

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Bob Levine on April 30, 2017 in Teaneck, New Jersey. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Levine, for agreeing to speak with us today and to share your extraordinary experiences.

My pleasure.

I am going to start the interview with the most basic questions. And from there, we'll build the story.

- Good.

So can you tell me, what was your name at birth?

Robert M, for Michael, Levine.

OK. What is the date of your birth?

June 4, 1925.

And where were you born?

In The Bronx, New York City.

And did you grow up in The Bronx?

Yes, I grew up in The Bronx.

Did you have brothers and sisters?

I have one sister, Miriam, three years older than I, who since passed.

OK. So she was born in 1922?

Mm-hmm.

And what are your mother and father's names?

My mother's name is Augusta Kornbluth.

Kornbluth.

Kornbluth.

OK.

And my dad, Sidney S Levine.

OK. Can you tell me, were your parents born in the United States?

My father, yes. My mother was Austrian at birth, came here at a very, very young age.

Do you know about what year she came?

No. I know she was only three or four years old.

OK. So it must have been the late part of the 19th or the early part of the 20th century.

OK.

Something like that.

Agreed.

Yeah. And your father was born here actually.

Yes.

So did his parents come from somewhere else?

Bialystock, Poland.

Bialystock, Poland. Were they alive when you were born, his parents?

His father.

OK. What were their names, if you remember?

Well, his name is Samuel, and I can't remember my grandmother's name. I called her something else, I think.

Was she alive when you were born, your grandmother, your father's mother?

I assume. I think so, yes.

But you have no memory of her.

No. No.

OK. And your mother's parents, were they alive when you were born?

No. Here again, I couldn't tell you.

OK.

So of the four grandparents, it's your paternal grandfather--

Grandfather was the only one I really was involved with, yes.

And did he live close to you, close to your own family?

He lived with an aunt in Brooklyn, yeah.

He lived in Brooklyn.

My father's sister, yes.

OK.

And was he a storyteller?

Not really, no.

So did he-- so you didn't know much about life in Bialystok?

No. I just knew the name, that's it.

OK.

It's in Eastern Poland. It's in Eastern Poland.

Yes. I know it's-- yeah.

And did your father have other siblings besides that one sister?

Has a brother. Had a brother, Arthur. He lives near us.

And the sister's name was?

Harriet-- Henrietta.

Henrietta. Henrietta. Your parents, what language did they speak with each other?

English.

English. OK. Did they know Yiddish? It wasn't used in the house, no. No.

OK. No.

All right. And what neighborhood in The Bronx did you grow up in?

In West Bronx. Are you familiar with The Bronx?

Sort of. But tell me as much detail as you remember because somebody will be who sees this interview. Well, the address was 1422 Nelson Avenue.

OK.

And it was very close to Featherbed Lane, if you're familiar.

Featherbed Lane? Featherbed Lane.

Mm-mmm. Don't know it.

And between Featherbed Lane at and Boscobel Avenue.

Describe the neighborhood to me. Was it a mixed neighborhood with Jews and non-Jews or was it primarily a Jewish neighborhood?

I would say it was primarily a Jewish neighborhood. We happened to be right next to the public school, which was very nice. And with a playground right there. And so everything within walking distance, which was very-- the shopping was a block away on Boscobel Avenue and Featherbed Lane.

So it was very convenient.

Very, very convenient. It was very convenient.

Was the kind of neighborhood where people knew each other?

Yes. Yes.

OK.

We had apartment houses mixed with private homes. So there was a different element, yeah.

A mix.

So in the apart-- did you live in a home, a private home?

Private-- no, apartment house.

OK. How many stories did your apartment house have?

Six. We lived on the second floor.

OK.

OK?

Were you renting?

Yes. Yes.

OK.

Everything was rental. Yeah.

OK.

And we played in the street. And so it was very, very happy, happy childhood. Yes.

Did you ever go into Manhattan or was that a rare occasion?

Rare occasion. Yeah. Kind of some special trips. No, you just hung around, hung around the neighborhood.

OK. Were your parents very religious?

No.

OK.

My parents came from the Lower East Side and grew up in around a settlement house called Christodora House.

OK. Tell me about that.

Christodora House was a settlement house run by people from Princeton University. Princetonian. And they were treated very, very differently. They had a summer camp out here in New Jersey. So they would get away from the-- and stay at the settlement house, as they had clubs and they learned. They learned all about life.

What was the purpose of the settlement house? Just taking immigrant children and giving them a chance to become involved, and they did. And my mother spoke with an accent you wouldn't believe. You would think that she was graduate of Bryn Mawr College.

Oh, really? Yeah.

Yeah, because they really taught them how to speak. And they had clubs. My dad was in a club that they had elections and things of that nature. So they learned all the--

So it was beyond school. It was--

It was beyond school.

It sounds like a place to integrate kids into a US society.

Correct.

Into American society.

Yes.

And show them beyond the world they knew.

And it was definitely not a Jewish influence, of course. I had no Jewish influence at home whatsoever. I was not bar mitzvahed. I was not bar mitzvahed.

Oh, really?

Mm-hmm.

So that means were your parents more or less purposely secular or did they--

Just by being there. Just by--

OK. They had assimilated.

That was just their background. Yes, that's it. No. And we never really went into any major discussions about it or conversations about it. That's just the way we-- that's the way we lived. Yeah.

What about your grandfather? Was he very religious?

No. I doubt that he was-- and my aunt, who he lived with, there was no real-- but they all came from the same neighborhood. So they were all part of the same background.

As your father was growing up, his father brought him up in the Lower East Side?

Yes.

OK. And then moved to Brooklyn later.

That's right.

OK.

Yeah. My dad went to NYU, was a college graduate.

OK. What did he study?

He was in business accounting and became a major executive with a company that was in Brooklyn.

What was the name of the company?

Consolidated Lithographic Corporation. They were printers. And he was the vice president. So we had an interesting background.

Did you ever visit him at the office?

Oh, yes. And after college, I worked there.

Oh, yeah?

So you said a printing business. What did that mean, being a little more specific.

They made things like cigar bands. Labels for liquor bottles, that kind of printing. It was very--

Yeah. It's--

High-class printing. Lithography. And it was a big, big plant on Morgan Avenue in-- Grant Street and Morgan Avenue. I just remembered it.

Would be in Williamsburg? Grant Street I thought was in Williamsburg. But I may be wrong. I may be wrong.

I don't know.

What neighborhood did your grandfather and aunt live in in Brooklyn?

Near the-- what's the area where the Verrazzano Bridge is?

I know. I don't know the name of it. Is it Bensonhurst or--

That's a general--

Yeah.

I remember visiting.

OK.

I remember that.

How'd you get there from The Bronx?

We had a car. We drove.

You drove.

Mm-hmm.

I bet you had less traffic than now.

We had less traffic.

[CHUCKLES]

But that's also unusual. I mean, people in the city usually didn't have cars.

That's right.

Would you say that your father was sort of like a comfortable middle-class life?

Yes, it was.

OK.

No question.

OK. Describe a little bit of your home to me. You said it was a second floor of the apartment?

Second-floor apartment, yes.

OK. How many rooms did it have?

We had two bedrooms.

OK. And it was very comfortable. Never had-- never a want, maybe should I say.

OK.

We had everything we needed, yeah.

Well, I mean, that's quite something, given that you were growing up during the Depression. And a lot of people didn't have work.

Correct.

How did that Depression show itself in your life?

You know, I was very young obviously. The pressure was with the early '30s, though. Yeah. And I was just born in '25. So I was 7 or 8 years old.

Little boy. Yeah.

I really can't point to anything specific.

Well, I mean, were their neighbors of yours that were out of work? Did you know people in the neighborhood who were in a bad way because of it?

I wouldn't say that. I would not know. No. No.

OK. OK.

But we had a fairly large apartment house, and everybody seemed to be OK.

OK.

But there's nothing I could say to that.

Yeah. What about your mom? Was she a homemaker?

She was a homemaker.

OK.

And because of Christodora House, they would go away, as I say, during the summer. And they were shown golf and tennis and things of that nature. And we were exposed to those kind of things. My mother was a golfer.

Oh, was she?

And she would take the subway with the golf clubs and go to Van Cortland Park.

Mm-hmm.

And I must tell you this funny story. I was in grade school, and I was kind of a giggler, making a lot of noise. And the teacher said, I want to see your mother. I said, you can't. Why not? She's out on the golf course. They got a big kick out of that.

Yeah. Probably was the only time they heard that excuse.

Absolutely.

Or that reason.

Not too many kids in that neighborhood could say that. Yeah.

Yeah.

