This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Edward Novakoff, conducted by Gail Schwartz on September 22, 1996 in Washington, DC. This is tape number two, side A. And we were talking about your guarding the prisoners at Nuremberg. What can you tell me, in addition, about Rudolf Hess?

Well, Hess, I remember taking him over for interrogation to the tribunal, wherever that was. And I heard him say to them-- I was sitting behind them-- something about-- they asked him about the Jews and what happened and so forth. And they asked him, I believe, the question was would you like a Jewish defense council?

And I believe-- you know, it's hard for me to remember. This is 50 years ago. But I believe his answer was, no, not because I understand what we did to the Jews, it may not be a good idea. Or something to that effect. Because he was speaking in German and I don't-- but it was that kind of an-- so it was my belief that he had amnesia to a point.

Also, I want to correct one thing that I said earlier. I'm not sure whether it was Raeder or Dönitz that tried to break my leg as I went through a gate, but it was one of them. They both looked sort of alike. They were little short guys.

So you did not stay-- you were not there when the formal beginnings--

Yeah, what happened was some time in, I believe it was October or November, I'd had enough of this. I had enough of this. And the fellow that-- this lieutenant who was then working out of what they call a motor pool company, I said call them. I says, wouldn't you like a full time driver? So I got out of the jailhouse probably a month or two before the trials actually began.

And then I'd lost contact, because his job was a lovely job. He was the go-between between all the legations with the US Army Quartermaster Corps. So we got them their bread and their wine, their gasoline. And whatever they wanted, they would ask him and he'd get it for them.

OK, we'll get to that in a minute. Anything else that you have to say about other people? What about Field Marshal Kesselring?

Yeah, Kesselring, I really never had much conversation. He was still in uniform. The generals and the admirals were still in the uniform, at least when I was there. And Kesselring would just walk up and down the corridor with his big chest sticking out whenever he could, or in the yard, wherever we took him. He really didn't have much to say, Kesselring.

And what about anything else to say about Field Marshal Keitel?

The same thing goes true with him too. These were Prussian officers, and we were scum. I mean, who are we? I was a private in the army. And whether it was the German army or American army, I mean, they really considered themselves above everybody. You know, status-wise. So they didn't-- you couldn't talk to them as much as you could to the others.

Did you talk, again, to the other American soldiers about who these people were and what they had done during the war?

No, I didn't get too much chance, because once I got in-- when I got transferred out of the jail, I was too busy with this lieutenant going out having a good time.

No, I'm talking about while you were at Nuremberg.

No, not really. There was very little discussion about who they are, what they are. Because don't forget, most of them were like me, maybe, but they weren't Jewish. They were young men, 18, 19 years old, 20 maybe, who came from the United States, were in the army.

They were out of contact with the real world. From the time you landed in France, so to speak, to the time you arrived in Nuremberg, you really didn't know what was going on. The United States could've blown up. You wouldn't know. So I don't think they had much-- some of them, as I say, there were staff offices around, government mages and captains who were part of the American Army who were going into-- running cities and towns. I forget what they call the group.

But, you know, to rebuild Germany. And manage their municipal people. And we didn't have any contact with them, either, because we were isolated. So I really left Nuremberg, I'll be honest with you, outside of my-- of meeting these, and seeing all of this, I really didn't-- I still didn't comprehend what I saw.

Three months later, I didn't understand. And maybe two years later I still didn't understand that I had arrived in a place in history and saw 23 and more of the worst killers in the world up to date. I never realized it. I do now. But I still don't know.

How did I get there? Why was I there? How did I get there? Did God send me there? I mean, what was it all about? I never understood it at all. Never will. It's hard to explain to my family, believe me. They have no comprehension. Go ahead. You were going to say?

Did-- your military superiors at Nuremberg, were they sensitive to the fact that you were Jewish?

If they were, I wouldn't-- I didn't know. I mean, they didn't treat me any different than anybody else. I mean, I was just a private first class. This is your duty. You're on the roster, you go. I mean, I don't think in the jailhouse crowd itself there was much antisemitism. There wasn't-- I don't think the Jewish question, so to speak, arose at all.

