust pipe above the top of it so any water wouldn't get into the engine and so on, and the engine was also waterproofed. And we were probably-- don't hold me to it-- but probably four feet in the water.

OK. All right. Did you stay on the beach or did you go somewhere else?

We went about maybe a quarter to a half mile inland and spent the first night, dug a foxhole. And I got used to what incoming mail and outgoing mail is. That's what we call the shells coming in and going out. And within 24 hours, by the noise, we could know if we were in danger of being hit or if it was going to go over us.

So you went into combat?

Oh, yeah.

So right away you're in combat, rather than in an area that has already been secured.

Oh, no. We were in combat longer than any division in the Army.

What was your division? What number was it?

30th.

All right, what happened then? You had this foxhole. You learned the difference between incoming and outgoing mail.

Yup.

Take me further. What happened after that?

When we were being briefed in England, our main target was Saint-Lo. Saint-Lo was about-- I can't tell you exactly-- about 10 or 20 miles from the beach, but we didn't get there till about five, six weeks later. The whole Saint-Lo experience was very unusual.

First, the high command decided they wanted to do an experiment with our guns to do direct fire. So we were stationed as far as you could go before being in enemy territory on a hill. There was all these hedgerows in Normandy. I guess you heard of those.

So we were on this hill, doing direct fire against the Germans. And that didn't do any good. And then we got a little further, and it's an interesting story. We found a farmhouse. It was a two-story farmhouse, one room upstairs and one downstairs, but downstairs was a cider barrel. So we got very excited about it and we had a poker game there one night.

So I'm playing poker and a voice behind me says, can this building be seen from the horizon? And I said, how in the shit do I know? And I turned around and it was Omar Bradley.

Oh my God.

And we still didn't know what was happening. The next day or two, hundreds of Signal Corps people came, and that building became the headquarters to observe the bombing of Saint-Lo, which was a disaster, because the first wave of American planes had come over. They dropped a flare to point out where the target was, but they didn't count on a wind blowing the flare back to us, and the first wave killed more Americans than Germans.

Oh.

And then after the second wave, they corrected that mistake. Oh, incidentally, when that happened, every important general from American and English branches of Army, Navy was at that observation place. We saw everybody.

And so we went in the second day and then were successful. But I was going through with my half-track, and about every 100 yards or so-- I may be exaggerating a little-- we had a flat tire from all the shrapnel that was in there. So in Saint-Lo, per se, we did nothing but repair tires on our half-track. But that's when the breakthrough began.

Tell me. The breakthrough was through Saint-Lo.

Saint-Lo and Mortain, which was the next one there. Mortain was probably the major battle that's the least talked about. Our division has always been upset that Mortain is so ignored, because we considered it the number one battle in the whole war.

Tell me why, and tell me about it.

Mortain is also in Normandy. And the Germans decided to bring all of their armor into there and cut us in half, and thereby defeating the invasion. And between the Air Force and the artillery and all that, we held the Germans off and finally broke through. That was our last major effort, except the Battle of the Bulge later a little bit.

So how long did it take for you to hold them off and break through at Mortain?

Mortain, I got a book on it upstairs also. We were, I would say, four or five days.

OK, so it was four or five weeks for Saint-Lo?

Yeah.

And then four or five days for Mortain?

Yeah.

All right, so you're somewhere in July and August of '44. What happens after that?

Well, after Mortain, we went very fast, as a matter of fact, sometimes faster than our supply lines. We went towards-- let me rephrase this. We were the northern-most American division. The British were next to us, so we were always in the northern part of everything.

So that meant you were going towards Belgium?

Yes.

OK.

We went towards Belgium. And actually, Montgomery takes claims for being the first in Belgium, but me and my crew, six hours earlier, we had to sit in the ditch, watching them come in. And from there we went to Holland.

In the Netherlands?

In the Netherlands, and then eventually to Germany. And in Germany, we got called back. The Battle of the Bulge had taken place, and we had to go back. The Battle of Bulge was a big triangle and we were put at the tip of it to stop them.

So when you went through Belgium and then the Netherlands, were you the liberating force or were the British the liberating force?