So I always remember that. And that's our background. Yeah.

Did you have a radio at home?

Yes, we had radio.

And what are the kinds of programs that you'd listen to?

All right. Jack Benny.

Jack Benny?

Mm-hmm. I'm just trying to remember. Oh. I'm having memory problems.

That's OK. It happens sometimes. It happens. I mean, I know that that's an unexpected question. So where did your father go-- how's the car? If you know, did you have like a driveway with a garage?

No, no, no. In the street.

On the street. OK.



You know, in those early days, there was no car. The car came much, much later.

Oh, OK.

Yeah. After we moved from there, we--

Where did you move to?

We moved to 911 Walton Avenue, which was on the Grand Concourse, just on the Grand Concourse. And right next to the Yankee Stadium.

Oh, that's good.

And from my apartment house, I could look down onto the field in Yankee Stadium. And I had a private seat, my own private seat. How about that? Is that lucky?

That's pretty cool.

So those are the years when I had a lot of fun. That was my latest teen-- my teen years.

Your teen years. That is quite something, particularly if you're a young guy. And you know, who doesn't like baseball?

That's right. I had the autographs of every Yankee. Too bad I don't have them today. They're probably worth a few dollars. Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, all the big names.

Do you have any memories of grade school, what your teachers were like, what the other kids were like, the subjects that you liked the most and that you liked the least?

No, I had a fairly easy grade school. What did happen when I was in the fourth grade, I was playing in the street, and I ran-- I fell into the street, and I was hit by a car. And my leg was badly broken. So I had to recuperate at home for a while. And I was left back and had a problem catching up in school. So that made it a little tough.

A little tough, yeah.

So that was my left leg was broken.

How long did it take to mend?

About a good six months. Yeah.

Yeah. That can do it.

Yeah. Yeah.

That can do it.

And so I had a tutor at home, but you do fall behind. And when I came back, I used to be in the top grade. And they just dropped me down to the slow grade.

For a kid, that makes a difference.

Six, one in three or something. The numbers for the classes. So I ended up in the two. And the two was slow. However, we managed.

OK. Tell me a little bit about your parents' personalities, you know, what your father was like, what your mother was like.

Well, my mother was an outdoor person, the golfer, a walker, very athletic. My father was a tennis player, very athletic. And what we did, the summers were interesting. We would go away, like to Kiamesha Lake was a famous-- up in the Catskills.

What is the name?

Kiamesha.

Kiamesha Lake?

Kiamesha Lake.

OK.

And we had a bungalow. And one of the few people in the house, and we would spend the summer. And my father would come and commute. And so we had some interesting--

That's a very nice kind of--

It was an interesting-- for those years, it was an interesting-- yes, nice.

You know, it almost is the American equivalent of how Europeans would take vacations. Middle-class families in Austria and Germany.

Would travel.

They would travel. They would go to the mountains for the summer.

That's what we did. We went to the mountains.

Yeah. Yeah.

And it was called Kiamesha Lake in Monticello, New York. Right near Monticello, New York.

OK.

So we had a very comfortable and exciting childhood.

And your sister was also with you?

My sister. Yes, my sister was a tennis player. And she went to Hunter College.

And you, were you athletic as well?

Yes. I play tennis. I was on the tennis team in high school. And then, of course, I went to war.

OK. We'll talk about that in a minute.

When the 1930s, in 1933, you were just a boy, 8 years old.

That's right.

That's when Hitler comes to power. Do you remember anybody at home talking about what's going away-- what's going on in that faraway Germany?

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing. There was no-- I'm just wondering when I first, like, can't remember.

When you heard his name?

Yeah. Yeah.

And what about American politics? Would your parents ever talk about President Roosevelt or the policies of the Depression or things like that?

Well, it wasn't a big item. I'm just trying to remember the major discussions. And by the way, I must say about my mother, my mother was a food--

[PHONE RINGING]

We can cut. OK. So tell me about your mom.

First of all, about the food. She was not a food addict but a food-- anyway, we ate very healthy foods.

OK.

I wasn't allowed to eat this, wasn't allowed to eat that.

For example. I can't-- you'll have to tell--

OK. Hang on just a minute. Cut.

OK.

OK.

My mother-- oh, talking about food.

OK.

My mother would make salad. We had a lot of salad. And being a golfer, she was on the golf course. She would pick up all kinds of various grasses and things.

And that would become dinner?

And they would become salad, in the salad. And I'd say mom, what hole does that come from? But she was that-- she was a very devoted food person.

Well, that is ahead of her time because that only became something that was more conscious-- people were more conscious of it decades later.

That's right. She was way-- she was way ahead of her time. That's right. She marched with the Women's League for Peace and Freedom.

Oh, did she?

Kind of groups like that.

So she had some political involvement.

So she was politically involved, yes.

OK.

And she would go to all these meetings. So she had a whole life.

OK.

Was her food tasty that she prepared?

I ate everything.

OK.

To this day, I clean my plate. I'm trained. I'm very well trained.

And off camera, I heard that she had something against chewing gum?

I wasn't allowed to-- so I would out-- I forget. I went out in the street, on the sidewalks there was gum. And I would scrape the gum off the sidewalk.

If she had only known that, she might have allowed you to have a piece.

And I never got sick, believe it or not. That's the amazing thing. I mean, you would think that, wow.

Yeah.

The germs.

Of course, the germs and the feet on it. Ew.

That's it. Thank you. Thank you, dear.

OK. What about your father? What kind of a person was he?

Well, he was a very detailed person, had a big job. And he was not that communicative about things. I just really followed his footsteps. And it was just-- there was no lecturing, for instance. He was not lecturer. My mother was.

Your mother was a lecturer.

My mother was a lecturer. And so both my sister and myself really were pretty much trained.

So your mother, is she the one who kind of was the disciplinarian?

Yes, yes.

OK.

Very-- not controlling but--

Guiding.

Guiding. OK.

Yeah. It's unusual. It's very nice when I hear this, but it's unusual that kids would visit their fathers at the office, you know? And was that something that he did on a regular basis is bring you by?

No, the office was too far away. It was in Brooklyn, and we were in The Bronx.

OK.

But when I got older, I would visit and do a little work there or something, you know. And then after college, I ended up there for a while working. But he was a very good influence. I saw a lifestyle that I would like to emulate. And I think that was a big factor in my own growing up, yeah.

Well, that's what parents provide us more than anything else is a model.

An influence, yeah.

Yeah. Your parents, were they very social people?

Yes, they were bridge players, and we always had people visiting. They did a lot of socializing. And so bridge was a big part of their social life. And were most of their friends Jewish or--

Yes.

OK.

I would say that our whole immediate world was Jewish, yes.

And in this immediate world, then I go back to my larger, more political questions, was there ever talk about Hitler in Germany and what's going on there, as far as you remember?

Not that I remember, no.

OK.

Yes and-- no.

What was the talk usually about?

Well we talked a lot about sports.

OK.

And I think we didn't do too much talk about theater. I don't think we ever-- there was not too much visiting of Broadway. That was not part of our--

What about cinema?

I guess movies. Yeah. I was allowed to go every Saturday. I was allowed to go to the movies. They had morning shows in the theater.

In The Bronx.

In The Bronx.

OK.

And we all went. So that was a big activity.

OK.

What year did you start high school?

Well, 1939, '40. I graduated in '43.

So you started high school right--

In '39.

Yeah, in 1939, right when the war starts in Europe. September 1, 1939, the war starts.

I will tell you exactly where I was December 7, 1941.

Tell me.

I was watching a football game with my father at the Polo Grounds.

What grounds?

The Polo Grounds.

Polo Grounds.

Polo Grounds.

OK.

And the announcement came over that everybody in uniform report back immediately blah blah blah. And I said, gee, I'm only-- I was 16 years old. I remember saying that'll be it. I'll never get involved.

And was that a disappointment to you?

Not really. No.

OK.

No.

And how did your father react when he heard that over the news-- I mean, over the loudspeaker?

Well, my father-- I'll tell you once he became what we call-- we had fire wardens. People would go out at night and turn

the lights off because of the war. He had a street where he would turn-- I would go with him, turn the lamps.

Were these gas lights or are these electric lights?

Street lamps. Street lights.

And so this was all part of the-- early part of the war, '40.

'41 was when--

'41, yeah. And he would go out. And I remember the bridge. And he would turn the lights off. And we would spend that time together. So we had that kind of an activity.

And when you were in high school, was there then talk in high school about what's going on in the world?