So what did you do? You took these people out in the courtyard for a walk. What else? What are the other activities?

[INAUDIBLE] and we brought them over to the-- for interrogations when we were asked to bring somebody over. Essentially, that's it. Because they wouldn't-- they didn't do much except walk around. They would have meetings with their defense counsel. They went to the bathroom. I had to watch them go to the bathroom, because they were-- it was an open, you know, it was just a pot in the middle of the cell.

No, they didn't really do much. Some of them read books. Some of them did a lot of reading. Some of them-- so we would get them things, somebody would send it over, and we would bring it into the cell; reading materials, newspapers. I mean, we were sort of like, you know, you go to a hotel, you get room service. And they were getting room service.

Did they have any contact with each other?

Very little. Certainly the only time they even saw each other was when they were walking around the yard. They didn't have any contact physically with them. And I doubt very much if they could talk to each other either. They'd just walk around the yard. And they'd say-- they'd talk to each other a little bit. But there was no formal conversations of any kind.

And each cell was separate. There was no contact between the cells. So I don't think they talked to each other too much. Maybe later when the trial started they may have had conferences with their defense counsels. Don't forget, this was all at the beginning, before they-- some of them may not have been assigned counsel yet or whatever, however the process of getting them their defense.

So I think probably after I left, they probably had more contact with each other. Certainly they were all sitting in the same prisoner's box at the trial. I mean, so then they did. But my knowledge in the jailhouse, they had very little.

But they were out in the yard together.

Yeah, they were out-- oh yeah. They saw each other, oh yeah. I mean, and they were in the corridors, you

know. But the prisoners we would keep moving around. They couldn't really talk to anybody.

Why did you want to leave Nuremberg?

Well, I'm 18 years old, 19 years old, and this isn't exactly what I wanted to do in life, work in a hotel. And that's what the job was. So I ended up with this fellow. And then--

So you asked permission to leave?

Yeah. I asked to be transferred to the-- what they call the motor pool company. And they did, because people were leaving to go back to the United States. The reason I was there-- excuse me. The reason I was there in the first place is I didn't have enough points to go right away when the war ended.

There was a point system. I don't know whether you understand. You got so much for each medal, 5 points for a medal. And that was a points system to go to the boats that-- you know, it's not like in the world today. They put you on a C30 and they fly you back to the United States. They make 10 trips a day, you know?

I mean, in those days you had to wait for a-- to get on a boat. So that was the reason I was sent there, because I wasn't scheduled to go back until like February or March of '46. So when I got this job in the M company, the motor pool company, I was living it up.

What were your thoughts about leaving Nuremberg? When you left, what were your thoughts?

My thoughts about leaving Nuremberg? It's enough. I've had enough. What do I need it for? Let's move on to something else. That was probably my thoughts. I mean, you know. I don't think I had any serious thoughts about anything in those days. I was looking for girls.

The only time, when I got into the M company, I talked to a couple of officers about going to see if I could get into Poland to see what happened to my mother's family so that when I got back to the United States I could tell her what happened. And I had, because of my position as a driver, I had a Jeep that said International Military Police on the front of it. And I had what is called an ETO trip ticket, which means I could get gas at any American army base without question, food and gas.

So I spoke to my superior. I says, on a weekend, do you think I could drive into-- to look for this Eišiškės And when I did, they told me, you know, you can get in all right, Eddie, but you may not come out. You know, you're going to go through the Russian lines. Nobody knew what was happening. This was in the fall of '45.

If I were you, I wouldn't do it. You may never get out of Russia. I mean, out of Poland. So I didn't go. And I'm sorry to this day. I should've taken the chance and gone, but who knows. That's 50 years ago. But I just-- there was nobody for me to talk to about it. Nobody knew what would happen to me once I went through the Russian lines.

