

[QUIET CHATTER] OK.

And speed. OK, we're rolling.

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Vincent Koch on February 22, 2017, in Boca Raton, Florida. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Koch, for agreeing to meet with us today to share your story, to share your experiences.

As I mentioned off-camera, I'm going to begin our interview with the most basic questions. And from that we'll build and we'll develop your story. So the very first question I have is, what was your name at birth?

My name at birth was Vincent Kucharsky. K-U-C-H-A-R-S-K-Y.

OK. And when were you born?

I was born May 25, 1925.

And where were you born?

I was born in New York City.

Which borough.

I was born in Manhattan.

You were born in Manhattan?

Yes.

Upper? Upper, Lower, East, West?

I don't know. It was Lebanon hospital.

Oh, I mean more, where did your parents live? Where? Did they live in Manhattan?

Yes, that's where they lived.

All right.

Yeah.

And is that where you grew up?

I grew up primarily in the Bronx. They moved up to that area.

Do you still remember the address?

Absolutely.

What was it?

1957 Bronxdale Avenue. 821 is the apartment number.

821. And did you have brothers and sisters?

I have one brother.

OK. Younger or older?

Younger.

And what's his name?

Jesse.

And when was he born?

He was born on-- he was born on-- he just had a birthday. He was born on 4th of January 1931.

So there was about six years difference between you.

Exactly.

OK.

Exactly.

What was your father's name?

Abraham.

Abraham Kucharsky?

Yes.

And your mother's?

Rebecca.

And her maiden name?

G-O-L-U-B, Golub.

Golub. Where-- did your parents have brothers and sisters?

Yes. My parents had brothers and sisters. My father had about seven brothers and sisters. And my mother had about five.

Were they all New Yorkers?

Yes.

Were your parents also born in New York?

No, they weren't born in New York. They came from Russia.

Oh, did they?

Yeah.

So you're a first-generation American.

Probably, yeah.

If they came from Russia, they were immigrants. And you are the first generation born here.

Well, my father was born in London on the way over from--

From Russia.

Coming from Russia to America.

Do you know what part of Russia they were from, your father was from?

Not exactly.

What about your mother?

Where was my mother from? She was from Minsk.

I've been to Minsk.

Have you?

I have, yes.

OK, that's good.

Minsk is from today's Belarus. It's the capital of Belarus.

OK.

And it was heavily, heavily bombed during the war.

OK.

It was one of the toughest places to be. So do you remember, did your parents ever tell you what years they came over?

I wouldn't know that, exactly what year.

OK.

I wouldn't know.

Did they know each other before, or did they meet in New York?

They met in New York.

OK. And do you know how they met, how they met and married? What was the story there?

Well, they happened to move into a likable neighborhood, and that's how they met.

So they were neighbors, or neighbor people?

Neighbors, exactly.

OK.

Exactly.

And was that in the Bronx as well?

Well, it started in Manhattan. That's where they moved when they came to America. To America. That's where they came. They came to Manhattan. They had relatives there. My grandparents lived in New York, too.

Oh, so your grandparents had already come to the United States.

Yes, a little before. Very similar, but a little before.

And do you know why the family left Russia?

No.

No one ever spoke? They just said we left. OK.

I don't know. I don't remember hearing why they left Russia. I imagine that it had a lot to do with the war at that time.

That's true. I've heard a lot of people say that in the early part of the 20th century, in the late part of the 19th, people wanted to avoid serving in that Czar's army.

Mm-hmm.

You know, it was the draft. It was of course the war itself when it happened. So about how long do you think they were in the United States before you were born?

I really don't know.

OK. Do you know the year they married?

No. I don't know the year they married.

That's OK. What language did you speak at home?

English.

English?

English.

So they learned English?

Yeah.

That's unusual.

Yes, I know that.

That's very unusual.

Yeah. We spoke English.

OK. Did they ever speak Yiddish amongst themselves?

My grandparents did.

OK.

But my parents at home always spoke English.

And what about Russian? Did anybody know Russian?

Yes. I don't know what percentage they were comfortable with, but they did speak. My mother I know did. Not my father.

OK.

My mother's spoke some Russian.

OK. Did they have family still left behind?

Yes.

Who would that have been?

Who would that have been? I really don't know what percentage of them? There was probably some brothers. And they all didn't come over at the same time.

So would have this been on your grandparents' generation or your parents' generation, who was staying behind?

Staying behind, it was predominantly on my-- not my parents. My parents came over with some of the relatives. I think the grandfather came over first.

OK.

And one of the oldest daughter, I remember, came over. I mean, this wasn't in my time, so I--

I know. And I know sometimes families tell stories, and sometimes they don't talk much.

Yes.

What was yours like? Your parents?

What was mine then? They didn't talk much at all. You'd have to push them to get stories.

What did their parents do to make a living?

To make a living? My father was a Painter-decorator

OK.

And my mother was a housewife.

OK. How did he come to be a painter and a decorator?

I think one of the older brothers were in that. And that's where it started from.

Did they have their own business?

No. No, they worked for other people.

Worked for other people, yes.

OK. And your mom took care of the house, then?

Yes.

She took care of you and your brother and the household.

Yes.

OK.

And the children.

And the children.

Yes.

A not inconsequential thing, you know?

Not at all.

Yeah. Which parent was the one who was more involved with you when you were younger?

Which parent? Well, I suppose I saw more of my mother than my father.

OK.

But--

Were you closer to one or the other?

No, both about the same. We had a very warm early life with the family. We had a very close relationship.

Was yours a religious family?

The grandparent end of it was. My grandfather was.

And this would have been your father's father or your mother's?

My mother's father.

And when you talked about your grandfather before, were you referring to your mother's father or to both sets?

I was much closer to my mother's, because we lived-- in those days, you would live closer to the-- people didn't roam around that much.

Yeah.

And we lived near our grandparents. My brother as well.

And your father's parents, were they also in the United States or not?

Yeah, my father's parents, they originally ended up in New York.

OK.

And then after that, they all migrated to California.

Oh, so it's part of the family was then on the West Coast?

Yes, yes. My father's family was predominantly on the West Coast, California.

Was your neighborhood predominantly Jewish, or was it mixed?

Mixed.

Who else was there?

Irish, Italian, and Jewish.

OK. And as you were growing up, did that make a difference when you went to school, when you played with other kids? How did that--

Did that make a difference in what way?

Well, I left it open ended, to find out if it's in some ways, you know, kids would razz each other, or you didn't hang around with somebody who wasn't--

Oh, yeah. We were confronted with a lot of anti-Semitism in the neighborhoods that we were involved with. That was wasn't a very strange situation. But in most of these places, we found a very warm niche eventually, because we didn't move around a lot. Once we moved into a area, we usually spent years in that area.

OK.

So we got to know everybody.

And when there was an experience of anti-Semitism, was it on the level of children, or did it go beyond that?

Both.

Both, then?

Yeah.

OK. Can you give me some examples?

Can I give you some examples? Well, I mean, certainly at the parents level and the grandparents level, it dwindled down to the younger element. But it was mostly in the older-- grandparents, grandfather, grandmother. Maybe even some of the older children. I wouldn't be familiar with that.

OK. What was your school life like? What memories do you have of going to school in the Bronx?

What memory? Well, good memories.

Yeah? Did you like going to school?

Yeah, I liked it very much. Yeah.

OK.

I liked it. I wasn't prepared to answer questions in that category.

I know.

I was prepared to answer questions in my--

I understand.

--my category.

I understand. What I'm trying to do with this is paint a picture of the world that formed you before you enter World War II. That's what the purpose of all these questions is.

Well, when I start to tell you about that, that'll cover that pretty thoroughly. Pretty thoroughly, yeah.

Did people in your neighborhood talk much about politics?

No.

OK.

No.

Did you have a radio at home?

Sure.

Mm-hmm. And was that the main source of news?

And newspapers.

OK, which newspapers?

Which newspaper? The New York Times and The Daily News. Those two.

Any Jewish newspapers?

No.

No Forverts?

My grandparents, yeah.

OK.

But we didn't.

Your family at home, they didn't talk much about politics or about what was going on in the wider world?

Not really. Not to any great extent, no.

OK. When Hitler came to power in Germany, that was in '33, and you would have been eight years old.

OK.

Was there any talk about what was going on and who was this Hitler over there? You ever remember about that?

Oh, yes. Sure. I mean, listen, '33, I was active already in '33.

What do you mean by active?

Well, I mean, I was very much aware of what was happening in Germany and stuff like that.

OK. As an eight-year-old boy?

Yeah.

OK.

Sure.

Did you belong to anything like clubs, or Scouts, or youth organizations, or anything like that?

No.

No?

No, I did not.

How did the Depression affect your family?

Very much.

In what way? Tell me, please.

In what way? I mean, it was tough to make a living at that time. My father had a tough, tough job of working. In other words, he wasn't in his own business. And I remember as a child that that was always a big-- I didn't get involved with it. I was too young, but I certainly know how it affected my mother and father.

OK. So the jobs, they weren't regular.

Not at all. Not at all. This is actually in the Depression. Yes, '33 was the Depression years. And they were tough, and they affected us pretty much then.

Do you remember times when it was not so easy to be able to afford food?

Not to that extent. We always were able-- my mother, that was very-- her kids were very, very important, as far as food. And she was a terrific provider, and we saw more of my mother than we did my father. But my father was the one that we loved very much. He never yelled at us.

So she was the one who was the disciplinarian.

She was the disciplinarian, yes.

OK.

She was. But we were very good Kids we didn't need any discipline.

Yeah, no. You know, usually these tasks are somehow or other, it's one parent who ends up having one role and another having another role.

Exactly.

So tell me a little bit about their personalities, your mother and your father.

Well, with that, I don't know where to begin with that, though. My father was a quiet, quiet guy. In fact, to this day, I mean, he passed away he was 47 years old.

He was young.

Very young, very young. But we have terrific memories, both my brother and myself. My father was--

Was he a gentle person?