Not really. Not really. I mean, we saw nothing. No, I really--

Were there newsreels that you saw in the cinema or--

I guess we went to-- when we went to the movies, yeah, you'd see the cinemas. They were so far away, it didn't make any difference to us. We're here, they're there. Yeah. I really wasn't-- I was not that concerned.

And what about newspapers? Did your parents read newspapers?

We had newspaper. We would read newspapers, yes. I guess it was the-- The New York Post I think was the big paper at the time. And that was in the house every day, yeah. But we didn't have the news programs that are on the TV. There was no TV.

On the radio.

Radio, yeah.

So you don't remember hearing news programs on the radio.

Not really.

Just entertainment programs. OK.

Yeah, yeah, mm-hmm. It was low key.

OK.

Yeah.

But in the neighborhood, nobody really talked about Hitler?

No.

That you heard.

Yeah, right. It was just not, yeah. And it was--

And what about the war with Japan, then? Because the United States entered the war with Japan after Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Was there any talk in school? Did you know people who were in the military at that time?

You know, there was not too much. Nobody from our area was involved. Nobody knew somebody in the army or it just-

So life seemed to go on.

It just was absolutely very normal, yeah. Amazingly so. It was just, yeah. I never really thought about it that way, but we had very little contact, yeah.

OK. So you finished high school, yes?

I finished high school.

And when did you finish high school?

In 1943.

June?

June of '43.

Then what happened?

And then we had somebody come to the school, and they came and said, do you want to take a test for the army specialized training program? They're giving a test. So a bunch of us took a test. And I passed.

And I turned 18 in June. So I had to sign for the draft. And they told me that if I signed out, I would go to school, AS-- Army Specialized Training. So I signed up.

So in other words, you weren't drafted. You signed up.

I signed-- but it was kind of at the same, yeah. Having put my name on it, then my number suddenly came up.

OK. So when did you leave home?

September 1943.

So after high school, you had two or three-- you had the summer at home.

That's it. That was it.

That was it. And how did your parents react?

Well, they were pretty upset. But I said don't worry. I'm going to go to school. That was my big thing. So I went to the Army. And we ended up at Camp Upton, New York.

Camp what?

Upton.

Upton, New York.

Yeah.



OK.

And was that boot camp?

That was boot camp. That was just an entry thing.

OK.

And then I was supposed to go from there. They give you 17 weeks of basic training, which was in Spartanburg, South Carolina. And from there, I was supposed to go to a school.

Now, when you were in Camp Upton--

That was basic. That was a--

Was that sort of like a-- that was basic training or was that in Spartanburg?

No. Spartanburg was the training. Upton was just a--

A processing.

A processing, that's right. That's it.

OK. Did you meet people who were different from the folks that you grew up with?

Yes. Yes.

Was this in Upton or was this in Spartanburg?

That was in Spartanburg, yeah. Upton was pretty much the same milieu, yeah.

OK. So what were they like, these folks? I mean, because that was one of those side effects of having this draft, this overall draft in World War II.

I remember very distinctly getting involved with some Italian boys, and I couldn't get over how close the Italian families were to the Jewish families. It was very, very similar relationships with the parents, you know.

So that's something I can remember very, very clearly, yeah. And I said, oh, well, that's something that happened to me and so, you know.

Did you meet young guys who were from different parts of the country?

No, they were all from our area.

Really? Even if you--

Spartanburg.

In Spartanburg, they were all from the New York area?

Yeah.

OK. But not in the Jewish world that you grew up in.

No, no.

Yeah. OK.

It was a lot of mixed. It was a mixed group, yeah.

OK. So in basic training, what are some of the things that you remember the most vividly?

Well, I think that a lot of hiking-- picnicking, I would call it. And this was basic infantry training, which was kind of scary. Using weapons and went hiking with a big-- and physical, crawling up obstacles, you know. But I did very well. I was athletic, and I was able to move, and I enjoyed the outdoors.

And I was back on that as the hiking is a big part of my training. And then suddenly, the army was planning the invasion. And they realized that because they suddenly had a date that all the guys that were set for school, it was canceled. ASAP was cancelled.

Did you know that at the time, why they were doing this?

No.

How did you hear it?

We didn't know that there was a date. We didn't know anything about the invasion.

So what kind of reason were they giving?

They just announced it, that the program had been stopped.

OK.

And suddenly, we were shipped. And we were shipped out overseas.

After the 17 weeks in Spartanburg?

Yes.

That's not much training.

17 weeks in training. That was it.

17 weeks is now three months? Four months? Three and 1/2 months, something like that? That's not a lot. So that meant the fall. You were there in Spartanburg for the fall.

Yes. It was September, October. That's right. Yeah. And by the time we were shipped over in March, I think March of '44--

That's another three months. So where did you spend the winter?

Good question. I have to remember.

OK. Because that would mean half a year's training, if you went in in September--

I think we stayed in Spartanburg longer than that.

So you remember being shipped over in March.

Yes. Yeah.

OK. What was that like, going overseas?

Well, I can-- it was a troopship, which is packed to the gills, you know, and people-- it was a rough, rough, rough ride.

Did you sleep in hammocks?

No, no. There were mattresses. Just piled four or five high.

Four or five high bunks?

Bunks, yeah. The bunks, yeah.

That's pretty high.

And was there danger of hitting mines or was there danger of U Boats that you remember?

I'm sure there were, but we were not aware. But we were in a big, big convoy. And we ended up in England-- actually, in Scotland. We embarked in Scotland. And they took us all the way down to the end of England and--

To where? To Cornwall?

Another training camp.

OK. Was this Cornwall that you ended up going to? No. Do you know the place that you landed in Scotland and where they took you?

It was a big city right nearby in Scotland. What's the city there?

Edinburgh?

Maybe could be that.

Glasgow?

Glasgow, I think it was.

It was Glasgow. OK.

Yes. And then we got-- put us on a train. And all the way down to the end of England.

Well, the very corner is Cornwall.

It was sheep-- it was sheep country. I remember.

Yeah?

OK?

Was it very pretty?

Very pretty.

That's Cornwall.

Yeah. Yeah. Oh, OK.

Yeah. With cliffs and things like that into the sea?

A lot of beautiful streams and little bridges built by the Romans. I remember seeing the signs, built by the Romans.

What kind of a camp was it that you ended up in?

It was a another basic training camp. Infantry, yeah. What was I going to say? I had something I wanted to remember. I have a vague, vague remembrance. But we just assumed that we were trapped. We really felt trapped.

I was going to ask you that.

Yes, please.

After you after you learned that the whole education program was stopped--

This was a major blow. Really was a blow. I wasn't expecting to be handled this way. So that was--

Were you bitter?

I think so. One of the first major disappointments. How could they do this kind of thing, you know? But you know, you're trapped, and you're--

By that point, you have no choice.

You have no choice, yeah.

And we were given no information about invasions or we had no idea what was going on.

Did you already belong to a particular unit or a particular division?

No. We were called replacements. So we joined the unit in Normandy, yeah.

OK.

Went over as replacements.

OK. So what kind of training did you undergo in Southern England?

Basic. Again, essentially what we were doing in the states.

So not much different.

No, no.

Hiking, climbing.

Weapon-- a lot of weapons training and different mortars and rifles and all kinds of guns.

Were the trainers US or British?

All US. Everything was US, yeah.

Did you have any contact with the British?

No, no. No. There was a very small town nearby, but we never got out too much.

What was the name of the town? Do you remember?

I used to know it.

It'll come to you. It'll come when the camera's gone.

But I still do remember, though, some things very, very-- when we finally did get overseas-- over the Channel into Normandy, and I can remember standing on the beach. And it was June of '44.

And I said, I can't believe a year ago today-- it was June of '43-- that I graduated high school. So here I am. I mean, you realize that that was a major, major moment for me.

Of course. Of course. June of '44, you're 19 years old. You just turned 19.

Just turned 19. That was my birthday present from General Eisenhower, I always say. Levine, you're going into combat. So you arrive in Britain in March. And the invasion is June 6, I believe, '44.

Yes, correct.

So we have March, April, and May.

Three months of initial--

Three months.

--service.

And then when they're getting you ready to send you across the Channel, how does your routine change? What happened after that? What happened after the training was finished?

You know, nothing, really special.

Did you go to a port city or something?

Well, we went directly from our camp to the Port Plymouth. Plymouth was the port.

And convoyed by truck?

Yeah.

OK. And at that point, had anybody told you what you're doing and where you're going?

At that point, we were told, yes. That's when we first found out. That's when we found out. We hadn't even heard-- we never even heard about the invasion. There was no real news. June 6, we were still, you know. Very strange. I never really considered the timing, but that's--

Well, you know, you--

You just learn to accept every day is to just keeps going at it.