I didn't have credentials. I couldn't get credentials as part of the American army forces. I mean, I'd have to do it on my own even though I had a-- I could get gasoline and everything, but there's no American dumps in there either. So where would I get-- the Russians may not give me gasoline to get back. I mean, I just didn't-- so I didn't do that.

And then I was really enjoying myself. I'll be honest with you. I was living it up. I moved to another place in Nuremberg. I was living in a house that was a former mansion. I was really enjoying it. And suddenly, one day, I get a call to go to the company clerk's office. And the company clerk says you're going back to the United States tomorrow.

And I says, how did that happen? He says, your brother is getting married, and he made a special request to the Red Cross, now that the war is over, to give you a little-- he wanted-- to let you go early. It was about two months early, actually. And so I ended up the next day heading for Le Havre on my own. I had [? separate ?] travel documents to come back to Boston. My brother was getting married December 30, so that

was the end of that. That was my-- that's my war history.

Then you got back. And can you briefly summarize what happened after that?

Well, I got back, and I went to my-- I got-- I went to my-- I was best man at my brother's wedding, obviously, in Boston.

Did you stay in the Boston area after that?

Yeah, well, it's my home. I mean, my folks lived in Brooklyn.

And what kind of work did you do? Or do you do?

What have I done since then?

Yeah, just a summary.

You got another hour?

Just to summarize quickly.

Yeah. I went into business with my brother, and I was the largest manufacturer of Navy officers' uniforms in the world for a while. And I helped Ralph Lauren get into business. I mean, I-- and then, at age 46, I got tired of the clothing business, and I became President of my temple in Brookline.

I was President for eight years. I was an officer for, like, 25 years. And then I ran-- in 1974, I ran for the Board of Selectmen, which is similar to a mayor as you'd know it. I was a Selectman for 12 years. During this period I was also appointed to the Massachusetts Maritime Board of Trustees, and I became the chairman for two years.

After that, I went into the investment banking business. And then I went into the investment business. And I'm still in the investment business. I'm still not really retired. And I built and created the largest Jewish cemetery in the greater Boston-- I still run that. I'm the treasurer. I don't-- you know.

And I've had an interesting life. I've done it all. I was awarded an honorary degree, a doctorate in public administration, for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. And I never went to college.

Wonderful. Before we end, I just want to ask you some of your feelings. What were your thoughts when you heard that these prisoners were sentenced to death, the men that you had guarded?

Couldn't be better. Couldn't be better. Why did they let any of them go? I think some of them got away. They should have killed them all. They were all guilty of whatever. By association they were guilty. But I was tickled. I hope they dump them-- do the same thing they did with the Jews when they killed them, dump them in a pit.

But anyway, I don't know what happened. I mean, I understand they were hanged in the jail, Nuremberg in that same yard that I used to walk around.

What were your thoughts when you heard that Goering committed suicide?

Save the taxpayers money. Now I think, save the taxpayers money. What do I think? I think-- I says, you know that-- all I could think about, you know, he used to get doctor visits all the time. I said, you know, that doctor is going to get him out of it one of these days. I'll bet he does something so he never has to go to the gallows. And that was my only thought about it.

You had said he had been on drugs before? For what reason?

Well, he was a-- I don't know. He was a-- I think he was a-- he had a habit. I think he had a habit. I don't know. Here, they must have archives on their medical history somewhere. But I got a hunch he was on-- he had a habit, and they dried him out. Is that the word?

When did your mother hear about what happened in Eišiškės?

Well, she must have heard before I came home, certainly. I don't remember. I mean, I didn't get home until the war was over for six months. She must have heard. I mean, what are you going to say?

Later on, about some years later, she found out she had a cousin who had escaped to Israel. And I went on a trip with a mission from Boston in 1957 to Israel. It was the first combined Jewish Philanthropies mission of any kind from any place in the United States. I don't know how I got onto that one. I was the youngest one.

And I found my cousin, my whatever. And my mother had given me some money, cash, which I gave to him to help him out. But that was-- and then I left there, and that was-- I lost contact with him. I haven't seen him either for many years.