Well, we were the liberating force of places that we went to.

I see. I thought it was-- OK. But you were the liberating force then for the Netherlands?

Not for all of it. Mainly just the panhandle area, Maastricht and Heerlen and up around there.

So that's the southern part of the Netherlands?

Yeah, the northern part was all the British.

OK. When you got to this panhandle of the southern part of the Netherlands, Maastricht, Heerlen, and so on, what time of year was that?

I'm going to have to guess at it. I would say October.

OK.

I'm guessing. But incidentally, I also had my first shower since landing in Normandy there. We discovered showers in the coal mine there for the coal miners, and that was my first shower.

That must have meant something.

Yeah.

Off camera, you also told me, about Maastricht, that you found-- was it in Maastricht or in Heerlen-- you found a synagogue.

In Heerlen.

All right. Tell me about that.

We discovered a synagogue that the Germans turned into a stable for their horses. And somehow or another, some people cleaned it out that day, and that night was a Friday night. They had Friday evening services in there.

And were there many Jews to have the services?

There were a few.

Were they Army people?

No, no. The Army people plus people that had been hidden.

And they came out from hiding? Now, when you had spent the summer in the Netherlands before, when you were still a boy, you started learning Dutch.

Yeah.

When you came back with the Americans, were you able to converse with people? Had you kept enough Dutch that you were able to communicate?

I made out. I could read it better than I could speak it, for sure.

OK. So did you talk to any of the people who had been hidden?

No.

No. OK. All right. So you participated in the Friday evening services.

In Heerlen.

In Heerlen. And then what happened after that?

Well, after that, it's one of my big failures.

Why do you say that?

We wanted to prepare to cross the line, and they had us maneuver on the Meuse River in Holland. And I came up with an idea that I thought was masterful, and the high command took it up, but it was a total failure and wouldn't work.

Oh.

We were trying to figure out how to get communication lines across the river.

Meuse River, or the Rhine River.

Rhine, eventually. So I made a suggestion that we put a cable-- I don't know, a combat wire during WWII, was about as thin as what you use to recharge your cell phone, that kind of wire.

Very thin.

I suggested that we tie it up to a bazooka shell and let the bazooka fire over to the other side. And all the generals came out to watch this thing to see if it worked. But what we didn't figure, the slag from the wire would always get caught in the water and pull a shell back into the water before it got to the other side.

I thought I had a wonderful idea and it didn't work.

Maybe it just didn't have the power to go far enough, whatever it did. So you tried it once and it didn't work there?

Oh, we tried it several times. Spent almost a day experimenting.

OK. How did it eventually get taken across?

I don't know because we didn't have that problem, because what happened is on the southern end, they discovered the bridge. The Remagen Bridge, have you ever heard of that?

Mm-hmm.

So they crossed the line over there. So after that, it wasn't necessary to go through all those things.

OK. So from Heerlen, I mean, that's so close to the German border. Did you continue into Germany?

Yes. We entered Germany maybe four or five miles south of Monchengladbach, and went into Germany from there.

And what did you see when you got there, in Monchengladbach and the surrounding areas? Were they bombed out?

Oh, yeah. Everywhere you went was bombed out.

Did you see any civilians?

Yes.

Did you engage with any of them?

No, we weren't allowed to. It was called fraternizing.

Even talking to them?

Oh, no. We were not allowed to speak to Germans.

OK. What about German soldiers? Did you engage with any of them? Did you ever get close enough to--

I interrogated some prisoners, but not many.

OK.

And I'll tell you the oddity that gives you the whole German mentality. The first word out of every German prisoner was I didn't fight on this front. I fought on the Eastern Front. Although we took a POW here, the first thing out of their mouth said, I only fought on the Eastern Front.

And what did they think would save them with that?

I don't know, but that was a norm. And as I say, we got to-- oh, God, what's the name of the city-- to Julich. Julich, OK.

We got to Julich when we got called back to go to Belgium to the Battle of the Bulge.

OK. So you were involved in these interrogations until then, when you would capture somebody?

Yes.

All right. Was there any other kind of information you were after? What kind of questions did you ask?