Well, it is-- I find it amazing that to organize such a huge mass movement and keep it secret, that's what they had to do so the Germans wouldn't find out.

That's why they were playing games with us. They had built this phony camp so that the Germans thought there was going to be an invasion to Calais, which was a different fort entirely.

Yeah.

And yeah, they--

But see, one of the consequences is that guys like you are in the dark. You don't know what's going on.

There was nothing talked about. That's right. There's a good reason. Because they were trying to hide it, yeah.

So the first you hear that you're going over is still in the camp or in Plymouth, when you get to Plymouth?

No, in the camp, yeah.

In the camp.

I think we were issued certain combat gear, some combat gear, and then suddenly you realize, hey, why am I getting this?

So that's when it hits that you're going to be going into combat.

Mm-hmm.

I can't imagine what that moment was like. You know, you're a kid.

Yeah, yeah. You don't realize how young you are. You think you're 19, wow. It's a baby.

Yeah. Yeah.

Now I know.

So when you get to Plymouth, what kind of boat did they put you on? That was a troop-- infantry-- they call that infantry. There was initials for it. Infantry something ship. ILS, like Infantry Landing Ship.

OK. How long did the crossing take?

Oh, several-- a few hours.

OK.

Yeah.

And was it nighttime, daytime when you crossed?

Daytime. Oh, yeah. Daytime.

Daytime. And do you remember the date that you crossed?

I don't.

OK.

I think it was about a week or so after--

D-Day.

After D-Day, yeah.

So you knew that D Day had already happened.

Yes, at that point, we knew. Yeah.

OK.

But it wasn't until-- aware. Yeah.

OK. So when you were crossing, were there planes overhead?

Oh, yeah there was. I mean, it wasn't a major-- all that had done previously. That was the week before, you know, on the 6th, when all the ships, the Navy ships, and we were just pretty much alone.

OK. Well, I remember talking to some guys who were part of this first invasion.

Yes.

And they would say that why didn't those planes bomb those guys, you know, the Germans in the little pillboxes on top of the cliffs? And they flew over.

Yeah.

Which is one of the reasons there were so many casualties.

That's right. They missed the place. They had no idea, as a matter of fact, about the hedgerows. The hedgerows were a major, major part of the defense set up. And our people-- hedgerows, what a hedgerows, you know?

And that's what got us all in trouble because the Germans were using that as a wonderful defense mechanism. Are you familiar with hedgerows?

Well, the hedgerows are-- wouldn't that be something beyond the cliffs that's in the countryside?

Yes. Yes, the countryside. The farming. The farmlands. All the fields were separated by hedgerows. They kept the cows in, and they kept everyone-- everything was-- but every one of them was an embankment and then trees.

So you had-- they issued us gloves, for instance. We had gloves. And a couple of days, the gloves, which were threads, because you were just always using--

Using them to climb onto the branches and over the hedgerows?

Yeah.

Is this it?

You could imagine, it was quite a defense. Very tough. Very, very bad.

So you'd have to fight field by field.

That's right.

OK.

It was a struggle, and it took us a long-- that's why it took so long to get out of Normandy, because they--

OK. OK. So when you were-- about a week after D-Day, do you know any of the details of D-Day at that point?

No, nothing.

Nothing. You just knew that there already had been the invasion.

Yes.

And when you're on the ship--

You don't get any information, not really.

Well, if you did, all the kids would turn around and run, you know, or want to.

Yeah. That's right. That's right.

When you did get to Normandy, what do you see? Were you released into the water?

No, no, no. We landed on the beach.

You landed on the beach. But as a matter of fact, I remember there were a lot of German prisoners on the beach at that point. And they were being shipped. In the boat that we came on, they were being shipped back. And I kept saying to myself, how lucky. How lucky these guys.

Yeah.

There you are.

Well, by that point-- here's another question-- by that point, did know more about Hitler? Did you know more about what the war was really all about?

Well, you know, at that point, we had-- I must say that in the city, in our neighborhood, we had families coming over in the years of, I guess, like--

Refugees.

Refugees. '40 or '41.

OK.

And I remember people talking about meeting people. I remember that up in Washington Heights, there were a lot of refugees. So suddenly, we were aware of what was happening in Germany through this kind of talk. Didn't know the



details.

But you knew things were bad for Jews.

Yes. They were coming. So they were-- that's right.

These were mostly the refugees that you'd refer to if they went to Washington Heights. They're usually German-Jewish refugees.

Yeah. But we just, as I said, we never did meet them. So we were aware of them.

Secondhand.

Secondhand. So I was, at that point, landing in Normandy. I had a sneaking suspicion that being a Jew was not the best thing. Now, I must say this. If you're aware of the fact that when you come into the service, you're issued dog tags.

OK what is on those dog tags?

Your name and your serial number and something very special.

OK, what's that?

H for Hebrew. C for Catholic. P for Protestant. H for Hebrew. So you walked around with a dog tag that was stamped H.

And the German Army-- ah, the German Army-- the US Army took Jewish soldiers, put them in combat in Nazi Germany, knowing there was-- to me, to this day, that's why Berga becomes such a very-- because those guys were all selected because they were Jewish.

So how did they know? So there's something that still to this day is very upsetting to me, that we were sent there. Was that like a stamp of--

So in other words, it's almost like the US Army sends the Jewish guys-- I mean, are you saying that they were either conscious or unconsciously--

Were they not aware that the Germans had a Jewish problem? That's right.

OK.

Why would you send a soldier marked basically? Might as well put it on your forehead and say, you know.

So in the training, whether you were in the US or whether you were in Britain, was there any official kind of talk? And by official, I meant even from your own direct report. You know, the people you reported to about, you know, it's a little harder for the Jews because--

No.

No news of that kind of thing at all.

No, no. If you're captured, get rid of your dog tags, things of that nature. Nobody-- you were not-- there was no discussion. Don't talk about it. There were guys--

If you were captured, you should get rid of your dog tags? Nobody said that or they did say that?

They didn't say that, but guys did it.

OK.

The only problem is, that you're really making yourself-- you're doing it, you're stripping your ID, and that's not a good idea either.

And why isn't it? For those of us who have no idea why it isn't, why isn't it a good idea?

Well you could be taken as a spy or something, you know.

This is the only thing that says you're only a soldier.

That's right.

OK. OK.

It's to me, in looking back, it had to be an antisemitic tinge there somewhere, I feel. And when I met the guys in my group who had been at Berga and who had really suffered torture, thoroughly because they were Jewish soldiers. They realized there was something--

Something wrong there.

Something wrong somewhere.

OK.

Yeah.

So when you land on Normandy beach, what did you see besides the German prisoners of war? What was in front-- paint a picture for me.

Well, to me, a beach was always a fun place, you know? And suddenly, you look around and you see weapons and massive trucks coming over the-- I mean, it was just a different world there.

Was it cleaned up by then?

No, no, no.

No?

But tanks, huge tanks. But I remember the Germans, the soldiers. And it was my first contact, of course, with-- that's the war right there, you know? But we were told get in the truck, you're going to the 90th Infantry Division, ba ba ba. And they had it all figured out. And you were gone.

All right. So you're off of the beach. You're in the truck, and where were you taken?

You're taken up to your division, your group. And you find out that you're a member of K Company, Third Battalion, 90th Division. And you're going to be a mortar person. A gun, mortar gun.

So what does that involve? What does that mean, being a mortar?

It means you're a man-- with a three-man crew. And it's a weapon that you see these long barrels.

Right.

And you drop a shell in. and as a matter of fact, because of the hedgerows, that became the major weapon because it had a lob to it, and it goes over the--

The hedgerow.

Over the hedgerow.

So it was effective.

Hm?

It was an effective weapon.

The most effective weapon we had.

OK.

We were very busy.

So once you are assigned and you know that you're in the 90th Division, K Battalion, Third-- I forgot-- unit?

Battalion.

Third Battalion.

K Company.

K Company. What does K Company mean?

Because the companies are broken up. Every battalion is broken up into groups.

OK.

And there was A Company, B Company, C Company.

All right.

And this group, the company. So that's the way they break it up, yeah.

OK.

And in that company, they break it up into different little groups.

And so what was your first experience of active combat?

I should remember that, shouldn't I? Yeah.

Well, maybe not. Maybe it was uneventful.

It was just--

What was the countryside like then?

Well, it was off-- there was a lot of cows. It was cow country. And that's why the hedgerows were very important because a farmer could keep control with it. And then there were fields and things of growing of food, you know. So it was a real farm country.

So were you fighting and cows were grazing at the same time?

That's right.

That sounds so bizarre.