Yes. But when my mother wanted him to be non-gentle, I remember those issues, too.

Oh, really?

Yeah. But he was a great guy, a great guy.

What are some of the values you think that you got from him?

A lot.

OK.

Very quiet man. Everybody loved him. He was the kind of guy that he made his mark without being loud. You know, he was a terrific, terrific guy. In fact, one of the big things that we remember, the neighborhood that we grew up in was predominantly Italian.

OK.

And it so happens that when we first got into that neighborhood, we weren't accepted in that neighborhood, because we were one of the few Jewish families that grew up in that neighborhood. But he was very instrumental, my father, in making certain that he was well accepted and his family was well accepted.

That's quite an achievement.

Yes, I remember that they had a club there-- see, certain things stick with you forever-- where the people used to play cards in this particular club. And they approached my father one day to join the club. They wanted to have him in the club, and we thought that was very significant. That was the first Jewish guy that they ever asked to join the club. That's the kind of guy he was. He was magnetic as far as people loved him.

That's wonderful.

Yeah.

That's wonderful.

So we remember that. Even at my age, I remember those little incidents that go way, way back.

There are the sorts of things that do shape you. They impress you.

Very much.

You know?

My brother, too.

OK.

I mean, the two of us talk about those situations that stick with you so vividly that we remembered every happy thing.

What are some of the things that were important to him, to your father? What are some of the things that he thought was important to how you lived your life?

Well, I don't how to put it in words, but he had a magnetic personality. They liked him very, very much. And what we saw affected us, too.

Of course.

Very much so.

Of course.

And that helped the whole situation. We got to like those people. We melded with them very well. And we lived there for a long time, and we became one of them.

And this was basically an Italian neighbor, you're saying.

Predominantly. I could count the Jewish families on one hand.

Got it, got it.

But predominantly. And some of them were just-- not all of them were the same.

Sure.

But some of them were terrific. And that was all due to my father, his personality and stuff.

So let's talk about your mother a little bit.

Oh!

[LAUGHTER]

She was the disciplinarian. What are the other-- I mean, aside from that, how would you describe her personality?

How would I describe her personality? Well, she was a housewife, and--

Was she more outgoing? Was she more of an extrovert? Did she have certain hobbies and interests and things?

No, she was predominantly a homebody. But she was-- I don't know how else to describe that?

What about your grandparents? Did you see much of them?

We lived in the same building.

Oh my God. So you did. You did.

I saw a lot of them.

OK.

A lot. And I had a very strong relationship with my grandfather.

Tell me about it.

I remember him very well. He was real wonderful man. And he used to take me to school every day.

Did he?

I remember-- isn't it remarkable how you can remember little things like that?

Yeah.

He took me to school every day. He wanted to make certain that I didn't cross the street and had the cars coming.

He wanted to keep you safe.

He wanted to keep me safe. My grandmother wasn't the same. She was different. She didn't care if I zigzagged through the traffic.

Go.

[LAUGHTER]

Now, did they ever tell stories? I mean, grandparents usually have more time. No?

No, no.

OK.

Either they didn't talk stories, or I didn't listen to the stories. One of the two. But my grandfather, he was a special, special guy. Really special warmth, from a warmth standpoint.

So you got that from both your father and your grandfather.

Yes.

OK.

Yes.

And let's go more towards school. When did you finish grade school? How old were you?

When I finished grade school?

Mm-hmm.

When you say grade, are you talking through high school?

No, I'm talking through sixth grade, eighth grade, and so on.

Sixth grade and eighth grade. OK, well, eighth grade already was graduating from almost high school, wasn't it?

No, that's 12th grade.

There was no 12th grade at that time.

Really?

was eighth grade.

Really? You had eight grades of school, and then after that did you go further? Or did--

I went much further.

OK.

I went four years in Germany and France and Belgium.

That's a different kind of school.

Yeah.

That's where I went. I mean, from the day that I graduated in 1943--

Then you would have gone through 12 years of school. You have four years of high school. And then you have two years of middle school, usually, and six years of grade school.

Well, I mean, as far as the grade school, well, it was--

I asked this in an awkward way, what I kind of wanted to get a sense of is, did you already enter high school in the late 1930s? Or did you enter high school after the war started in Europe? That's kind of what I was getting at.

OK. Well, the war started in Europe in 1933.

No, 1939.

'39.

'39.

Oh, but Hitler came into power in '33.

In '33. Yes, yes.

OK, 1939. OK. So--

Were you in high school then?

Yes, they were preparing us. We knew that we would never be able to go to college at that time because we went from elementary school, which was-- I graduated June 30, 1943.

OK. And then were you drafted, or did you volunteer?

Drafted. I was drafted. And I entered this service. And I graduated, as I said, in June of 1943. And I was drafted in August 8th.

That's not much time.

Not at all, no.

Less than not even a month and a half.

No.

So I wanted to dwell a little bit on the high school years. So that tells me that, yes, when you were going to high school, your years in high school were already the time when the war was raging in Europe. You know, if not freshman, certainly sophomore, junior, senior year.

Yes.

And maybe even freshmen year.

Well, 1943, I was finished with high school.

During those years, was there talk of joining the war? Because the United States had stayed out of it for such a long time.

Was there talk? Well, everybody thought it was just a matter of time that they would have to, you see.

OK. Did you get much news about what was going on?

Oh, yes. A lot of news. We were very well aware. I personally was very well aware of what was going on.

Did you get news of what was happening to the Jews in Europe?

Yes. Yes, I got-- I was updated on that. I was very well aware of the persecution and the whole story. I read newspapers, and listen, that was the things that were easily available to know what was going on, if you wanted to know what was going on.

OK. And you read The New York Times, you said. And you read, was it The Daily News that you mentioned?

Daily News, yeah.

The Daily News. Were there many radio broadcasts?

Yes.

From abroad?

Yeah, there was plenty of them. I don't know from abroad or not, but there was.

Well, there were plenty about abroad.

About the war, yes,

About the war.

Absolutely.

Well, there were journalists like William Shirer who were in Berlin at the time.

Gabriel Heatter.

Yeah. William Murrow. And things like that. Those names were familiar to you?

Yes, they were.

OK.

Yes, they were.

Any others?

That was the main source of knowing what's going on. I mean--

More than newspapers?

Yeah, the newspapers. And also there was a couple of-- like this Gabriel Heatter, who you just mentioned.

Well, you did. I don't know of him. I know of some others. Tell me, who was he, Gabriel Heatter?

He was actually a correspondent that was on every night at 7 o'clock.

OK.

And he would bring all the news. And most people at that time, that was their main source.

So did people sit around the radio to hear the 7 o'clock broadcast?

Yes, yes.

Like they do now around television.

Yes.

Or they did for a while.

Exactly, exactly.

Oh, must have been pretty influential.

Who?

Those newspapers broadcasters.

Yes, well, there wasn't a lot of them, but they packed a wallop. No question about it.

Your brother was much younger. He was still like a kid when you were drafted. Is that right?

Yes, yes. He was-- let me see, it was five years and seven or eight months difference between the two of us.

Yeah.

We had a very close relationship always. In fact, I remember little things along the way. When I was leaving to go into the service, I walked into the room where he was sleeping. I remember that vividly. And he put the covers over his head. He didn't want it.

It was too hard for him.

Too hard for him.

What about for your parents? How were they reacting?

Well, of course. In fact, the correspondence that I had with my parents is that what I would do, once I got into the service, and I was in the-- you notice, I'm leading back to my era.

Well, no, I want to go there. I want to go there.

But the idea is that actually when I was in the service already, I used to try my utmost to write to them.

OK.

But I would always write to my father, not my mother.

And why is that?

Why was that? Because she wouldn't take it. In other words, this would aggravate her to death, some of the stories. I would never get into it. I would always try to make sure that the message that I gave was as pleasant as I could make it. I would try to preserve my parents from that.

This is actually a tough thing for a young teenager to do.

Well, we were that way both, my brother and myself both.

You wanted to spare your parents.

Absolutely, absolutely. And later on, I found out that that was a mistake, too. And why was it a mistake?

Why?

Because my father didn't take the news from me as well. I preserved the feeling of my mother, but my father was the one that-- he was the one that it aggravated him to death.

Well, he was worried.

Pardon me?

He must have been worried.

Oh, of course.

Yeah. And so I would assume, but you explain to me if I'm wrong, that this communication, their primary concern is, are you safe.

Of course.

OK.

Of course.

So you're telling them stuff that any way would challenge that--

Yeah, absolutely. And I would try to soften it. It was kind of tough for parents.

For everybody.

You have no idea how tough it was when they had to take a son to-- in New York, it was Grand Central. That's where you left from.

So now I want to turn to that. When you were drafted, it was August 8th, you said, that you got your notice.

Yes.

How long before you had to leave? When did you have to report?

To the service?

Yeah.

That was the day.

That was the day that you reported. OK.

Yes. That was the day.

And that was the day you left?

Yes. My mother took me down to Grand Central Station. That's where they left from. They took you from there to Camp Shanks, which was a New York--

Where's that? Where in New York was that?

That was upstate. That must've been about-- maybe about 50, 60 miles North of Manhattan.

OK. And so this was your introduction into the US military?

Yes.

Can you tell us about it, explain a little?

That's what I was prepared to talk about. OK, that's what I was prepared--

We're there. We're there.

That's what I was studying, and then you threw me a curve ball and you asked me about my grandparents. I didn't pay attention to--

I'm tricky like that. What can I tell you?

I didn't pay that much attention to them, and you started with it.

I'll tell you why I do this.

Why?

It's that when we come to the parts that are the central parts of somebody's story--

Yes.

--I want to try and provide context to whomever will watch our interview, so that they will hear not only what you say--

Yes.

--but who you are.

Exactly. I understand that fully.

Yeah. And so then that's why I ask about the people who would have been the ones who influenced you the most.

Yes.

So.

OK, I understand that. I do understand that.

So it's not for nothing.