Well, first, we ask them the usual name, rank, and serial number, and what outfit, what unit, and so on. I mean, just general questions. But it was amazing, the responses we got.

And I had even a worse one much later. This was after the armistice was signed. We were stationed next to a place that was-- oh, God, what's the name? What do you call it? Not a Canyon.

A valley?

No, a natural, a stone-- a quarry.

A quarry, OK.

A quarry that they were testing the V-2 bombs in.

OK.

And by then I was switched to become a CIC agent temporarily. And somebody told us that there was a scientist there who was very instrumental, and he's in hiding. So we found him. And I didn't want to let on that I could speak German, so I kept asking him questions in English.

And he wouldn't answer. He said, I don't speak English. And I knew that every intellectual in Germany knew French and English. So the sergeant who was in my Jeep said, why don't we just kill the son of a bitch? And all of a sudden he spoke King's English. And a week later, or two weeks later, I read in The Stars and Stripes-- it was our newspaper-- that he was Huntsville, helping with Riedel.

Excuse me?

That he was in Huntsville, Alabama, helping Riedel. I was fit to be tied.

Well, that happened. It happened with Wernher von Braun.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I mean, Wernher von Braun, who was-- his name was Riedel. Yeah.

Once he started talking, did he have anything to say that you remember?

Well, usually they had nothing to do with anything, you know.

Oh, OK. All right. But that's much later.

Yeah.

That's at a further point down the line. So you're pulled back. You're pulled back to what will be the Battle of the Bulge.

Yeah.

And this is probably at what time in the fall, November or something?

Well, I know we spent Christmas there. I'm pretty sure it was December.

OK. And you said you were in one of the tips of the triangle that was the northern--

We were the ones that stopped at the tip of it.

All right, and at what location was that?

It's near Spa, Francorchamps.

OK.

Francorchamps, it's near Spa.

Is that in Belgium?

Yeah.

OK.

That's actually where the word "spa" comes from.

And can tell me a little bit about what happened there with you, the half-track, your other soldiers.

Well, about then I was no longer on the half-track. I became a forward observer. And the most interesting part, when people hear of the snow and ice we had. We were billeted in a farmhouse, very nice people. But to go in and out of the house, we had to go through a second floor window because the snow was so high.

Really? OK. So what was your work as a forward observer? What did you have to do?

I was spotting the airplanes. The German planes came in and give them directions to our guns.

OK. Did you have more engagement than that? That is, were you involved in any of the battles in any other way?

We didn't really have any major battles that I can think of. Other than getting bombed from the planes, we hardly encountered any German soldiers. I don't remember that.

OK.

And then after it was over, we went back to the Siegfried Line to start a battle fire.

All right. Can you tell me, what was the Siegfried Line?

The Siegfried Line was a German counterpart to the Maginot Line, which was a series of fortresses, which Germany hoped would keep the French from coming out of Germany. And the Maginot Line hoped that the Germans couldn't get into France.

But this was from the First World War?

No, they were built after the First World War.

Oh, they were built after the First World War? OK.

Yeah, Hitler built the Siegfried Line.

OK. Well, did you cross the Siegfried Line?

Oh, yeah.

And so you were on your way to Aachen, very close to the Dutch border and Belgian border. And what was your work then? What did you do then? What was your role?

You know, I think I give it to you backwards. I apologize.

It's OK.

Aachen was before. Julich was later. When we got to Julich, we were called back to the Battle of the Bulge. In the Siegfried Line, I was still chief of section of the half-track, and I became a forward observer when we got to the Battle of the Bulge.

Well, you told me that, yes. And you had to climb through the second floor window of the farmer's house.

Yeah.

And then after that, what happened? Where'd you go?

Well, after that, it was very easy. We just kept going into Germany, and because of Potsdam Agreement, we had to stop at the Elbe River. So we went as far as Magdeburg.

That's pretty far. You were very close to Berlin.

Yeah. But there was a border that they'd agreed on in the Potsdam Agreement.

All right, as you were going after the Battle of the Bulge to Magdeburg, it sounds like that's what you're doing through the winter of 1945.

No.

No? When did that take place.