It is. And the sad thing was that you'd come up, and you'd find the dead cows. And you realized you were the guy who did it. And it's bothered me a long time. So we were-- but it was a main struggle. Day to day, you didn't know whether you were going to survive 'til the next day. That's a tough, tough way to go.

And you don't know what that does to your whole body and your mindset. When you talk about post-traumatic stress, but if we learned about, you realize the months, the days, the months that you were doing this every day. You had no idea if you would survive. So a lot of pressure.

Where would you sleep?

Foxholes.

OK.

You buddied up with somebody.

OK.

He had the shovel, and you had a--

A pick of some kind?

I'm sorry?

A pick of some kind?

A pick. A pick. A pick and a shovel. So that's the way they would-- so I would use the pick. He would take the shovel. And the two of us had a hole for the night. And that was our home for the night.

That's why I sit around here like this, and I say, how bad can things be? Look how comfortable. I found a very, very important word in the dictionary.

What's that?

Perspective. I tell my grandchildren. I told them, think about perspective. You had to be there to appreciate it.

Yeah.

And that is something I learned-- I live with. So when anybody says, I'm an up person, I say, hey, how bad can it be? They're not shooting at you. Because that was my relationship with it.

Well, one wouldn't want that experience on anyone.

No. But going through it, this is what the result is, that it prepares you to handle most everything in life. You think this is tough? You should do that kind of thing, you know.

Yeah.

So if I can repeat this and kind of picture it in my own mind, there you are in a field, and you're near a hedgerow. Is that where you would dig the foxhole so you'd be next to a hedgerow?

Yeah, normally.

Yeah.

Right.

And then there's another field and another hedgerow, and the Germans could be behind that one.

And they had hedgerows. And they had foxholes.

And they had foxholes. And they also had mortar guns?

Yes, everybody. Yeah.

OK.

So you're part of a mortar group, three guys.

Yes, right. A team.

And are there other guys around you?

Yes, yes.

OK.

Yeah. That's a squad. There was platoons. K Company is made up of a number of platoons. And the platoons are broken up as a squad. So it's all arranged.

And how many guys in a squad?

A squad is about a dozen. A platoon maybe-- a platoon may have 50 or 60 people. And then the company is a group of platoons.

OK.

So K Company is like four platoons or something.

OK.

That's how it worked.

And would you, for example, were you in stalemates where you would be on your side of the hedgerow and someone else would be on another side for days on end or would you make progress?

We made progress. In the early-- yeah. We were moving because we came in with a huge amount of equipment and

men. So the Germans were really-- and the Germans--

[PHONE RINGING]

OK. More explanation on the division.

Yeah, the division consists of the 357th and 358th and the 359th Regiments.

OK.

The regiments have battalions. Battalions have companies, and companies have platoons.

And platoons have squads.

And squads. So that's the--

That's the sequence.

That's the sequence.

OK.

So I was a member of the 358th.

Regiment.

Regiment.

OK. K Company, Third Battalion, fourth platoon.

OK.

The fourth platoon was called Heavy Weapons Platoon. The other guys all had rifles.

OK.

We were the ones with the mortars.

Did you have rifles too?

No. We had pistols.

Pistols?

And we had pistols. But our weapon was the mortar.

OK.

And so that's the way the--

OK.

The only way--

So you were saying before that there was a lot of equipment that came over with the invasion.

Yes. and we really were overpowering. So the Germans were constantly-- but it was very slow because of the hedgerows. But there was a constant movement.

OK.

So would it be that you'd wake up and the next day you have gone over to the other field?

That's right. OK? But when we finally got to this, call it a hill, our first major, major battle.

OK.

And this was July now. This was a month later. A month we're there. And we've only gone--

How long? Kilometer? A mile?

10, 20 miles.

OK.

I mean, it was movement but--

Slow.

Slow. And this is where I got involved with the Germans. This was called Hill 122. It was the Foray. It was a hilly-- a forested hill, [SPEAKING FRENCH]. And the Germans had really-- and it was a very important point because from that hill, they could have--

A view.

--a view. They could see the landing area, for instance. The whole-- they could watch and see what was going on.

So it was pretty high up.

It was high up. Yeah. And we finally got on top. The Germans retreated. And they went down that way. So we followed them. And this is where, I think, they were expecting us. They encircled us. And that's how I got trapped. So I ended up being wounded and taken prisoner. It was July, July 10.

You hadn't even been there a month. OK.

It was a short war but very intense.

OK. What do you remember after being taken prisoner?

Well this, of course, I remember. Now, I was wounded by a-- a German threw a grenade at me, and it caught me in my thigh. I was wounded. And I was on the ground.

And I looked up, and there was this guy with a gun. And my buddy is a kid over here. And the two of us looked up. He got up and starting to run. You don't do that. And the German just turned and shot him. So I put my hands up.

Do you remember his name? The kid who was--

I didn't know his name, no. I had another-- the guy that I buddied with, with the pick and the shovel, was named Mike.

He and I were the ones that shared the foxhole together. But this guy was caught with me.

Now, the moment you put your hands up, there's a moment there which is another-- it's a special world of stepping from one world to another. I mean, being an independent and suddenly being a prisoner is tough.

And here, I suddenly realized the H on my dog tag. So that's when everything sort of comes together with you. And he got me, and we gathered a few other guys that were trapped. And they marched us back.

Do you remember what he looked like, this German?

No. I know what he was wearing a uniform that-- he was a member of the special Hermann Goering-- you know Goering? It was like a special unit, and they wore a special color. They were really--

So you were able to identify that.

I couldn't. I just learned later on that he was-- I was wondering why he was that-- they were a special group.

OK.

And he got me to the back. And then we were herded all together, and we encamped that night with the Germans. Slept with the German side.

And how many of you were there?

Maybe about 20 or 30 guys, yeah. And then the next day, they got us up. And they put us on the road. And they were going to march us to the back. And suddenly, all this dust was going up. It was a nice hot July day.

And my group, the 90th, saw the Germans gathering. They thought we were all Germans. And they fired on us. And that was my second one. What was when I got my-- so I was wounded by my own--

So I was going to ask, if you had gotten wounded here in the thigh, could you still walk?

I could walk, but my buddy, Mike, was walking with me. He had his--

You your arm around him.

Yes. Yeah.

OK.

So he and I, yeah. Then when the shell hit, the group of us, we all went up the air. I came down, and he didn't survive. And I think I was about one of the few, maybe the only one, who did. And that's where my leg was shattered. So I ended up in this farmhouse.

And of course, the Germans had a field hospital in this farmhouse. And they took me in the kitchen and put me on this kitchen table. And the doctor came over and says to me-- heavy accent-- for you, the war is over.

And then he grabbed my dog tag. And he says what's this H? At that moment, I said goodbye. I really did not think I'd-- I says, there goes my 20th birthday. I absolutely-- at the moment, you just cannot explain. But I don't how many people get to that point who say goodbye, but I did.

And then I woke up in the barn on a straw in the back. And I looked down, and I see one foot and that's-- I said, but at least I'm-- I didn't expect to wake up. And then I reached around, and I see my dog tag was gone.



They could take the dog tag, and later on I found it in my pocket. He had written me a note, what he had done and why, and signed it. And this is what my story is all about. This is the doctor that I--

Tell me.

The family that I've gotten involved with.

Well, we'll come to that. But I have a couple of questions before.

So this was the moment that-- you have to understand, this was why I'm so involved.

I'm surprised that the Germans actually didn't just let you die, you know? They took you into this farmhouse.

Right.

Because they could have easily done that.

Correct. But you have to understand, this was-- if it wasn't-- this was a military operation. They have prisoners that were taken. So we're exchanging. They want their prisoners to be taken care of, that kind of thing.

OK. So there's a self-interested reason why they wouldn't do that. OK. And so now tell me-- OK, so now we understand why they would take you into that--

Medical unit.

That medical unit, that farmhouse, and whatever they set up there. And there is that doctor who asks you, *was ist das*, and for you, the war is over.

I just closed my eyes and never said a word.

And then you black out.

Right.

OK. And what is it that you find in your pocket?

It was a card. Like a postcard that he had written-- matter of fact, interesting was it had Hitler writings on it. It was like a card that you would send home from there, you know, the army.

OK.

And he wrote on it, and I have it.

You have the card still?

No. I don't. The card, I gave it to the widow. It's hanging in her--

OK.

Yeah. I have a picture of it I'll show you. When we went to visit her, I brought--

The card.

To me, this man had already saved me, I think, I believe. But that he represented something, a human element that I

recognized.

So what did he write there? What was written on the back of that card?