No, of course. Of course not. I surely understand that. But--

So now let's come to the heart of the matter, when you are in the army. Tell me, what were the first days like, the first weeks like? What did they make you do?

Well, Camp Shanks was a place that everybody from that area of New York would go to Camp Shanks. They would get them ready to go on the next step. And after that, they would ship you to a more permanent--

Did you go through any sort of basic training to be at Camp Shanks?

Yeah.

What did basic training involve?

From the initial situation where they sent you from New York, say, up to Camp Shanks to get you prepared, the next step was you would be assigned for basic training and to join-- you would have to join-- they would place you in an-- And of all places, they sent me to Mississippi.

Well, that's something different.

That sure is something different. I don't know how they placed me to Mississippi, a guy from New York.

Well, tell me about that. And what was-- that's where you had your basic training?

I had basic training for one year.

In Mississippi. So you were in Camp Shanks for about how long?

Not long at all. Maybe it was a question of maybe a month.

OK.

They got you kind of prepared. They got you ready to let you know what's in front of you. In other words, where you're heading from that point on.

So I have a number of questions now. If we're talking chronologically, then you're in Mississippi for about a year.

Yes.

I would say that you're probably, for a year, that would be from, let's say, September, October '43 to September, October '44.

1944, November of 1944.

Is when you're finished with Mississippi.

Exactly. And that tells me that you were spared D-day. You did not participate in D-day.

I did not participate in D-day, exactly. Which was June 6th. Right.

So let's talk a little bit about the year that you were in Mississippi. One of the things that some people I've talked to who were in US military forces, who were young guys like yourself at the time, is that this was the last great-- they told me-- this was the last great event that was an equalizer in the United States, in that kids from different backgrounds got thrown together, who would never have met otherwise.

Yeah.

Rich kids with poor kids, kids from the East with kids from the Midwest.

Well, in Mississippi, that's the thing that confused me no end. Because most of those that lived in Kentucky and Mississippi and Louisiana were sent to that camp.

And then you.

And me and three or four other guys that were from Manhattan and Brooklyn ended up there, which was a surprising thing.

So was this a part of America you had just never known about before?

Well, I m, I didn't mingle with that, but this was a part that I-- first of all, we were hoping-- we were hoping-- that from the beginning-- I'm gonna backtrack a little.

Sure. Go right ahead.

We were hoping where they sent you, whether it was the Army, or whether it was the Navy, or whether it was the Air Corps, we were three very, very close friends that were the same age that lived in the neighborhood.

OK.

And we used to see each other, you know, like three guys would. And it so happened that we all had the same idea, that we'd like to go in the Navy. But we had no pref-- we didn't have any chance. You couldn't tell them where you wanted to go.

So after they put you through when you first got going on the 8th of August, all they would do is check your physical position, and then they would stamp your papers, whether it was Army, or Navy.

They made the choice.

They made the choice for you.

So my mother prayed for a week beforehand that I would end up in the Navy. And I asked her, Mom, why? She says, because I assume that in the Navy you'll always have a place to sleep. That was her thing.

Well, you know, it has its logic. It has its logic.

Yeah. So the idea is that-- I was stamped Army.

OK.

The other two friends that I had mentioned to you, one ended in the Navy, and the third one ended up in the Air Corps. All separate places.

Services, yeah.

And if I want to push it a little further, the three of us, we never saw each other after that. We didn't--

You mean, after the war was over?

No. No.

Oh, no. During the war, during your service.

Yeah, during the war. I mean, we were in different parts of the world, actually.

What were the names of those two other guys?

That was a tough question.

I'm sorry.

One of them was Italian, Anthony Maggio, I remember his name. And the guy that ended up in the Air Corps, his name was Robert Poster.

Robert Poster.

Poster. P-O-S-T-E-R.

Did they both survive the war?

No.

What happened?

The guy that ended up in the Navy, he was on a destroyer escort.

OK.

And and is obligation was in down in the-- I forgot the part of the ship that he was on. And they had an explosion. He got killed on that. And Rob Poster, which we would have loved to end up in the Air Corps, because life there was a lot better, he ended up being shot down over Tokyo. So he was gone.

So the guy that survived and feared the other two got home. And they didn't. I mean, that's how life is, how you can predict what takes place. And this was one perfect example how what took place there, though.

Wow.

But we spent a year there. It was a tough year. In fact, I have to tell you one little incident that may be interesting to you, though. We were out in a field doing you know rows. Training was constant. And the Sergeant came out, and he says, you have a visitor.

A visitor? I don't know anybody in Mississippi.

Yeah.

Who is gonna-- who's the visitor? So he takes me to what they call the orderly room. That's where the captain stays and all that. I come there. Who do I find there? My mother.

Really?

Would you believe that?

She traveled all the way from New York?

I don't think that woman ever traveled out of Manhattan.

[LAUGHTER]

I can tell you, I think New Yorkers are like that. You know, the world is in Manhattan.

And she came down to visit her son.

Wow. I think that is amazing.

I can't tell you how surprised and everything. And they treated her so well. She came down on a train that left from New York to--

Mississippi.

To Mississippi on a train.

Well, I mean, that says it all.

And she used to tell me stories that most on the train were troops.

OK.

You know, American soldiers. They treated her so well on the-- they didn't know what to do for her when they found out that she's going to Mississippi to visit her son. I mean, this was a--

Well, this is what every son would want his mother to do, you know?

Well, that was unbelievable. And then-- this was so much a part of the whole story, though. I met a woman there. She must have been in the 80s. And she had a-- woman alone that had her own home in Centreville, Mississippi, a small little town.

And she-- I don't know how she met me or whatever. But when she found out that my mother came down, she offered us to stay at her home. And we stayed at her home. And every single morning, they allowed me-- the captain allowed me to have breakfast with her. She would make breakfast every morning for us, so that I could be with my mother.

That is so cool.

Isn't that cool?

That is way cool.

Holy mackerel.

It's sort of like people know what-- you know, when I was younger, of course, I thought that 18 and 19 years old, you're adult.

Yeah.

Now when I think of a kid, I think of them as kids. They were just kids.

Absolutely.

And you're thrown into a war.

Absolutely.

And that was the least they could do.

Absolutely.

Wow.

Unbelievable.

That's a lovely story.

Yeah, but the idea is, she was so unbelievable. That's the kind of-- to come all the way down. It really didn't help me much. I was happy to see her. But it was an obligation to be with her at night. Not to--

Right.

I don't want her to be alone. You know, that kind of stuff.

Of course not. Of course not.

But that, I remember that vividly. It's surprising.

Well, you know, when I asked you before what was your mother's personality like, this shows it.

That was her personality.

Yeah. Her personality, she'd give her life for her kids.

Yeah.

You see? And that explains almost what the story-- I had pictures that we took there of Mrs. Dawson, I remember.

That was her name?

The gray haired lady that was so unbelievably-- she was fabulous. And here I remember her. Is it remarkable that the short term memory gets stronger? Here it is.

Well, this is the long term memory.

Yes.

This is the long term.

No, but I meant that short term is eluding me, but the long term sticks with you.

Yeah. Yeah. When you were with these guys in basic training, what was the conversation usually about? What did guys talk about when they were going through this? Was it where you're gonna be posted, what you're gonna be doing? What was it? I don't want to lead. I just want to find out. What do you remember?

What was the conversation? Almost everybody was pretty much the same, you know? When are they gonna get out of it? When are they leaving the service and stuff like that.

OK.

But some of them were complainers. Constantly complaining. And others had a disposition that knew that they had no choice and made the best of it. So you would mingle with those that fit your category more.

Did politics enter this at all?

Never.

In the sense that there were people who thought this was a good war. We have to be fighting this.

Never.

Never?

Never heard anything about politics. You know, the only thing that I-- had after a while, I remember vividly that a lot of these Southerners hated Roosevelt. Hated him. Why? Because he caused the war. That's according to them. He was responsible for them being there.

Well, you know, that that speaks to that. Because there was this huge isolationist wing in the United States.

Yeah.

A force of people who said, let's keep out of it. You know, this is a European thing.

Yeah, well, the idea is that they always used to-- I never got involved with those kind of conversations with them. Even though there was a lot of anti-Jewish--

Well, I was coming-- I wanted to get to that as well.

OK.

See, when I was asking about being thrown in with different kinds of people--

Yes.

--did that show itself? Did that appear?

Yeah.

How?

Very much so, very much so. They were very-- quite a few of them were very antisemitic when they found out that we were Jewish. Very--

Were there many Jewish guys in basic training with you in Mississippi?

There wasn't that many. I mean, my particular group, there was only six. That's all. Just six.

And out of how many?

Well, out of-- I would say-- I'll break it down to, a company was 1,000. So six out of 1,000 is not many.

No, it's not many at all.

It's not many, though.

OK.

But the idea was that-- I had some in particular. I remember vividly a sergeant there from New York, from New York, was probably the worst antisemite that I've ever come across.

Was it the stuff he said or how he behaved? Or did he treat you differently than the others?

Well, yes, I would say so. Because after a while, they were pulling troops out of Mississippi infantry, and sending them as replacements to Europe. So what they would do is, they would take them, and they would present their choices, who they wanted to my particular person, a lieutenant was in charge of our group.

And every time that they sent a list, I was always on the list. And I didn't want to go in the worst way, because I started to make some very good friends there. And if I had to go into combat, at least I knew them. That's a certain feeling that you get to know the guys that you're with, you know?

I've heard that was real important?

Yes, very important. And my particular lieutenant, who was from North Carolina, had the opportunity to switch names. And he always took my name off and replaced it with somebody else. In other words, he--

He'd undo what the sergeant did.

What the sergeant did. Right.

Wow.

And that was a form of antisemitism. There's no question about it. But the things that he did was unbelievable. We had somebody in our particular company area. I was a mortar sergeant. I don't know if you heard of a mortar.

No, what is that?

A mortar is an artillery piece.

Ah, mortars.

For the infantry.

OK.

You know. And I had this particular guy. To everybody, he seemed effeminate.