Winter of '45, the war was already over. Yes, the war ended in May of '45.

That's right. So the winter of '45, it was still going on.

You mean at the beginning of it?

That's right.

The beginning? No, the beginning we were still in the Battle of the Bulge.

All right, that's December '44.

Yeah, in January.

OK. And then after that?

And after that we started going very fast towards Magdeburg.

OK. And that was February and March 1945?

Yeah. Yeah.

OK. So as you were going, February and March '45, towards Magdeburg. Do you remember what you saw as you were going through this heart of Germany?

Well, as I say, they used me as an interpreter a lot. I was involved in this aluminum plant, and then I also was involved-- there was a salt mine somewhere in the area, in which all of the French gold was stored. And I supervised the transfer of the French gold to the French government.

That must have been satisfying.

Yeah, it was very satisfying. Only then did I learn about the specific weight of gold, because it's almost impossible to carry one, what do you call?

A brick?

It's like a break, yeah.

OK.

It's very heavy. And I did a lot of interpreting from then on.

And how was it that you got transferred from the half-track to the-- I guess you became the forward--

Well, I was still in the same outfit. I was simply changed from the battery, combat battery, to the headquarters battery.

And that was solely because of your German language skills?

Yeah. Yeah.

Were there others in your unit or that you knew who also spoke?

No.

So you were the only one?

Yeah.

All right.

And then I said we went through a bunch of salt mines and the aluminum factory and that kind of experiences. And then when we got to Brunswick, which is Braunschweig in Germany--

That's right.

--is when Roosevelt died. And the Germans were laughing and making fun of us, and we got pretty nasty about the way they acted.

What does nasty mean?

We started fighting with civilians. And as we neared Magdeburg, about six miles before we got to Magdeburg, I was looking for a gun position for my outfit when I detected this horrible smell, this horrible odor, and I couldn't figure out where that stink was coming from.

Can you tell me what the odor smelt like? Can you describe it?

No, just awful. And what we discovered was an abandoned train full of Jews being shipped from one concentration camp to another. They'd been locked in these cars without food and water, no sanitary facilities. It was the most horrible site that you can imagine. And it was in a town called Farsleben, which is about six kilometers outside of Magdeburg.

And was it a train that had many cars to it?

Oh, yes. It was a cattle train. And it had about 60 to 70 people in each car. Some of them were dead, half-dead, standing. There was no place to sit. It was a horrible experience.

And so how many of you discovered it? How many from the US Army discovered it?

Well, from Magdeburg, we were the only ones. There wasn't any tank battalion that happened to be there, and more of them were involved than us. 743rd antitank, the battalion. And there was little we could do for them. We didn't have any food to share. We only had K-rations. We had nothing to share.

So one of the officers went to a nearby village and made all the Germans move out and turned that village into sort of a hospital so these people had a place to stay and could be taken care of. After that, I lost track of them completely, until my division invited some of their survivors to come to one of our reunions in North Carolina a few years ago.

Really?

But it was an unbelievable sight, and rather let these poor people get liberated than kept them locked in these cars.

How long were you there at that track?

It was about a day.

Did you talk to any of them?

Yes and no. I mean, they were in no shape for a conversation like you and I having. Most of them said-- The Yiddish word for Jews is "Yid," [YIDDISH]. And that's about the most conversation we had.

OK. And you understood, of course?

Yeah. And we felt so helpless because we had nothing to give them. We had no food. We had nothing. I mean, I carried a canteen cup, but that would be gone in two minutes.

So I know you explained to me that it was a horrible sight. What I would like, if you possibly could, do is to paint a picture in words of what it is you first see, how you come across the train as it is, what you first see there, and then how things develop and what you see next.

Well, as I said, we were attracted to the train by the odor and the smell. We didn't know what it was about. One of the men had opened up one of the cattle cars and he was shocked there was full of people, standing up, smelling like hell. These people had been without food and water for several days, no sanitary facilities, and they were just living human skeletons.

Men or women?

Both men and women. And we found out much later, when we located some of them, that they were teenagers at the time. Some of them were teenagers at the time we saw the train. And like I said, about 60 to 70 people in it.