Well, just that what he had done with the medication, and it was a medical report, you know. This is what I know what he did.

OK. So he took your leg off.

He did. He did.

He took your leg off, and then what medication he gave you?

As well.

And he took the dog tags off?

Correct. I don't know. He just got rid of them. But I believe he realized-- he knew what the H was on there.

Yeah.

And this was not-- and he didn't know if I was going to end up with who, you know?

Yeah. Yeah.

The SS were the guy who-- the bad guys.

And you might not have made it to Berga with your shattered leg. And then he signed his name.

Mm-hmm.

Now, this must have been in German.

Yes. Yes. I had no idea what-- But I just saved it and then had it translated a long time later.

OK. So what was your-- what was the rest of your-- what happened to you after that? There you are, you wake up in the barn.

Well, they now-- and I only realized this after we had traveled there years later, from that spot to where I ended up at the hospital in the city of Rennes-- R-E-N-N-E-S-- and it was a former school house that had been converted into a POW hospital. And we had medical people that were captured, doctors. And our own--

Your own guys.

Our own guys. And the Gestapo was outside patrolling. So this was where I ended up in this hospital. It was really a stalag. It had a number, 122 or something like that.

So it was a prison camp, but it was a hospital within the prison camp.

That's right. Prison. That's right.

And did then you come under the care of captured allied medical people?

That's right. We had French and American medical people. The nurses, matter of fact-- interesting. The nurses were

students, student nurses, at the University of Rennes. And they would take it on to take care of us. And I had a note from-- I finally found out who she was. Well, I'll tell you all about that.

OK. So when you come under the care of these people, you know, the Allied captured medical folks, do you tell them who you are?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I had no dog tags. That was my problem. I had no ID.

OK.

But at least I was--

With your own folks.

I was with my own people.

And how did they handle it? Did they say, OK, just keep quiet. Don't tell the Germans or anything.

No, no. Nobody-- we just--

OK.

Just said nothing, and nobody said nothing. They really have very little in the way of medical equipment. So the treatment was minimal. They just changed the bandage, kept it clean.

Were you in pain?

No. Amazing. It was just-- it was they call a guillotine amputation. They just cut it. There's no attempt to close it or anything. It's healed by itself. So I had to have a additional operation later on.

OK. It was tough. But we were-- there were hundreds and hundreds of POWs wounded. And the room that I was in was the dining room of the school, the mess hall. It was a big, big room. And we have a lot of guys bumped up, right. So they just managed it. It was July-- that was July 11.

So two days after.

Well, July 11 was the-- yeah, two days.

After this capture. July 9, I think you said?

No. July 10 I was captured. That night I spent with the Germans. And the next day I was wounded again.

OK. And the 11th, I ended up taking the operation. May have been I may have spent the night in the slop house. And they put me-- oh, interesting also. They put me in this wagon with a couple of other guys. And we went to this terrain. But until I did it myself, I realized it was a trip.

About how long?

It was a long trip. And the effort that they made really impressed me, the fact that they would go to that effort to send me to this. But it was a big truck. And as I started to go, the door next to me opened up.

And a guy put his head in. He said Americana. I think, here. He took out something and he give me a shot. Isn't that something? I mean, that kind of care was just-- and he closed the door.

You wouldn't have expected it.

No, no. So they made an effort. Yeah.

And how long were you in the ven, in this Stalag 122?

About a month.

OK.

About the middle of August.

And so the nurses were local girls.

They were students at the university.

And the Germans let them in to help take care of the prisoners.

Mm-hmm.

OK.

It was all some big arrangement with the local townspeople.

Do you remember the food, what kind of food they gave you? To this day, I can't eat boiled potatoes.

[CHUCKLES]

That was what it was?

There must have been a potato farm nearby. Boiled potatoes and not very much else. Some vegetables, like some sort of green stuff.

What was your mental state like at that point? Were you kind of in a shock or--

You know, amazing what 19-year-old minds, you really can take a lot of-- I just slept well. I had no real pain. So I was fortunate. But had this several days, they would take the bandage off and clean it. That was touch and go. There was no painkillers.

No painkillers. Ooh. And no infection?

And that's what-- they were kept clean. yeah. No infection. I got some kind of healing. In a month, the skin can do a lot. And then suddenly, Rennes was being attacked by us.

And there was a shelling, and my bed was brought against-- there was a wall right behind me. And all of a sudden, I heard something hit the wall up above, and a fragment of a shell. I said, wow. I said, they're going to get me. They're going to get me. I wasn't sure I was out from under.

Yeah.

But I went back. We visited that place. I took Edith, my daughter. And I showed them exactly where that-- I remember.

OK. So Rennes is under attack. What happens with you? Well, we just--

Because they leave you there.

And then suddenly the Germans retreated.

And they left you there.

They left us there.

OK.

And all of a sudden, the American Red Cross came in. And I looked at that-- the guy came in with a blanket, US Army blanket, put it over me, and I said-- I said, wow. I felt like I was home. It was amazing. Just suddenly, this blanket became my-- and we were saved and shipped back. So that was my big-- but I--

You were shipped back to where?

England. And then England decided that the leg had to be re-amputated. So they shipped me to Walter-- then I was shipped to Walter Reed in Washington for another operation.

So believe it or not, this is an official length that you're supposed to have. Seven inches below the knee is ideal that I had. That's what I have today, seven inches.

So your leg was amputated at one point?

Above the ankle.

Above the ankle.

That's in the field in France, by the German doctor.

Yes, right. And then Walter Reed re-amputated to seven inches below the knee.

And why? What is the reason for that?

Articulate.

To be able to mend the leg?

That's for circulation. All sorts of reasons that they feel that is the ideal length. Excuse me. Yes.

Excuse me. Can we cut? Your wife just wanted to add something so-- remind you of something. Tell me what it was.

When I was taken in England, they took the, called the guillotine cut, and closed it up.

OK.

And after that procedure, I became ill for some reason or something. And it delayed my trip. And then I was finally shipped to Walter Reed, and they took the [INAUDIBLE] to the leg.

Seven inches below the knee.

Yeah, they re-amputated. But I don't know why England felt that they had to close the wound. Maybe there was the reason for that, I guess.

What was it like for you as a young man to realize you didn't have a leg-- you didn't have half of your leg?

It was very difficult. It made my-- well, it was very difficult dating for instance, relationships. I felt very conscious of being immobile. It was a--

[PHONE RINGING]

Oh.

OK. Yeah. You were saying that you were immobile, and dating and things.

I was very self-conscious obviously. I walked OK. But I didn't feel 100% obviously. Made dating very difficult. And so but--

You know, but you-- I mean, first of all, I can't imagine what it was like to be captured. I can't imagine what it was like to really think this is it. I'm not going to wake up and yet you do.

And yet when you do, you wake up and not all of you is there. And then a month in this captivity, did it dawn on you right at the beginning what really has happened or was that gradual?

Well, it's obviously a shocker, but you learn very quickly to accept. And the original feeling is, I guess, I'm here. I'm out from under. Whatever happens can only be a plus. You get-- that's where the positive thinking becomes-- you have to become an optimist. Very positive thinking is the name of the game.

But you know what--

I always believed, I really did. I always believed that I would get up and walk and just carry on with the ups and downs, of course. But as I say, perspective. I say that very seriously that it gives you a tremendous amount of confidence that if I can handle this, I can--

I can handle anything.

That's it. That's right. Nevertheless, though, you had losses. You had also-- you had promises that were then not kept. You know, promises for the school.

That was a blow.

Yeah. And I can imagine anger. Anger at fate. I don't want to put words into your mouth, but you know, in what--

Questions.

Yeah. Questions.

Questions.

And also, how do you deal with the negative things because if you squash those negative feelings, they come out one way or another. And I'm wondering, did you have them? Did you have anger? Did you have a sense of, I wasn't treated fairly? This shouldn't have happened. I got the short end of the stick.

I think there was a lot of it. It was, yeah. And getting over that takes time. And a lot of positive things have to happen to make it OK.

So tell me, what are some of those positive things that happened?

Well, OK. Getting a leg suddenly, being able to walk and do the things, that kind of thing. That was a big thing.

OK.

And it's hard to believe-- I must tell you this-- that the first leg I got at Walter Reed was a product of the Civil War.

No, really?

You know what it was?

What was it?

It was a solid piece of wood. Wood that's hollowed out. Well, it's called willow wood.

OK.

And that's what they did, I was told. From the Civil War.

How Civil War amputees would-- oh, my goodness.

And it was-- you could imagine--

It must have been heavy.

Well, willow wood is light.