OK.

And that's all this sergeant had to know. He was in his particular outfit. He would aggravate him to death. Because he decided that he was gay. And we used-- it galled us, because it doesn't make any difference whether they were. They're still guys that are putting their life on the line, and what's the difference? He was a quiet guy. Finally, he requested that they transfer him.

This guy?

This guy.

Because he was picked on so much.

Yes. He was picked on so much. And what did they do? He requested to go into the-- what the heck is the name of the-- the guy that was-- that very unbelievable outfit, the-- they were written up. When-- oh, what's his name? The guy that they killed? What was the name of the--

I know, it slips your mind--

No, but this is-- this is-- what's his name? Rangers? Not Rangers, but the most difficult position to be in, he volunteered for it, this particular guy, which was amazing. Because he wanted to get away from--

The sergeant.

From the Sergeant. And we found out, and he was shipped overseas. And word came back that he got an unbelievable-- they gave him an award that was unbelievable for heroism. So how wrong they labeled this guy and made-- life was tough enough without having somebody like this.

Oh, that's a real education.

Real education. But I want to tell you something. And that is that he would-- we were six of us, and I was always picked to get out of his outfit. I mean, because I was Jewish.

And he wasn't the only one. The story with this young man, there was another one there, too, that I remember vividly.

Another sergeant or another--

No, another ordinary private.

OK.

And this was during-- this is while we were in Germany now.

OK. Then let's--

Let's hold off on that.

Yeah, let's hold off. Unless it has nothing really to do with Germany. It's an incident within the service.

It has nothing to do with Germany.

Then tell me now, because we may forget later. So what was this other guy, this private who was picking on someone?

No, the private wasn't, but the sergeant.

Picked on the private?

Picked on the private. Constantly.

The same sergeant from New York?

Same sergeant.

And what did he pick on him for?

They put him on-- actually, they had a mission there at night, where they picked about 12 guys to proceed to try to find out just about the lay of the land as far as where the Germans were. And the sergeant was the one that picked the 12 men to go with him. He went with them.

And what took place is that this one particular guy that he was abusing and literally made life miserable for, he had the opportunity to get even with the sergeant. You have no idea, though.

How did he do it? Or what kind of opportunity was this?

Well, the 12 men spread out. You know, in other words, they weren't near each other. That was part of the group that he picked. And this guy shot him and killed him. I mean, what went on there, I mean the stories, and their own, no [? doubt. ?]

And did anything happen to him?

No, but it was a foolish thing to do, because when somebody starts to fire their rifle, they send up a flare to kind of light up the area, so they know what the story is. And when you light up the area, it puts them in jeopardy. Because you know that these Germans, they're not far away. And--

They could find you, because they know your general location.

Exactly, exactly. So that could have put everybody else in--

But he was never-- this was a private who shot the sergeant?

Yes.

And--

Was he ever detected? No, naturally nobody talked about it as far as the other 11 or 12 or whatever it consisted of.

He must have been pretty bad.

He was so bad that that's what he built up-- animosity to that extent. You know, to push somebody to be willing to do that at a time like that, you can almost imagine what--

It must have been--

What the consequences were.

Tell me a little bit about the basic training itself. What kind of training was it? What were the paces that you were put through?

Basic training was very, very difficult. We had a general there that was an advocate of tough. He felt that he's doing you a favor, because he's preparing you properly for when you get into combat. You understand?

You think he was right in retrospect?

Probably. Probably to a certain extent. Only to a certain extent. And what is a certain extent? They built new barracks there.

In Mississippi?

In Mississippi. And the barracks were supposed to be for, you would have your meals there. And it so happened that he wouldn't allow it. He wouldn't allow any of us to have their meals in there. And it never stopped raining. And he'd have us outside.

Eating outside?

Eating outside. Because this was his thought of what was gonna make you a tough soldier. I didn't agree with that kind of stuff, though. He feels that you'd get so mad, it would be just perfect for you if you'd be able to confront anything

when you were put to it.

So tell me about other aspects of basic training. Because they're taken 17, 18, 19-year-old kids and turning them into soldiers. How did they do that?

How did they do that? I don't know if Bill knows any of these Jewish things. Though I know if he is Jewish or not. But the idea is that I slept near a guy. There was about 12 in the bunk. And every morning I put on certain religious articles. And he would watch it, and I would get up-- Reveille was 6 o'clock. I would get up at 5 o'clock to put this on.

And the guy that slept next to me, which was from the Deep South, he got up one morning early. And he said, Vince, he says, are you OK? Because part of this was strapping on your arm.

What is it, a phylactery or?

Yes, that's what it was.

Phylactery.

Exactly.

Tell people who will not know what is a phylactery?

Well, they called it tfiln.

Tfiln? OK.

But the idea was that he thought that I was taking my blood pressure. And he wanted to be nice. And he says, you want to know something? You have all the grounds of being discharged because your blood pressure is so high.

Gosh. Well, you said earlier your family was not very religious.

No.

But did you nevertheless go to synagogue on a regular basis?

Not regular, no.

Did you become more religious when you were in such circumstances?

No, no, no. In fact, I wasn't that religious, but I got the religion from my grandfather. He was religious.

OK.

So.

But it meant something to you to put that on every day.

Yeah, my mother was very much against me taking it along with me. She says, I want to tell you, if you're taken prisoner, you'll be killed immediately by the Germans, because they would know what it is. But I didn't listen to her. I felt the thought of it was protection. I would get through. And that's what happened. But I was a big kick out of it, the fact that he wanted me to bring it to somebody somebody's attention that I was taking my--

Blood pressure.

My blood pressure every morning at 5 o'clock.

So did you eventually get sent over with guys that you knew? Were you sent over with people who were your buddies or not?

Yes, I was sent over. They sent us over as one group, the whole division.

And division means how many?

Division could be anywhere from 13,000 to 15,000.

Wow. And this was in November 1944?

This was November. I left Camp Shanks. In other words, they sent us on the way back to stay.

Oh, really?

Yeah.

So from Mississippi to Camp Shanks.

Back to Camp Shanks. And they gave us the necessary clothing and everything that we needed and stuff like that.

And then where were you taken from Camp Shanks?

From Camp Shanks it took us 28 days to cross the Atlantic.

Oh, wow. From New York?

From New York.

OK.

Why? Because that was the era when the Atlantic Ocean was infested with German submarines. So we spent 28 days zigzagging to try to confuse the Germans there. And we landed in Marseilles, I think 28 days later. That's where we were heading.

So it was like in early December, you landed in Marseilles? Yes.

How did it happen?

Yes, I think it was the first week or so whatever.

OK. Well, that's not a bad place to land in wintertime, in Marseilles.

Oh, what a town that was, boy. Wow.

What kind of impression did it make on you?

What kind? I don't really remember it all. Because the first thing we were looking for was a bar. [laughter]

And we found one. And boy, did we take advantage of it, though. It was great, though.

Really?

But from then on, it was a question that they gave you what you needed. You know, rations. And that's as far as you went. I mean--

So you were in Marseilles for a short time, and then you were shipped North?

Then I was shipped North.

OK, how did you get North? Was it by train, or on foot, or in truck, or how?

Walk.

You walked.

Walked. That's what the infantry does-- walk.

[LAUGHTER]

I mean, the first skirmish that we ended up with was February 16th, 1945.

And this was where?

This was in-- this was in Germany. That was our first confrontation into combat.

OK, so I'm assuming you missed the Battle of the Bulge.

No, I was in the Battle of the Bulge.

You were in the Battle of the Bulge?

Yeah.

OK. So I thought that had taken place in December. I must be wrong, then. Yeah.

I don't know. It could have been the following December, maybe.

No, no, no. I've got my dates wrong.

No, I was in the Battle of the Bulge. I was awarded a Bronze Star in the Battle of the Bulge.

Wow, wow.

And that was the first one. I got two Bronze Stars, and I got a Purple Heart. I was injured in the Battle of the Bulge.

OK, let's start with the first skirmish. And then I'd like to hear about those things that you just told me in more detail.

In more de--

The first skirmish was February 16, 1945.

Right.

And what part of Germany was that? Bliesbrucken.

Bliesbrucken.

That was the name of it, Bliesbrucken.

OK.

That was the first that our particular unit was confronted with.

OK.

And that was a tough situation, because they knew we were coming. And we lost about half of the outfit there. And what did we lose them with? The Germans knew that we were coming, and they mined the area. You know about mining?

Tell me about it.

The Germans were very good at that. They would place mines in the ground. And if you stepped on it, it would take this part of your foot off. And that's where most of the casualties came from. Because we didn't know, I mean, what was gonna take place. And they knew. They knew everything we were doing, almost, the Germans.

And we lost quite a few of them. This was the first situation where we really hit combat. You never get used to it, but after a while you get a little more-- you know, you understand what the heck is going on.

Well, this was the dead of winter.

Yes.

OK. And Bliesbrucken, geographically, what part of Germany was that in?

It must have been right on the border with France. Right, as soon as you leave France, you go. That's one of the--

First places.

One of the first places that you would go.

Did you take play Bliesbrucken?

Take what?

Did you repel the Germans? Or did they-- were the Germans repelled, or did you succeed?

Yeah, we got through. We got through, because we had reinforcements that came through. But the thing that I remember the most is that the Germans were dug in, knowing that we're coming.

Was that a surprise? Or did you know that they knew?

We did not know that they knew. But they were prepared. And when we got close enough and we saw who we were fighting, that was a complete surprise. They couldn't have been any more than 14 or 15 years old.

Oh, good God.

Yeah, that's how young they were.

Oh, good God.

And I remember vividly-- I remember this one situation that they were in foxholes. So when I got there, he came out, this one guy came out of the foxhole. And when I saw how young he was, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. And when I got close to him, he got so close that he spit in my face. That's how arrogant they were.

Wow.

If you can picture that. They were-- that young element was-- the older element, believe it or not, were looking to get out of the war already. They were in the war that long. But--

What would you put that down to? Why were the young ones like that?