In one car?

In one car. But to visualize it better, American cattle cars and freight cars are much bigger. Those are about 2/3 the size of what you're accustomed to here in America. And to illustrate it even better, are you familiar with American Legion?

Uh-huh, yes.

The elite group is called the Forty and Eight Society. It's named after those cattle cars in World War I, who could haul either 40 soldiers or eight horses. That's where the 40 and eight comes from. So 40 soldiers could be in--

In a cattle car.

--in a cattle car, but we had about 60 or 70 people in there.

So they were packed together.

Packed together. They were very bewildered. They were going to ship from Bergen-Belson to another camp, which name escapes me for a moment. And a few days later, one of our medical officers took over a village, made all the Germans evacuate, and turned it into a field hospital.

And of course, as I said before, I had a very helpless feeling because there's nothing I could do for them. I didn't have any food to share. I didn't have any water to share. There's nothing I could give these people.

And how did you know who they were? Who were these people that you find on the cattle cars?

Well, first of all, they had a star of David on the front of their garment.

OK.

And most of them were so anxious for us to know where they were, they would say in Yiddish, [YIDDISH], which means "I'm a Jew." But that was about the end of it. We didn't sit down and have a conversation with anyone. It was a very horrible experience.

Now, had they stopped close to a train station in Farsleben?

Oh, no, no. This was in the middle of nowhere.

It was in an open field?

Absolutely. Oh, yeah, an open field.

So you had been driving along in your half-track, or on some other vehicle.

No, I was in a Jeep then. We were looking to set up a gun position for my outfit.

And you're in this open area, and you don't see anything but you smell something.

Well, we smelled something and then we saw the train, and by then somebody had opened one of the doors.

I see. And was there's still an engine, a train engine with it, or was it just the cars on their own?

No, I've been told that the engine took off. The whole German crew took off with the engine.

So all they did was leave these cars there?

Yeah.

In the middle of nowhere? OK. And you say you stayed there for about a day.

Yes.

And during that day, were you near the train car, those train cars, or did you have to go back to looking for a position for your--

No, no. We stayed around the train cars for quite a while. Incidentally, if you have any interest, I think you can go to the internet on the train at Farsleben and find some photographs.

I see. So there were probably some soldiers who took pictures there?

Yes.

OK. Were there any other Jewish-American soldiers that you know of?

No, not that I know of.

OK.

First of all, I'll say the people who did the main work was from another battalion, the 743rd antitank battalion.

743rd antitank-- I didn't say it right-- 743rd antitank battalion.

Yes.

And you, who were from, repeat again?

531st AAA.

531st AAA. And you were the two that found and started to take care--

Well, more them than me. I was just with the three other people in my Jeep.

OK. And they were taking people off of the train, off of the cars?

They were jumping off, yeah.

OK. And you're saying many years later?

Many years later, a couple of guys from my outfit took it themselves to see if they could locate some of these people, and brought either five or six with their families to the reunion. One came from as far as London, England, and they had them talk about themselves and describe the whole experience.

And from the reunion, what do you remember? I mean, what kind of stories did they tell of who they were, where they had come from?

Well, the main thing that surprised me-- I wasn't there-- that all the people that we found were teenagers at the time they were liberated.

OK.

Because to me, everybody looked so old and haggard. I mean, you can't imagine what a person like it looks like. You never look at them as young people.

Well, from the photographs that are so famous and that we've seen, we can visualize it because of those photographs. But if we didn't have them, it would be very-- you talked about the star that was on their garments.

Yeah.

Were they all wearing the same kind of garments? Was it all prison uniforms?

No, as a matter of fact, in the pictures-- I used to tell people they were all in prison uniforms. In the pictures, they were not all in prison uniforms.

And up until that point-- you see, as you've been describing to me your service in the military and fighting and in the war, there is a point where you meet up with an effect of the Holocaust, and that is in Holland, when you find the synagogue and people who were hidden come and you had Friday services. And now this is the second part.

That's correct.

Between the one and the other, did you come across anything else?

No.

OK. And by this point, when they said we're from Bergen-Belson--

No, they didn't say.