But suddenly things like Velcro came in, which remember Velcro came in? And then they started to do research and development. And everything worked out. Today, it's just a whole-- amazing. But you learn gradually to accept little by little the pluses. But the early days were tough, yeah.

Did you go home to your parents?

Oh I--

I mean, after Walter Reed?

Yeah. I traveled, Yeah.

OK.

Go home on crutches. Yeah. And I was at Walter Reed for nine months because I developed all sorts of skin problems and one thing or another. And so it was a struggle. But here again, as I say, it all adds up to being thankful that it all comes out.

Did you go into detail with your parents about what happened?

I don't think so, no. Nobody really--

OK. Can we cut?

All right. Your wife also reminded us that when you were in England, is that when you let your parents know that you had been wounded and captured and released?

Well, they-- I guess I-- yeah. I wrote from England, yeah.

OK. Had they already known that you had been captured?

They had a telegram. They had a telegram that I-- and there were no details on the telegram. Was missing that, just missing.

OK.

OK.

And then, so what did you write to them? Did you tell them the extent of what had happened?

That was my problem. I couldn't tell. I didn't.

You didn't.

And that's why they were guessing about what it was all about.

What were they guessing?

Well--

I mean, did you know they were guessing?

No, no.

OK. So what did you write them?

I just wrote them that I was wounded. But I didn't tell about the leg.

OK.

I don't know. Just to this day, I don't know why.

OK. Did they visit you in Walter Reed?

Oh, yes. Yes. Yes.

OK. Do you remember seeing them for the first time?

Yeah. Yeah. Well, by that time, of course, they were aware of what happened. They knew it at that point.

How did they know?

I guess-- I don't remember the details. But they were-- before I got to the States. You know, I just don't-- I just don't remember this.

OK. OK.

That's a good question, though. That's an area where absolutely I'm blank.

I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised. This is so traumatic.

Yeah. Yeah.



That there are just things that-- these things that I'm asking are real details.

When did they learn that there was-- yeah, the leg had come off, yeah.

But you know, for a mother, for a father to learn that their child is mutilated like that is-- I mean, first of all, they're grateful and, second of all, what's happened to my son?

Mm-hmm. Yeah. It was-- yeah.

Do you remember when you saw them again, what that was like?

Yes, I remember that first sight at Walter Reed, yeah. I just sort of-- I came down. I met them. I met them in the lobby. I was on crutches obviously. And it just, that was--

And what did they say?

Well, they just-- everybody melted I guess. It was--

They were all crying.

Yeah. It was a major, major moment. But we went from there.

And then you went back to the house in The Bronx with them after you were released from Walter Reed.

Right.

Did your mother stay at Walter Reed? Did they have facilities--

No.

--for families to stay sometime?

Yeah, there was a-- yeah. But I came home.

Did Miriam visit you during that time?

Yeah, she came down with friends.

OK. And what were the first weeks at home like?

Well, getting-- Yeah, it was-- is was a question of I was getting ready to go to college at that point. I thought I was going to go away to school.

Tell me, let's see if we can put the sequence of chronology in order. You land June 9, was it, or a week after D-Day. You land a week after D-Day. In July 9 and 10, it is when you're in this battle--

July 10.

OK. And you're captured. July 11 is when the operation happens. Then for about a month, you're in Rennes. So that takes us into August.

Yes.

So from August, you're back into Allied hands. How long were you in Britain?

I imagine it was about a month, I guess.

OK. So that's September. So it's one year after having gone into basic training, September '44. And then you're sent back to the United States. Do you remember which month it was that you came to Walter Reed?

In the fall, October something.

And that's when you see your parents. All right. And then you're in Walter Reed for nine months. So during that nine months, the war ends.

That's right.

All right. Before we go--

I remember--

OK.

Yeah.

Tell me. What do you remember?

No, I said I remember lying in bed with earphones on my-- and hearing that the bomb went off.

You mean the one in Hiroshima?

Yes, Hiroshima.

So that's August 1945.

That's right.

OK.

And I was-- actually, a month or so after that, I was--

Did you get disability from the army?

Yeah.

And you were on the GI Bill?

The GI Bill, yeah.

OK. And you're back then at home, and you have within your sights education.

I'm writing to schools.

OK. What schools and what subjects?

Well, I was into economics. And I ended up at a school called Bethany. Bethany College in Bethany, West Virginia.

That's pretty far from New York.

I had somebody that my father knew was a teacher in New York. And he gave her the name.

When did you take that little card out and asked for having it translated? When did your attention turn to that card the German--

When I came home, and there was-- there was somebody who worked for my father who was German.

OK.

And he translated for me. It was a long time.

And when did you start thinking about this guy?

[INAUDIBLE]

When did you start thinking about this German surgeon.

Edith and I traveled to France, what year? '80?

Italy.

Italy.

Italy.

And went on a Perillo Tour. You know the name Perillo Tour?

Perillo Tour. Yeah, I've heard of those. Yeah.

And on the bus, there was a whole bunch of guys going back to the places where they were during the war. And it got be kind of-- and Edith's brother lives in Paris. He was an artist living in Paris. So we decided to visit him. And while we went to Paris, we would travel down to Normandy to visit the beach.

Yeah.

I'll show you where I landed, ba ba ba. And I told the lady who was running a little museum down there, I told her-- oh, and I had at that point, I had a thing about the French. I wasn't very happy. And I didn't think they were-- I don't know.

It wasn't fair because it was just a couple of weeks. And the people I met were all involved in saving themselves. So they weren't too involved in thanking us and everything else.

Oh, so you're saying when you first landed, you didn't see any French kind of gratitude that you're there.

Correct. OK.

OK.

So on this trip, we went to this museum, and this woman announced to the group room-- they were all local people-- that this man landed with the 90th, and they all got up in clapped. Suddenly, I started to feel a little better.

And then she told me that nearby, there was a man who was very interested in my Division. And he had a little museum in his house. But his town was liberated by the 90th.

Oh, the 90th even.

The 90th. So Edith is a French student. And so I was loathe to do it, but she wanted to go. And we went to visit them. And when I told him the story, he said would you like to find the doctor?

And is that the first time it occurred to you?

yes

I had no idea I could-- how to do it, how to reach him.

But your feelings about him, had they already been there or you hadn't really thought of him about until that moment?

No, no. I hadn't thought-- that's right. I hadn't thought of him. I just was grateful, but that's about as far as it went.

OK.

We didn't know this, but shortly before we arrived in this little town, the German soldier who had been captured by our-- had visited him. Henri, his name is. And Henri had his name and number. He said, I'll speak to Heinz about this.

OK.

And Heinz went to Berlin with information on the card. I think I sent a copy of the card. And he had the numbers and everything else. And he found out who it was. We just had the name. Didn't know where he was from.

Didn't know anything.

But he was from a town called Saarbrucken.

Saarbrucken. OK. It's a pretty town.

Oh, yes. Yes. And then it started the whole thing rolling. And because he contacted the family.

What was the name of the doctor?

W-O-L-L.

W-O--

Fredo. Not Fredo. Edgar.

Edgar.

Edgar Woll.

Edgar Woll.

W-O-L-L.

OK.

And the family told us that the doctor had passed away several years before.

OK.

But they would be delighted-- wonderful that we could visit.

So the next year, we got together with Henri. And we drove to Saarbrucken.

Oh, wow.

We came back, and we spent the weekend in Germany in Saarbrucken. We came into this family. They had a party. It was a Saturday night. And we were the guests of honor. And one guy got up to raise his glass. Without you, Bob, we'd still be saying Heil Hitler. In other words--

And I said, well, I came as a liberator. Didn't know it. And I was turned on by this whole family thing. And I would say these people, professional, they're all doctors. And I said, I felt very close, very warm. This is not an enemy, obviously. These people, I could be-- we could be neighbors and be happy with it.

They were a wonderful, lovely family. So that's how it started. And from that moment-- he had several granddaughters who he never met, and we met them. And one of them decided to come to Fairleigh Dickinson's for an English course.

That's around the corner from you.

And they lived at our house.

Oh, my goodness.

So we really became an extended family. It was just wonderful, just wonderful really. It's been my big, big, big pleasant surprise that it ended up being-- I have-- I just have to show you.

You will in a minute, when we're not miked up. And we'll go get some pictures and maybe film them. But this is almost-- I mean, we have very few beautiful moments in talking about the kinds of stories and destinies that we talk about.

But this became such of a family-on-family thing. And we just hit it off so beautifully together.

What did you learn about him as a person? You never had a chance to meet him again.

No.

But what did they tell you about who he was?

The doctor.

Yes.