Indoctrination. Indoctrinated by the German hierarchy. They were vicious compared to the-- I mean, we had stuff with the older ones that absolutely would have loved to-- they were in it already about five, six years. They couldn't wait to get out of it already.

Was this the first time that you came across Germans, German soldiers, the enemy?

Bliesbrucken was the first time.

And that was when this young kid comes out of the foxhole?

Yes, yeah.

OK.

That was the first skirmish that we ran into, yeah.

Then what happened? With you?

Then with me, it was a question. We approached the Rhine River. I mean, I walked. I mean, I can't tell you. And you know what a mortar is. A mortar has three parts that you carry.

You were carrying a mortar?

Well, each one would try to help the other one by carrying it a certain distance. I was an observer, a mortar observer. The mortar observer is the one that goes up front, so that he can get on his phone and give the distance to the one that's back with the mortar itself, you know?

OK.

They used to call them stovepipes. You know, you drop the shell, and you would have to figure out about how many yards or whatever it is.

That doesn't sound like a very safe occupation.

No.

[LAUGHTER]

You're very bright!

Thank you!

It wasn't a very safe occupation. But I ended up as a staff sergeant.

And what does that mean? You no longer have to be out front there with the phone phoning back?

No, I was up front anyway. I was up front. But that that was after a while. You know, after a while. I think the biggest thing that we were so interested in becoming, from a private up the ladder to a staff sergeant, was see the pay increase. It went from \$21 a month to \$28 a month.

25% more!

That was a big increase. Right, right.

If I got my math right. So what I wanted to ask you is, did you become a sergeant between Bleikirchen and the other units? When were you promoted?

When was I promoted? I was promoted a field situation. That was coming out of Heidelberg, Germany. I led this group. And we were just ready to cross the Danube River. And that was a session in itself.

I mean, they knew. It was remarkable how they knew so much about what we were gonna do. Meaning the Germans. We had to cross the Danube River to continue to move forward. And I didn't know how far. I mean, we didn't know how deep the water is and stuff like that. But Heidelberg was a place where the Germans--

It was wonderful. The town was top-of-the-line far as that. And we stopped in Heidelberg. And they would had their little boats there, the residents that lived there. It was mostly professional people, doctors and attorneys.

There's a university. It's a famous university town.

Yeah.

OK.

So the idea is that some of the guys got into those little boats. I wasn't one of them, but I made sure that the guys I was with at least got going. And they knew we were coming. So as soon as we pushed off and we ended up almost close to the middle of the Danube, they opened up with artillery fire.

Oh, my.

Helpless. Where are you gonna go from the middle of the Danube River? But the only thing that you were able to do is try your best. You know, so much has to do with luck, too. In fact, when we got into Heidelberg, we got into Heidelberg at about 6 o'clock in the morning. And this is walking from who knows how far.

Was Heidelberg after Bleikirchen?

After what?

After the first--

Oh, yes. Quite a bit.

OK.

Quite a bit.

All right.

And as we moved up, we noticed that there was a tavern on the corner. And that always frightened us, because we didn't know who was in the tavern. And it had curtains. You know, these kind of curtains that you certainly couldn't see what was doing there. But that's the only way that we can get through is to check to see what's happening there.

And we approached the tavern, and sent a couple along to try to peek through the curtain that was there. And we saw a big round table in the middle of the room. And there must have been about six or eight Germans around the table, sitting around the table.

Oh, just sitting around there.

Well, they were there. We didn't know whether they had-- what their intentions were or anything.

Soldiers or civilians?

Soldiers.

Soldiers?

In uniform, the whole works.

Oh, OK.

With their rifles alongside of them and all that stuff. We didn't know. So what we did is, we sent some around the back, and we sent some-- we had to know, because there was no way of proceeding without knowing. And when we finally got to the point where, by golly, you got to make a move, you either go in there, or you're not gonna go back, when they saw us, they stood up from the table, and they put their hands up. They were waiting for us, for the American soldiers to come, so that they could--

Surrender.

They could surrender. They loved to surrender to the Americans.

Well, of course. Because you weren't the Russians.

That's right. They feared the Russians more than anybody else. Boy, that was murder. Especially after Stalingrad, when they went through that situation. Listen, I spent four years in that situation.

So when you went over in '44, you were there until '48?

'7.

'47. OK. But I want to backtrack. Was Heidelberg after Battle of the Bulge?

Heidelberg was before.

Before Battle of the Bulge?

Before, yeah.

OK.

The Battle of the Bulge already was almost towards the end. This was the last thrust that the Germans put to get through, to annihilate. First of all, that was in the Black Forest. I don't know if you ever heard. The Black forest--

Oh, I thought it was in Belgium. The Battle of the Bulge was in Belgium.

Well, no. I don't think it was. If it was, maybe part of it. It was a big--

OK, so it was in the Black Forest. All right.

It was a big forest, but you never saw daylight. They refer to it as the Black Forest because the trees were so thick, and it never stopped snowing. We couldn't use-- the Americans couldn't use their Air Force. And the Germans knew that, and that's why they picked that particular time, knowing that there's a better chance of their getting through.

They put everything that they had-- tanks and everything, the Germans-- to get through. And it so happens that the only reason that they didn't get through is because they ran out of oil, gas. If they had enough gas, they would have probably annihilated us.

From something like that.

Yeah.

So tell me, what was your experience? What happened to you personally? This is after Heidelberg. What happened?

Well, what happened to me personally was that I was in the Battle of the Bulge, I would say probably for about three weeks.

And this is what month?

What month? That's hard thinking, exactly what month. I know that it was so thick that the Germans figured out that if they threw artillery fire in there, they would get quite a toll, because they would explode, and that's where I got hit with artillery fire.

OK.

And they wanted me to-- the medics came, and they wanted me to-- take me to the hospital. I didn't want to go to the hospital, because if I went to the hospital, I wouldn't be with my people anymore. They would send them somewhere else. That means I'd have to start in--

With somebody else.

New acquaintances, and new this, and new that. So I just stay begged off and I camouflaged it.

Where were you injured?

I was injured in my right leg, and in my shoulder, and in the right-- shrapnel, all with shrapnel. You know what shrapnel is?

Tell me. Tell me.

Huh?

Tell me.

Shrapnel is what the artillery shells, that's what they're full of. That's what causes all the damage, is the shrapnel.

Is it metal bits?

Yes.

I forgot that I'm talking to somebody who wasn't in the service.

Well, yeah. That's right. I mean, it's self-evident to other people, but we also need definitions. I mean, some people won't know. I didn't know what a mortar sergeant was.

No, you didn't know what a mortar--

I didn't know what a mortar sergeant was.

Yes.

And yeah. so yes, you're kind of explaining the ABCs.

Yeah, how would you know? How would you know, though?

So--

But I missed certain things along the way. I mean, you know, across the Rhine was an episode in it itself. I don't know if you ever heard, but the Maginot Line was a very famous line at that time.

Mm-hmm.

The Germans spent a fortune in money and time to build that particular line. It was a defensive line. They knew that the Americans, when they landed in Marseilles, would be coming up in that area. So this was protection for them. But you have no idea what this line looked like when you got-- we got through it, you see. We got into it.

What did the line look like?

It was like a hotel. That's how they built that particular line. It was like a hotel. They had all the necessary-- I don't know what to call it, but they were doing it for years to build this particular Maginot line-- Maginot Line. That's what they called it.

But they made one foolish, very foolish mistake that we couldn't believe that the Germans would make a mistake like that.

What was that?

The Maginot Line was a fortress. But they didn't figure you can get around the fortress. You don't have to go right through it.

So it's a physical building?

Yeah. So we never bothered to go through the line. We did after they started to run North. Then that's when we got a chance to get down and take a look at what it looked like. We couldn't believe what the hell-- that was really a fortress in every sense of the word, though.

All this time, from Marseilles onwards-- again, forgive me. this is gonna be naive question--

Go ahead.

You guys get any news? Did you get any newspapers, like the army paper?

Yes, but not frequently. The army paper, they made it their business to distribute that. We would get that. But as far as the news getting to you, it was very, very difficult then. I mean, I would-- all of a sudden, I would get a batch of mail that thick that was written maybe about three months ago.

OK.

Stuff like that.

Now, in the news was there anything that you learned that you didn't know before about what was going on or what had gone on with the Jews in Europe?

Yes, along the way. Not a lot, but you know, you're asking a question where they questioned a lot of Jewish soldiers or not necessarily Jewish, any kind of soldier. I mean, I don't want to push in front of you, but they didn't know what a-- what do you call it-- concentration camp was. They never saw one. They didn't know anything about a concentration camp. And they didn't know what's doing inside.

What about you? Did you have some idea?

Along the way, as we were proceeding, I came across Dachau. You ever hear of Dachau?

Oh, yeah.

OK. Dachau had a lot of satellite camps. A lot of people never knew that. All they knew was Dachau. But as we were moving North, I had news that I knew already what a concentration camp was.

How did you know and the others didn't?

Mail. Mail from home.

So your family would write to you and say that they heard about these things?

Yes, they would question it. Have I seen it, and stuff like that? My father was always interesting in that. So this one day, we're moving up, and I take a look, and that's a concentration camp. It was off the road. It was a dirt road, and this was all off the road.

Did you go closer?

I went inside. I was the first American soldier that entered the Landsberg Concentration Camp in 1945.

When was this? What month was it?

What month was this? I don't remember exactly what month it was, no.

I don't usually want to lead, but I will say, I would think it must have been sometime in April, April '45. Maybe--

Yeah, yeah. Probably. In fact, I noted that it was in April 1945.

Yeah.

Yes.

So this was Landsberg, and this was a satellite of Dachau?

Yeah, Landsberg was the town that Hitler was put in prison.

Really?

Yeah, he was in prison, you know.

Yeah. But that was in the '20s.

in the what?

In the '20s.

Well, he was put-- that's where the prison was, in Landsberg in Germany.