It's something you found out later?

Yeah.

OK.

All they said was [YIDDISH]. That's all I heard out of them.

OK. Did you know of concentration camps?

Oh, yeah. We had heard of them, but again, I don't think any of us were aware of the magnitude.

All right.

And how many people had worked, because I think I was familiar with Dachau before I left Germany.

OK. Well, it would be natural because Dachau housed political prisoners in the 1930s, including Social Democrats.

Yeah. So on your way eastwards, during those last months before the war, you didn't come across anybody else or any other sign of Jewish life or Jewish death?

No.

OK. And you stayed there for about a day. And what did what did you do during that day?

I was just helpless and bewildered, because there's nothing I could do. I mean, I was almost like a bystander.

And what was the next day? What did you have to do the next day?

Well, I went back to the service. And then the last job I had before the war was over, in Magdeburg itself, they had a big POW camp for Russian prisoners that the Germans had taken. And I was in charge of transferring them to the Russians.

And much to my surprise and chagrin, I expected the Russians to welcome them with the band and all the kind of hoopla. There was nothing. They just went over there and went to the other side that was it. There was no welcoming. There was nothing.

Well, many of them were sent to Siberia because they had the nerve to be captured by the Germans.

Yeah.

Yeah.

It was very unexpected, but that was about--

And then later--

I want to pause at this moment, though, and ask you another question. You were witness to their transfer, that is, the prisoners, the former prisoners of war. Were you involved in the transfer?

No. I was but I can't remember what my job was. You'll have to excuse me.

That's OK. I don't remember what specific I did.

OK. How did they look?

Terrible.

Was there a difference between how they looked and the--

Oh, yeah. They were much better than that, but again, none of them looked overfed or anything like. It was a sad bunch.

And what was their mood like?

They were just very solemn, very somber.

Were there many?

Were there what?

Were there many of them, many of these former--

If I had to guess, I would say it was at least 500.

OK. And it sounds like it all took place in great silence.

Yeah.

When they had to cross from the--

The Elbe River.

So it was the Elbe River as it divided you?

Yes.

OK. Did you meet any of the Soviets on the other side?

No. We were strictly on this side, say, here are your boys, and that was it.

OK. And after that, you didn't meet? Because there are these famous pictures of American soldiers and Soviet soldiers meeting at the Elbe and kind of greeting each other.

We didn't do that.

OK. OK. And how long did you stay there, at that point? That was Magdeburg, yes?

It was Magdeburg, and from there we were shipped to a place called Leesten, and that's where the quarry was with the V-2 bomb.

And Riedel, who you found.

Yeah. Now, they had a forced labor camp there, but it was totally empty when we got there. So I don't know if they housed Jews or what they housed or how they treated them. It was completely empty when we got there.

Many Poles were near there.

Hm?

Many Poles were in the forced labor camps.

Yeah, I don't know. We didn't see any of them.

OK. But by that point, when you got there, you knew there had been a forced labor camp.

Oh, yes, yes. We were told that it was, yeah.

OK, all right.

And that's where they tested the V-2 bombs. And after that, I got a furlough to Paris and London. And before the furlough was over, I heard that the war was over, so I quickly found my outfit so I could get shipped home.

So you didn't go back to Dortmund?

No, I wanted to very much. Because Dortmund was in the British territory, they couldn't arrange for me to go there. My chaplain tried to work on it for me and we just couldn't put it together. Dortmund was in the British zone. I was actually probably less than 50, 60 miles from Dortmund.

How sad.

Yeah.

You ever hear of [NON-ENGLISH]?

Mm-hmm, yeah.

Well, we were there.

Yeah. So that's not far at all.

No, it's not.

So did you ever make it back to Dortmund?

After the war, yes.

When?

Well, I determined I didn't want to go back. And then one of my relatives told me that my father and mother had an actual burial in Dortmund and that the graves could be identified, and there's a Jewish law that you have to put a marker on a grave. It doesn't say what kind, but a grave cannot be unmarked.

So I went back to find the graves. Negotiated with a monument maker to get markers made. And then people came out of woodworks who remembered me because somehow the story got on the television and on the radio, and all of a sudden I found old friends and even a distant relative.