Do you still think today about your experiences of what you saw in Flossenburg? What thoughts come to your mind?

The first night stays-- I can still see that cell block with the guys standing at each door with the names. It's always in my mind. And my thoughts? Why didn't I do more about it? Why didn't I speak about it and talk about it afterwards? Why didn't I verbalize it to the press? Why didn't I you know publicize all of this?

But, you know, you get back, and I had to make a living. I didn't have two quarters to rub together. My brother and I went into business. And, you know, you forgot about it.

Do you still--

The human mind is great.

Do you still think about Flossenburg and what you saw there?

Well, that I can still see. I have a picture somewhere in my house that I took of an oven with fire in it. It's a bad picture, but I know what it is. And yeah, I mean, you know, I still see all of that. I still see guys lying in the snow during the Battle of the Bulge. I still have all kinds of memories.

But I was never really psychologically affected by any of it. I mean, you remember they talked about these returning soldiers, they're going to have all kinds of psychiatric problems? I don't think I did. For whatever reason. Maybe I'm too dumb or something. But I never really had any psychiatric problems with it.

But I'll never forget it. I mean, how do you forget it? The first time you see a guy with his chest blown open, blood all over the place in the snow, I can still see that vision. I still have that vision. And I still have a vision of these guys. But it doesn't-- it's 50 years later.

I'd like to-- and I'm glad that the Holocaust Museum was formed, so maybe my grandchildren will come here and visit someday. Maybe they'll hear this tape.

Did you talk to your children? You have children?

Oh, yeah. I do. I have two boys and two girls. Yeah, I've told them, and I've made them watch the-- I forced them the other night to watch the Battle of the Bulge.

Did you tell them about your experience in Flossenburg?

Oh, yeah, I've told them all that. My daughter in law, who you met earlier, she went through this museum

with me. I explained to her the pictures, and especially at the end where you come through the trial portion of this museum. And I explained to her who-- what was this, and then-- yeah, I've tried to. But you can't describe what--

Has it affected you and your feelings of being Jewish?

Oh, yeah. I mean, that's why I'm very Jewish. Not very Jewish in the orthodox sense. But I'm-- when I ran for office, I made sure everybody knew that I was Jewish. And that I was not an observant Jew to the extent of orthodoxy, but that I was a practicing Jew.

When I was at the Maritime Academy, I was chairman, and I was the only Jew on the campus. I think. And I can't believe that they, the non-Jewish [? world, ?] had elected me chairman of the second largest Maritime training school in America. But I was an-- I had become an administrator by that time I knew how to run a government.

I knew how to run-- I'm an expert at running public meetings. Have you ever seen the town meeting that Clinton-- no? Well, I know how to run one of those. I've done hundreds of them. So they made me chairman. But I

Never made any excuses for being Jewish. I'm proud of my heritage. I'm proud of the whole thing. And my-- I have two daughter in-laws who are wonderful and my two son in-laws who are wonderful. I have no problems. I try to tell them everything, but it's hard to describe.

Is there anything you want to add that we haven't covered?

Well, let me put it this way. I've had a long, interesting life. I've done it all. I play golf now. Everybody says to me, you know, you don't seem upset when you get a bad hit or-- and I says, it's not important. I've done it all.

My ego has been satisfied. I got elected to office four times in a row. My opposition was the Democratic town committee in Brookline headed by Michael Dukakis. I don't know if you've heard that name before. They never could defeat me. I beat them every time.

And I'm very friendly with Michael today. As a matter of fact, he was in my house in Florida recently, talking about things. And if I had to do all over again, I probably wouldn't want to do it over again, particularly the Battle of the Bulge. That was terrible. That was hell. I mean, physical hell.

If I had to do it all over again, I don't know. But I'm glad to have made this tape, because maybe one of my grandchildren will come here someday and listen to it.

Well, that's a beautiful note to end on. Thank you so much for doing the tape.

Thank you.

This concludes the interview of Edward Novakoff.