Uh-huh. So when you entered this camp, what did you see?

That's the hardest part for me to talk about, because it never gets out of your mind, to be frank with you. What I saw, I walked in. The door was open. And what I saw there I can't describe it. That's what got me talking to students at this stage of my life, to tell them that it's being denied that it ever happened. You understand? I want to get the message across that people shouldn't-- there's a tremendous amount of people that deny that the Holocaust ever happened. It was a propaganda situation.

You can't tell me it was a propaganda, because I was--

Well, take us through it.

Pardon me?

Take us through it. When you come to the edge--

Well--

I need to see through your eyes.

OK. What happened is that I walked in.

Is this a building or a compound? Or what was it?

No, this is like a Quonset hut.

OK, so it was one building.

Well, there was a lot of building.

OK.

But this was one. This was the first one that I--

Entered.

That I entered. And when I walked in there, first of all, the odor was terrible. Unbelievable. These people were-- some were alive yet. Some were emaciated that were able-- there was about 15 in this particular building, in this hut, really.

And I walked, walked, started to walk. And they were so happy to see an American. They didn't have to be told that it

was an American. They were waiting for the Americans already. They knew that the Americans were on their way. And what I saw there, it's hard to describe, actually.

Were there bunk beds? Was this a sleeping quarters?

This was-- a sleeping quarter? What this was, was boards. That's all. They slept on boards.

OK.

And it was--

And about how many people do you think were in there?

On this one that I was in, I would say probably it was about 15.

OK, 15. So it must have been a very small place. Very small.

Yes, this particular one. But they had them all over. It was a big area. The camp itself was a big area. Because I had just received a package from home. I had a relation that was in the market business. And occasionally he would put a big package of food, and he would send it to me. It might take a month to get to me. And you don't want a package that you walking with.

In any event, I went, and the driver allowed me to put this package in his Jeep. He was a driver. And I took the package, brought it into this place. And I lied it on the floor and opened the package there.

I can't tell you what took place. Those that were able to pick their heads up started to crawl towards the package. And what happened after that, though, they started claw each other, really, to get to the food.

So my captain, who was the head of that whole thing, came in and put his hand on my shoulder, and he says, Vince, the smartest thing you can do is take that package out. Because they're gonna just claw each other, and you don't want to see that take place. Which he was 100% correct, and that's what I did. I took it out.

But from then, then I started--

Did anyone talk to you?

Who?

Of these people who were in there. Did any of them talk to you?

They couldn't talk. They were beyond the talking stage. They could hardly get out of the--

Slats where they were.

Slats, yeah. They could hardly. It was like a bunk bed. You know, except board. There was no mattress. It was just boards.

Yeah.

And I don't know how long they were laying on the boards and stuff like that. I have a book here I brought. I was interviewed for a book. In fact, the author of this book, took him three years to write the book. And why did it take him three years? Because he couldn't find the guys like me that he could speak to.

And one day-- one night, in fact, I get a telephone call from the author. Name is Michael Hirsh. And he says, you don't

know what I have been going through to try to find people like you that I can talk to. Do you mind if I ask you a question?

I remember it was a Saturday night. He had me on the phone, without exaggeration, for 2 and 1/2 hours.

Wow.

That's how many questions he was asking.

And do you remember any of those questions?

Yeah, I mean, it was all of what you're asking. Same stuff exactly.

Same stuff.

But he didn't go into my grandparents.

[LAUGHTER]

No, he only went into the--

What happened in Landsberg.

Up to the-- yeah, right.

Yeah.

So--

Did you go in any other huts?

Pardon me?

Did you go into any of the other huts that were there?

Oh, I didn't go into all the huts, but they came out from various-- they were all in these green-- in these like pajamas. You must have seen pictures of them.

Were they striped?

I have some over there, if you want to take a look at it,

We'll take later. We'll take a look later.

They were striped, yeah.

Did anybody speak to the American soldiers of the prisoners?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. In Yiddish.

That's one of my-- that was gonna be one of my questions. Did anyone come up to you and start talking to you in Yiddish?

In Yiddish.

So can you tell me about that?

They didn't know whether I was German, or French, or anything. But they started-- I understand Yiddish. So I knew what they were talking about. And I started asking all kinds of questions. And they didn't want to talk about a lot of things, though. They were only-- what they went through was a thing that you couldn't imagine.

The first place that I-- after I left this particular thing, maybe about 2,000 yards down, they built an area, the Germans did, before they left. I entered there exactly two nights before they left they left two nights before.

You went.

They walked out of that place. But before they did that, what they created, they burned some of these huts down. They burnt them down. They poured gasoline all over.

With the people inside?

Sure. The people were inside. And they just burnt to a crisp. And this thing that I'm describing was a huge-- it was a huge ditch that might have been set anywhere from seven, eight yards to about 20 yards.

And what they did is that a lot of those that they found in these huts, they brought them to the ditch, and shot them, every one of them, and pushed them into the ditch. There they were piled up like from here to the ceiling maybe twice with bodies.

Oh, my goodness.

It was horrendous. There's not a word that you can explain what they did there. And my captain was there, and he says, you know, he says, General Eisenhower is in the area now. I'm gonna call him. Maybe he wants to come down and see what took place there. I says, that would be a good idea.

The following morning, he came down. So the captain said, Vince, I want you to take him. You take him.

You went with General Eisenhower?

Yeah. Well, let me tell you something. That's something I never forget, either. He was standing closer than I am to you now. And I could see the teardrops-- this is a general that's been through everything-- rolling down his cheek. And when I gave this information to the author that I told him, that was one of the things, that I saw General Eisenhower, I think two weeks later, he called me-- not Eisenhower but the author-- and he said, look, it's very important, Vince, but I insist that everything you say has to be authentic. I don't want any guesswork or anything. And General Eisenhower was never at Landsberg.

I started to check my memory. I mean, I still had good memory at that time. I says, well, I started to apologize up and down. I says, you want to know something? That was General Eisenhower. There's no question in my mind. Make a long story short, two weeks later, he called me and apologized.

He was able to authenticate it?

Yes, he says that he certainly was there. He says, not only was he there, but General Patton was there, too.

Wow.

So we went through the whole--

About how much time did you spend with him?

Not much, not much. I didn't spend much time. He was only there for about a day and a half. I took him to the gas chambers. That was--

In Landsberg.

In Landsberg, yeah.

OK.

There was about 3,300 occupants of that-- it was a big, big place, though.

That is, you guys found 3,300 left? Or that--

No, no. I didn't know how many were there, but that's what I read after a while.

OK.

That it was-- see, we came from two different directions. I came from one end, and the tank outfit, our tank outfit came from another end. So we both merged in the same area there.

And when you were entering for the first time, you said it's off a dirt road, were you alone, or were you with other soldiers?

I was with our eight, eight in our group.

So there were the eight of you?

Yeah.

And what were you saying as you-- and here I am in 2017, asking you, what were you saying as you were entering this camp? Do you remember what you guys were talking about? Did you know this is a concentration camp?

Oh, I knew. I knew, of course. I knew it was a concentration camp. It was very easy to know. I mean, anybody would know that had been informed of concentration camps. They all looked alike, almost.

How did they look? For some of us who've never seen it live.

OK.

Tell us, what do you see?

First of all, they had the barbed wire fences around them. And actually, I don't know how else to describe it, but when you got inside, first of all, by the time we got in there, they had a chance-- those that were able had a chance to get out of their particular Quonset huts, and they were all over the--

The yard or something?

Yes, all over the area, you know, walking, looking for us.

OK, so that when you entered the compound area--

Yes.

--you already see people. It's not like-- you see people, inmate, prisoners, former prisoners who were there. They're walking around, those that could.

This is after we penetrate a little further. The ones that I found were those that were in there that couldn't walk. They couldn't walk at all. That's the first ones that I came across.

OK.

After that, what I saw after that was pretty horrible, but I stopped to talk to some of them along the way. You can't believe the emaciated people that were there. And I met other than Jewish people. I met one in particular, I remember very well, that was a priest, a Catholic priest.

What kind of impression?

Why? Why does that stay in your memory?

Because you expect it all to be Jews. Concentration camps, they are synonymous with Jewish people. Yes, the majority, overwhelming majority were Jews, yes. But when I saw this gentleman, and he wasn't abused like the others. I don't know why. But he was a very nice-- but he was a prisoner, in no uncertain terms.

And did you speak with him?

Yeah.

And how did you communicate?

He spoke English, believe it or not. I don't know where. I couldn't get a lot of information from him, but I was very anxious to know how he ended up in a concentration camp.

Did he tell you?

Well, he didn't get into a lot of it.

Do you know what country he came from?

I don't remember exactly. It had to be a country that was probably nearby somewhere.

Mm-hmm. How long were you in the camp?

Not long. A little over two days.

That's a long time.

It's a long time.

Considering that some soldiers just would come in, look around 15 minutes, and they move on.

Well, it was a little more to me than it was maybe to everybody else. Because of the Jewish factor.

Yeah.

But the idea is that after that, there was like a big hill that you walked down from there into the town itself, which was about a mile down there. So I walked down the hill. And I was very curious to speak to the people that I came across down there. These are these call them civilians or whatever you want.

Townspeople.

Huh?

Townspeople.

Townspeople, exactly. And what I did is that I took about five of them and had them walk back with me up the hill to show them some of the things that I saw. Well, their reaction, you can imagine, was horrendous. They wouldn't believe.

Did it look-- I mean, you saw their reaction. How did they react?

How did they react?

Yeah.

They reacted like you would react-- in horror. But who knows? I mean, they could have been frightened that here they're right near the American soldier. They don't know what these American soldiers, how they're gonna-- are they gonna annihilate them? Are they gonna shoot them or whatever?

But the idea is that that's the way they reacted. But they had to know.

Do you think they had known?

They had to know something was going on, because the odor in the area was-- can't describe it.

Well, people say that. And then I come back with the question, can you describe it for me? But is there any words that you would find that would give us a sense of what it could smell like?