Well, I met his son, who is a doctor also. And I realized that the son travels somewhere to volunteer. He's a very giving-- I'm trying to think of the term, when you reach out and--

Empathetic.

Well, going out and making an effort to help, traveling.

Altruistic.

OK.

I mean, that's another word.

However, so I realized that was what the doctor was.

And did they tell you anything about his personality? Did they tell you anything about who he was and what his life had been?

I don't think so. I don't know, but that he was just a wonderful father and grandfather, I guess.

OK. Did they know of this instance? Had he ever talked about this?

No, I don't think so.

OK.

No. This was-- to him, this was just a moment. But look what he did. Look what he did. He actually-- in removing the dog tags, when I look back on it, I say to myself, this was a special, special guy. And I find it such the unique-- I feel as though he has to be just like a unique story, as a war story.

It is a war story, yeah. It is a war story, and it is a unique one.

Yeah.

Did it change you as a person?

Yes. I think so.

And how? In what way?

Well, I got involved with a POW group, and I started to reach out to help other guys. And it made me feel so good. I mean, somebody would come to me, and I'd write a letter to the VA and get him his disability.

Oh, you mean for German POWs?

No, no, no. This is--

For US POWs.

US POWs.

OK.

No, my own group.

Your own group. OK.

And to this day, next Sunday at this point, we're together with a dinner down in Lyons VA. And we have a yearly lunch together. So we're very involved in helping each other and reaching out. And this is something I started doing. I felt so good doing it.

When you had this connection with the family, did the question of what had happened to Germany's Jews?

No, no.

Never came up.

No.

OK.

No, that's interesting. I mean, it never-- as a matter of fact, when we were at home-- and Cornelia was her name-- was at Fairleigh. She had two friends.

This is the granddaughter of his--

This is the granddaughter of the doctor.

Of Edgar Woll.

One girl was a Japanese girl, and the boy that she met was an Italian boy. So the three Axis powers.

Axis powers, yeah.

And we had them for dinner at our home. And I was sitting around the table and telling Edith, look at these beautiful children. I mean, these are supposed to be enemies? This is the-- this is the enemy.

And to this day, we get a note from-- I can't remember her name. The Japanese girl. She still writes to us. So it just ends up being such an ongoing-- but it wonderful, yeah. It's beautiful.

And it made me feel very special and very good. And that's the important thing. And the fact that I was able to walk well and really carry on my life and having two beautiful daughters and marriage.

When did you meet Edith?

1950.

1950.

1950.

And you've been married now?

66 years.

Congratulations.

November 22nd, it will be 67. We met on a blind date.

Did you?

Lived around the corner from each other in The Bronx. We went to the same schools, everything the same. And we had a-- so that was very special, very fortunate. So you can't ask any more than that. That's it. It turned out well. And here I am, 91, and I'm still walking.

[TAP WOOD]

I can't ask any more than that either. If there is something I haven't asked, then I'd be very grateful for you to share it. But thank you for sharing your beautiful story-- your hard story and a beautiful story.

Well, the point is, I think it goes on and on. It's a continuing--

Yeah.

--story, which is nice. You meet people. And you can share, and you can reach out and help people. That was my thing, really to help-- reach out. And it goes a long way.

That's a wonderful legacy. It's a wonderful legacy.

It does so much for you personally.

Have you ever come across people who are survivors of the war, who have a bitterness towards Germany and her allies?

This is why I like to tell my story because I met people like this, the Germans, and I said, you can't use a big brush. I'll tell you my story and about the Germans that I know. And that's what I like to do. And I feel that maybe that'll help.

But just as the Germans would say they were not-- would you call these people Nazis? I can't. I mean, they were caught in a war the same way we were. And the families were just taken and-- they're done now.

So I'm delighted to be able to share, and I feel it's very important to reach out and share the story because maybe somebody will hear it and say, hey.

It takes a lot, you know, when people have experiences where they've seen humanity at its worst, it is a huge thing to ask them to trust again and to have faith again. And I think it can only happen incrementally when you hear a story like yours, you know. And no one can prescribe it as a path for everybody.

Right.

But it takes a while to restore that sense of--

To know it can happen.

Yeah.

To know it's there. Yeah.

Yeah.

So it's particularly important.

Well, I just-- we were in New York with our-- one of the granddaughters brought her children to visit. And her husband worked in New York, and we met them in New York at a restaurant. And we gave them-- my daughter's up at Cornell.

And we brought shirts, Cornell shirts for them. And I have a picture of them. And here in the restaurant, people are looking around, and here these kids get up and put these shirts on. I felt--

These are the German children.

German children. They're the great grandchildren.

The great grandchildren now.

Dr. Woll never met him.



That's OK. That's OK. Your wife is saying that Dr. Woll never met his grandchildren. Do you know the year he died? Do you remember what year that would have been?

Would have been '54.

We have it.

You have the death certificate. OK. All right. Well, for this part of the interview, I will say I think that we've pretty much finished. We'll film some photographs later, you know, after you bring them out.

But at this point, what I'll say, this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Bob Levine on April 30, 2017 in Teaneck, New Jersey. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Beautiful. OK, Bob. Tell me, what is this that you are holding?

This is the French medal, honored to be given this. Designed by Napoleon. And it's called the Legion of Honor. And I am now a chevalier.

A chevalier.

A chevalier of France. And that's the way France honors all of us who were doing the war.

Who liberated France. You liberated France.

We liberated France. And I'm delighted to be able to hang this on my wall.

When did you get the medal?

About two years ago.

So in 2015, something like that. OK. Thank you very much. OK. So tell me. Who is this handsome young guy?

This is Bob Levine.

Bob Levine, age 19.

OK.

Was this taken in the United States?

Yes, it was. This was when I was at Camp Croft in my first week in basic training.

So that's in Upstate New York.

No, no. This is Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Camp Croft. OK. I didn't understand.

Camp Croft, South Carolina.

Spartanburg.

Spartanburg, South Carolina. OK. Thank you.

Wow.

OK. Can you tell me, who are the two people in this photograph?

They are the doctor and his wife, Maria.

OK. Dr. Edgar Woll?

Dr. Edgar Woll.

OK.

And Maria de Leonardi.

That was her maiden name?

Her maiden name.

And do you know about when that photograph was taken? It looks well before the war.

I'm sure well before.

OK.

Is there anything else you wanted to say to it? OK.

Tell me, and who is the picture of the young man there?

That is Dr. Woll.

OK.

OK.

It also looks like it was taken well before the war.

Well before the war.

OK. When you saw these photos, did you recognize him?

Not at all.

Not at all. Yeah. All right. Thank you. All right. So the bottom photograph, can you tell me what that is? It looks like a death notice of some kind.

This is a death-- in 1954, Dr. Woll passed away. This is the death notice.

He died young.

Yes, very young.

Do you know from what?

I believe it was cancer.

OK.

I believe it was cancer.

OK. All right. Thank you very much. OK. So tell me, when was this photograph taken? Do you know?

This was taken in 1982. Edith and I went back to visit.

OK. And who is that? Who is the person in that photograph?

That is Bob Levine.

That's you.

Pointing to the area where he was captured and wounded and the hedgerows of Normandy down below, on Hill 122.

That's Hill 122.

The [SPEAKING FRENCH]

OK. OK. So this is the area where it all happened. OK. Thank you.

So we can talk.

All right. So this is you in 1982 when you go back with your wife. And you're on Hill 122. And those were the hedgerows. OK. Very good.

OK. So tell me, who are the people in this picture?

This is Gabriela, Dr. Woll's daughter with Bob Levine.

OK.

When he was little younger, a little heavier.

And about what year would that have been?

1995.

Something like that, yeah?

In that area.

And they hadn't known this about their father, had they?

No.

Neither his son nor his daughter.

This was new to them, yes.

It must have been quite a special gift to them.

And it made, I think, very, very proud and gave us a special relationship. That's what it was. We had a--

Thank you.

--a little more than friendship.

OK. So tell me, what is this photograph about? There are so many people in it.

This is the 100th birthday of Dr. Woll's widow. 100th birthday, with the whole family surrounding her.

And they sent that to you.

Yes.

And is she in front with her two children?

Correct.

And so that means his two children.

Yes, yes. And then all the grandchildren. When did she pass away?

Just last year, I believe.

Yeah.

Just a little past her--

And this photo is dated when? Does it have a date?

'13. 2013.

2013. OK. All right. So what is that piece of writing that we are seeing here?

This is a copy of the note that Dr. Woll left in my pocket after the operation.

I see, and it's stamped as well. So it says 11th of July, 1944. All right. And that's the note that your father's colleague from his office then translated for you. OK.