In Dortmund? Was this distant relative one of the four cousins that you said?

No, no. This was another interesting story.

OK.

Their father fought in World War I and he was gassed, and it was a gas warfare. And a Lutheran minister picked him up, rehabilitated him, adopted him, and converted him and his children in Dortmund.

So they were spared during World War II.

Yeah.

Even though many who converted were not spared.

No, because they went back to three generations. If you were one fourth Jewish, you--

Yeah.

Yeah. Somehow or another he survived.

So what year was this that you went back to Dortmund?

Judy, what was your first year in Israel?

When we went there? We moved in 1976.

That's when I was there.

So 1976, 30 years after the war ends, is the first time. And was it easy to find your parents' grave?

You know, in Germany, everything's organized. I went to the cemetery office and he took me directly to it.

To the spot?

Yeah.

What did it look like then when you first saw it?

It was just a plain-- just a little--

Just ground?

Yeah, just ground.

And on either side there were monuments?

There were monuments on some, yeah.

OK. And was this the Jewish cemetery?

Yeah.

OK. And you were able to arrange at this point?

Yeah.

And you say some people came out of the woodwork. Did you remember them from before the war?

Yes. Oh, yeah.

What kind of people were with these? Were these child-- yeah, tell me.

Just the friends of the family.

Had they stayed friends of the family even during the dark times?

Yeah.

OK. And what kind of a feeling did it then leave with you, having gone back? Did you expect any of this attention?

No, I didn't.

Did it make a difference?

Yes, I think it did, because I like to be connected. You know, I like people. I mean, I carry a grudge against some, not against everybody. But I want you to know, when I negotiated for those headstones, I lost my temper like never before.

He quoted me a price and I told him, fine, it's good. And then he said, we've got to add tax. I said, I'm not going to pay tax for those bastards who killed my parents. And I got so incensed, they said, don't worry about it. I'll take care of it.

Is that the first time and the only time you lost your temper?

It's one of very few times I lost my temper. It just hit me the wrong way when he said it's a tax.

[NON-ENGLISH]

Yeah.

Did you go back after that?

Yeah. After that, I went another time to see the finished job, and then I took all of my children there.

And that was a few years later?

Yeah, many years later.

Many years later.

I think it was 2009.

Oh, that's a long time later. So you've been back a handful of times, three times.

Yeah.

All right. How has your feeling towards Germany evolved?

Well, it sounds too easy, but when I look at old people my age, I figure they were part of the thing. When I see young people, I say, I can't blame them. They weren't there. And just historically, that's been my rule of thumb.

So that's generational?

Yeah. I mean, any young person I meet, I can't blame them. They weren't there.

Did you ever have contact with your old, not maid servant, but the lady who had helped your mother?

No.

No. So you never knew what happened to her?

I don't know what happened to her.

And what about Mrs. Kornhagen? Did she ever appear in the picture again?

No.

OK. Is there anything else that you think is important for us to know about Germany, your connection to it or disconnection to it?

No. I can't think of anything.

All right. And conversely, the United States. I don't know whether this was on camera or off camera, but you mentioned earlier that the States, it was at its high point during the war.

Yeah. I think those were the best of times for American people. At the end of World War II, there was a togetherness like we never had since. We didn't have all these splinters and all of these different ideologies. People were very, very patriotic and very much together. They welcomed the soldiers home. And then when Vietnam came, soldiers were looked down upon. These were really the best of times.

So it was one society, rather than a fractured society.

Yeah.

OK.

But I think Vietnam is what destroyed it.

What about you, your identity now, and America for you, not just the overall picture? Is this home?

Oh, yes. There's no question about it. I mean, I consider Germany as something totally gone from my past. You know, I have no feeling for it, none whatsoever.

But for the United States, it's different?

Yeah.

All right. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about today that you think is important for us to know?

No, I can't think of it.

Well then, I thank you for your time.

Thank you.

And I thank you for your testimony. And with that, this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Henry Birnbrey on October 22, 2015. Thank you again.

Thank you.

There we are.