No. I couldn't, I couldn't.

OK. That's the answer I get, but I keep searching. I keep wanting to know it smells like this, or it smells like that.

Well, you can imagine dead bodies. I mean, what are dead bodies? Most of them, what was doing up there was--

Decomposing.

"Horrendous" is just a very mild description. I mean, it's just, you can't get into all of that, because there's no way in the world that you can describe it that people would understand. I mean, look, if I tell you that I saw the beads of tears on Eisenhower's face and I wasn't exaggerating, that tells something in itself.

Yes, it does.

Yeah.

Yes, it does.

That tells something in itself.

Now, your father was asking about concentration camps. Did you write to him and tell him what you saw?

Yes, I did. Of course I wrote him, but I don't know. By the time he got it, I don't know. But I absolutely wrote him, and I explained where I was. That's something that you had to be very careful with. They couldn't allow you to write things, because they would go through your mail. They would set--

They called them emails, you know, a little about that size.

OK.

And those emails they would scrutinize, and they if there was anything in there that led to direction or whatever, any important information, they would--

Censor it.

Censor it.

So this was the army censors.

This was the army censors. Right, exactly. But that was a very big factor, though. To make sure, you never know whose hands they end up in. And they were very careful with that, with that kind of stuff, though.

So there was the term "email" during World War II, but it meant something else.

Exactly. I never thought of it that way, but that was emails. Exactly.

Mm-hmm.

Emails.

And you were there two days.

Quite-- almost two days. Almost two days.

And did you have to ask permission to stay, or could you just stay?

No, it was a little shorter than two days because the-- my captain, who was a wonderful man-- he got killed, too, by the way.

What was his name, if you remember?

Joseph Revis from North Carolina.

R-E-V-E-S, Reves?

R-E-V-I-S, I think.

I-S. OK.

Yeah. Joseph Revis. He was a kind gentleman. And infantry officer usually are tough guys, you know? But he was a very caring guy. I can just imagine when he'd put his hand on my shoulder and telling me to get that package out of there, that gives you an idea of the kind of person he was.

How did he meet his end?

Pardon me?

How did he meet his end?

How did he meet his end? A bomb blew up. He was in a Jeep next to the driver. He was sitting alongside the driver. And a bomb exploded or whatever. And he got killed. [MUMBLING] The amount of-- that took place that never came back, but wow.

But they all had names.

They all had names. That's right. They all had names.

So when you left, what was the reason for leaving Landsberg? Was it that your unit was moving forward?

Our destination was Berlin. Now, what's the name of the town? There was a very-- there was a city 30 miles North of Landsberg. That was our first objective.

OK.

I forgot the name of this city. I'll have to write you in Falls Church.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah, this--

Can we cut for a second?

Sure. We are rolling.

OK. So we found out that where Landsberg is. And so because Dachau is in the neighborhood of Munich, and you said that Landsberg was a sub-camp of Dachau. Was that right?

Yes.

OK. So--

Dachau had maybe about 25 camps individually named, but they were all satellites of Dachau.

So Landsberg is South of Munich. Because you said that afterwards your objective was to go 30 miles North.

After Landsberg.

OK.

Right.

And so was Munich occupied at that point, or you were gonna take it over? That was the idea?

The idea is that we didn't know. I really can't even answer that, whether they were finished with a surrender there or not. I don't really recall what the story was. But I do know it was the next stop from Landsberg.

OK.

Was Munich.

And did you go through the city?

Yeah, we went right through the city.

Did you stay or just go on further?

Just went through it. That's it. Did not stay.

Did you get to Dachau itself, the main camp?

No.

No, you passed by that, too?

Yes, yeah.

By the way, I didn't ask you earlier, but for the record, can you tell me the identification of your unit and what part of the army you were from and so on, so that we'd know?

Yeah. That's easy. 63rd Infantry Division.

63rd Infantry Division? OK.

Yeah. You want to mark it down.

And after, Munich then where did you go?

After Munich, we continued on towards Berlin.

Did you get to Berlin?

Not quite.

OK, what--

The reason we didn't get to Berlin is that the-- it was very funny, because they sent us. They sent us home, by the way, if you had so many points. This is later on.

OK, this is after the war?

This was after the war, right.

OK.

But they had certain-- you have to accumulate certain points. How many years you were in the service, and whether you were in combat, stuff like that. So I'm bouncing around. That's the only thing to confuse you, though. But the idea is that they sent me to La Havre.

Oh. OK.

And they were sending me-- from La Havre, they were sending-- the war in Japan was not over. They were sending me to the Pacific.

This is after the war in Europe was over?

Yeah.

OK. I want to stay focused on the war in Europe to begin with.

Good.

The Battle of the Bulge that you said you took part in, that was before you liberated Landsberg? That was before you liberated these camps? Or was it after?

The Battle of the Bulge?

Yeah.

The Battle of the Bulge was after Landsberg.

OK. Truly? Because Landsberg, if you liberated that in April and the war ends in May--

Landsberg was the concentration camp.

Correct.

Right?

Correct.

And we're trying to figure out what happens after we left Landsberg.

Right.

And you're asking about where did we go from there?

Yeah.

Well, after the next notable place that we went was--

Munich.

Munich.

OK.

Right.

And then after that?

After that we were ahead heading, but never got into Berlin.

Now by this point, it might be in late April, early May. Something like that.

Yes.

Do you know? Do you remember where you were when the war ended?

Where was when the war ended? You mean in Europe?

Mm-hmm. The European war. It was May 9th, I believe. May 8th or 9th.

That's just about when Roosevelt died.

A little before. A little before.

Yeah, he died in May.

Did he?

I think the 13th.

Wow. 12th or the 13th was when he died. Where was I? Well, I started to tell you that-- what did I start to tell you about?

La Havre. That you were gonna go to La Havre, but I want to talk about Europe. I want to know if-- you know, when you never made it to Berlin, to what place did your unit make it?

Just a little bit North of-- just a little bit North of what do you call it?

Munich.

Munich. Not much further than Munich. So that would have to be-- if the concentration camp was round April--

Yeah.

--it would have to be around that, May or whatever.

OK, OK. So you were still in Bavaria?

Yeah.

Did you--

Was I in Bavaria?

Yeah.

Yeah.

Munich and Dachau and so on, it's all Bavaria.

Yes.

Did you have any more battles after that? Were you involved in any more skirmishes, any more confrontations, armed confrontations?

After-- no.

OK.

No. In fact, I was starting to tell you, after La Havre what happened is that they were sending-- they put me on a ship to go home, to go to the Pacific. And that was Hiroshima. They took me off the ship. I was happy they took me off, but anybody that was on the ship, not my ship but was on the way, they would take you home. They'd take you right to New-- to America.

So you were-- in La Havre, you were on your way to Japan, or you--

On the way to Japan.

OK. Did you make it to Japan?

No, no. They took me-- they took us off the ship.

Why?

Because the war ended in Japan. That was Hiroshima.

Oh. I see. So you stayed for another couple of months in Europe because Hiroshima was August '45.

All right, but listen, the idea of what I stayed was, after they took us off the ship, they sent me back to Germany with the Army of Occupation for one year.

I see. So you never made it home at that time.

No, not at all. I didn't get home until, I don't know. I don't remember exactly when, but that was-- I took the up as far as--

Right, I got it. I got it. Now, did you ever come across any other such places as Landsberg or any other concentration camps?

No, I did not.

OK. This was the one thing that you saw.

That was the one thing that I entered. And I didn't see any other one.

It was enough.

That was enough. Exactly. That was enough. But--

When you--

You know, it's very funny. When I was in the concentration-- not concentration. When I was in the museum--

Mm-hmm.

--I sat down with somebody there. I'm talking about that works at a museum.

Oh, our museum in Washington, DC.

Your museum in Washington. And I asked her a question about Landsberg. She said she never heard of it.

Uh-huh.

Would you believe that? I couldn't believe it when she said that. Where is it? Where was it? I says, do you have a map? So she took me to a huge map. And sure enough--

There it was.

There it was.

Well, in some ways it's not that surprising, because people generally know-- even colleagues-- know the major camps.

Yes.

And sometimes the satellite camps--

Yes.

--we're less familiar with.

Probably. Probably. Look, they know of Auschwitz and--

Treblinka. Right.

Places like that.

But there was a lot of these satellite camps that that book has all the history of that stuff, too. You know, it's--

So I want to ask you this. When you then get sent back to Germany as the Army of Occupation, what was your job then? What were you doing then?

What was I doing? We were just there to make certain that everything was peaceful there. You understand? I didn't mind that. I mean, naturally I would have rather gone home. But--

Where were you stationed?

Where was I stationed? I was stationed-- the first place that I was stationed was, believe it or not, was in Belgium, really. After that, they sent me to Antwerp. And then from Antwerp they sent me to-- they sent me to Germany.

OK, where in Germany?

Where in Germany? I got it written somewhere, but I don't remember the name of it here. The name of the town. It was a small town. We liked it very, very much because they gave us the opportunity to eat there. In other words, when the war was over, I weighed 165 pounds.

Yeah.

And when I landed back in New York, you know, after I got home, I went from 165 to 180. Because of the opportunity to-- we'd have steak every night for dinner. I would eat a dozen eggs every night.

And this is in New York, back in New York?

Oh, still in Germany.

Yeah.

Still in Germany.

This is still in Germany.

What was your job? As part of the Army of Occupation, what was your job?

My job was-- my group was with me, too, you know.

OK.

And the whole idea was to make certain that there it's peace and quiet.

So were you performing like police? Were you--

Exactly like police. Exactly like police.

Right.

This is what they did with the troops that they didn't send home. They sent them back to-- they referred to it as the Army of Occupation. So really--

And you were based in this small town.

Yes, but I can't remember the small town. It wasn't a significant town, so--

Did you have interaction with Germans there?

Did I have any interaction? The only time I had interaction with Germans, to be frank with you, is I told you about this particular lieutenant. You remember?

Mm-hmm.

Now, that lieutenant, he was-- I understood some Yiddish.

Right.

And that gave me some access to speak to the German prisoners. Because German and Yiddish, you can make out some of this stuff there. So every time that a group of prisoners came through, he would call me to--

Talk to them.

No, he would want to know certain information from them, and he didn't have anybody to ask. So he would call me. And the funny part of it, he didn't understand one word that I was saying, the lieutenant. But the prisoners certainly knew that I was Jewish.

Really?

Oh, boy, did they.

How did that show itself?

How did they show it? Because Yiddish and German are close.

OK.

So they must have put it together somehow.

Did they treat you in a different way?

They didn't have any access to treat me. None whatsoever. But while I was interpreting for the lieutenant, I saw the expression on the prisoner's face. He knew that I was Jewish. You understand?

And you were in the same town for the rest of the time you were in Germany, this small German town?

We were in the vicinity. I mean, it was pretty much the same.

Mm-hmm.

A known town, too. A known town. Maybe it's on Bill's iPhone.

[LAUGHTER]

Where was it?

We don't know. He doesn't remember where he was stationed. But that's OK. That's OK.

That's not a very significant part of the story.

No. So the letters that you were writing home--

Yes.

--were the ones where you were wounded, are those the ones that you tried to smooth over somewhat to your parents?

Sure.

Yeah.

Never discussed it. Never put it in a letter at all.

OK.

I didn't want them to know, they shouldn't have to think about that if I can avoid it.

Mm-hmm. Is there anything else you'd like to add to what we spoke about right now, about your service and experiences in Germany?

You're talking about after the war?

After the war.

Or before?

Any time.

Or during the war?

Either.

Both, either one?

Either one.

Either one.

Anything that you usually mention that we didn't cover.

What was significant that I-- well, anything significant would have to be during the--

During the war.

Combat. During the--

Tell me about the two Bronze Stars. What are the circumstances?

Well, the one of them I started to tell you about.

Mm-hmm.

The first one we had to go through that particular area. In other words, the Germans were dug in, in that particular area.

Was this the first skirmish you were in?

This was the one in Bliesbrucken, in February 16th.

Right, that one.

So that's the one that we lost. Had quite a few injured because of the--

Mines.

The foot mines.

Yeah.

Yeah.

What was your role that you won the Bronze Star?

What was the role there, you mean?

Yeah.

Well, the role they is that I had-- we got through. It wasn't just me. It was the other seven in my group. Because we were the ones that got through that particular area. That was a big deal, because it was the first skirmish of any major proportions there. In fact, I remember vividly that when the officers had to tell us where we were going the following night--

Mm-hmm.

--some of them were very considerate. You know, they felt a little bad. They didn't know how many of them were going to come back and stuff like that. So I remember vividly they sat us in a room, and they opened up two bottles of scotch. So that we could calm our nerves. You know, this is the first time, remember. The first time we were in combat.

It's a big thing.

OK, so I remember 4 o'clock in the morning is when. The kick off spot was-- there was a railroad. Tracks that went

through that particular area. And the starting point for us, is all our guys had to line up on the railroad. You know, just before, so we can all get going at the same time.

I see.

Understand?

Yeah.

So I remember we're standing there. And all of the sudden, I see certain some of us, though, are all of a sudden they're lying on the ground. I don't know if that's part of their situation, that they're gonna line. But I didn't realize the Germans knew we were coming. And they were firing. I forgot the name of the ammunition that lights up. In other words, it lights up.

I don't know.

You don't know.

It's tracers.

Tracers? Were they firing tracers?

Tracers, exactly. Boy, you know a lot about the German army.

No, somebody whispered it to me in my ear.

Yeah?

Yeah.

Well, the idea is, they were firing tracers. And that's what caught the American troops that were standing there. We were ready to go, to start moving forward.

And some never even moved.

And some of them never moved. And we thought-- I mean, I was certain some of us thought, you couldn't tell that they were hit by ammunition and stuff like that. So that was a heck of a beginning, as far as that was concerned.

What about the second Bronze Star? What were the circumstances surrounding that?

The second one was the one in December or something. That was the one on the Battle of the Bulge.

Uh-huh.

The Battle of the Bulge, that was a very, very difficult thing. Because the Germans, as I told you, they were putting everything forward. They knew, by the way, that this is their last particular thrust there.

Mm-hmm.

And our outfit, our particular outfit was still together. I mean, they never broke us up, which was a very good reason that I wanted to stay with them. And just moving the guys around, I suppose, so they issue-- they awarded it to the outfit, to the eight of us, or the nine of us. They issued the award.

So now let's kind of wrap up. You come back to the United States what date? Can you remember? 1947 you said.

What date was that on? What date? Where did we end up? What date were we at?

Well, we were talking about the time you were part of the occupation army.

Yes.

As more or less being the function of police.

So that was May, really.

Mm-hmm.

That was in May.

May '45?

Yes. No, wait a while. Wait a while. It was May '45.

Is when the war ends.

No. Yes. But April, April was the issue where they were sent-- where I was in La Havre.

OK.

That had to be around then.

No, I think that was a little later, but that was more closer to August. Because that's when the war in Japan ended.

The war in Japan? Is that when they threw the--

August--

They wiped out-- it was August.

Mm-hmm. Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

That was August.

That's right.

OK, OK. So what was the question?

The question is, I wanted to get a sense of when you came back to the United States.

OK.

Was that 1947?

Yes, that was 1947.

And--

But the date I don't remember specifically.

I shouldn't have asked about the date, because that's not an easy thing to remember.

Yeah.

Do you remember what time of year it was, whether it was the fall, the summer, things like that? Were you discharged at that point?

Yes, I was discharged. Because they sent us to that Camp Shanks again for discharge purposes.

Oh, OK.

You see.

It keeps figuring in your story, doesn't it?

Well, that's the base that they decided to use, that the army started to use that for that purpose. When we left, we left for Europe, the idea is that that's where they clothed us, they gave us all the-- they used Camp Shanks. That was a very central place for anybody in the East, you know, they left from Camp Shanks.

And when you got home to New York, did your parents pepper you with questions about the things that couldn't be written in letters?

Good question. Very good question. Because that's a story in itself. They were expecting me, my parents. But what I didn't expect is that she invited the whole family of 20 people. We were in the living room, and they were all-- she had all the chairs around. And when I walked in there and we sat down, not one person asked a question. They kept staring at me.

Really?

Yeah, they kept staring at me. Wow. Like I was a-- I don't know how to describe it. Can you picture that? There was no conversation. It was as quiet as can be.

And did that last the whole time of the event?

Well, it wasn't an event. It was just a--

Homecoming.

Homecoming. Yeah, that's all.

Wow.

And I was going with my wife at that time. And she was invited there, too. I wasn't married yet. And when it came time to-- they started to break up and go home, they were there a long time already, she went-- I remember she went-- she approached her mother, and she asked her mother permission, could she stay there with me yet. That's how she was brought out, you know? So I remember that very, very vividly. Isn't it remarkable, these little things stick with you? You don't remember the name of Munich, but you remember a little thing like that.

You got married?

Got married in-- yes, I got married. That would be-- that would be something, too. I got married in January, so how does that fit?

Well, was it January '47 or '48?

'47.

January '47. Then maybe you came home a little early. Maybe you came home in '46. OK. Those are mysteries that we will keep for--

Forever.

Yeah.

Forever.

I'm surprised that I can even put things in place. Some of these things, to be frank with you.

I think you've done fantastic. You've Put--

I mean, I really don't know how. Because to be very frank with you, if I put my car keys down somewhere in the house, I have to think twice, where did I put them.

So do I.

You, too?

So do I.

I feel better now.

[LAUGHTER]

So OK. I think that we've concluded the major part of our interview. After that, I will ask you to hold up a few photographs, and we'll film the photos and your medals. And with that, I'll say this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Vincent Koch on February 22, 2017 in Boca Raton, Florida. Thank you again.

You're very welcome.

OK.

You were a pleasure.

OK.

We're rolling.

OK. Can you tell me what is that that you're holding?

It's the Bronze Star award that I got on the 16th of February. That was the first combat that I had. And that was in Bliesbrucken.

Germany.

Germany.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Come more forward at the top toward me. Yeah, hold it straight.

Thank you. Sorry.

Audio as well. [INAUDIBLE]

Did you want [INAUDIBLE]

Yes, is it rolling?

Yeah, we're rolling.

OK. Can you tell me, Mr. Koch, what is this a photograph of?

These are two of my closest associates.

What are their names?

One of them was Robach. He's from Chicago. And his profession was, he was a cook. And that was great, to have a cook with you.

As your buddy, yeah.

Yes.

And which one are you? Are you the one that's standing in the back?

I'm the one that's standing in the back.

OK.

I'm gonna stop a minute. Please.

OK, I'm gonna repeat this one. Tell me, who is in this photograph. Again. Yeah.

Sergeant Robach.

Sergeant Robach.

From Chicago.

OK.

He was part of my outfit. And by profession, he owned a restaurant in Chicago. And he used to prepare kartoffels for us when we were in combat. Kartoffels are potatoes. We would find the potatoes. The Germans would hide it in a coal bin.

Uh-huh.

And he would find them.

And he'd cook them up.

And he would make all kinds of nice things with them. So we loved him very much.

I can imagine. And which one are you?

The one that's standing, I suppose.

OK. Thank you. Sure.

This is my squad. I was a sergeant over these particular soldiers in the 3rd Battalion.

OK.

Of the Company M.

OK. And do you-- came from?

I do. It's in the back of one of these pictures. That's it.

All right.

You see on the--

Yeah, I see. It says Michigan, Kentucky, New Jersey, Indiana, and Alabama.

Right.

And then kneeling left to right is New York, Chicago, Chicago, New Jersey, and California.

I knew you-- can I say something, Bill?

Of course you can.

Yeah, yeah.

I knew you were gonna ask that question, so I was prepared.

[LAUGHTER]

Thank you.

OK.

Thank you very much.