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This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Dr. Samuel Hagner conducted by Gail Schwartz on May 22, 1998, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This is tape number one side A. What is your full name?

Samuel Benedict Hagner.

And where were you born? And when were you born?

I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on November 1, 1925.

Let's talk a little bit about your family. Who were the members of your immediate family?

My parents, George Wills Hagner, my mother, Evelyn Benedict Hagner, I have an older brother, George Wills Hagner Jr. And I have a younger brother John Benedict Hagner.

And what was your childhood like? When you were growing up, was it a very quiet, calm childhood?

Yes. It was a quiet, calm childhood. My parents were Quakers. My older brother became a conscientious objector during World War II.

He served in civilian public service. He refused to serve in the military. So he served in one of these civilian public service camps run by the US government. During those years, I can recall the early war years.

Well, let's not get to the war time yet. Let's talk about just your child-- what kind of education did you have?

I started out in public schools in the Philadelphia system. Later on, when I was approximately-- oh, let me think. It was 1936. I would have been about 11.

My older brother was not doing well in high school, in the local high school. My father was concerned about what was going to happen to him. So he made arrangements to have him transferred to a local private school for boys in Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And this was Germantown Academy, a private day school for boys.

He found out at the time from the headmaster that he could send all three of us at a discount. So I entered into Germantown Academy in the seventh grade. My younger brother started in the first grade. We were five years apart, roughly, 1920, 1925, and 1930. So I graduated from Germantown Academy in 1942, in June 1942.

How religious was your family?

Not religious in the usual sense of the word, my parents became concerned about the war that was-- what's the word? Started in Europe, or beginning to show signs of Hitler's activities, they became deeply interested in pacifism at that time, and became very active in the local Friends meeting, one of the Friends meetings in Philadelphia. I was not-- at that time, I had not-- I was not born as a Quaker. I can remember, as a boy, attending the Unitarian church, for example, the local Unitarian church.

My parents were not so much interested in dogma or doctrine, religious dogma or doctrine. They were more-- I think became interested in Quakers because of the pacifistic stand. They really were, I would say, adogmatic. It was more concerned about the politics and the social ramifications of what the Quakers were interested in at the time.

And how did they impart that to you when you were a young child? I'm talking about pre-war. How did they impart that to you?

Mainly by discussions around the family dinner table, I knew they were going to a Friends meeting. They made no requirements that I attend the meeting with them.

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I think, at that time, I was still going to the Unitarian church on my own. Because I had friends that attended the Unitarian church. And for me, it was a social experience more than a religious experience.

Around the age of 13, 14, I became more interested in what they were doing. And my older brother, at that time, he was having to-- he was in college. He entered college in 1937, Oberlin College. He became interested in what was happening worldwide and particularly, in pacifism. And I heard more and more family discussions.

So I decided that I would have a look at the Friends meeting also. And I attended some Friends meeting with my parents and my older brother for a period of time. And then decided that I would become a member also.

That was something that I had to take the initiative on myself. I had to make a formal request to the Quaker meeting to become a member. And I can recall being visited at my home by some of the elders who asked me questions for perhaps a half hour or more, and then decided that I would be welcomed as a member of the local Friends meeting.

When they asked you questions, did any of them have to deal with war and fighting?

Not so much, at that time, they were more interested in why I wanted to join the Friends meeting and what my concept was of Quakerism, if you will. And I can remember discussing things like the light within. And they wanted to know what I meant by the light within.

I had done some reading on the subject. It was much more of that kind of a focus. I don't recall any real focus on the war at the time or what was happening in Europe.

When did you first become aware of conditions in Europe, or let's say, how old were you when you heard of a man named Hitler? You were born in 1925. He came into power in 1933. So obviously, you were too young then. Do you have any recollections of your early memories of who this man, Hitler was?

I don't recall exactly when. But it must have been somewhere in the late '30s, possibly 1937, 1938. Somewhere in there I must have become aware of Hitler, because around the age of 14 or 15 was when I began to have discussions with my so-called surrogate sister. This was a girl that lived down the street, two doors down the street. She was two years younger.

We would get together mostly on Saturday evenings. I never had a sister. And I wanted the sister badly. And so she became the one that she obliged by taking on that role.

We would get together on Saturday evenings. This was not a formal date. We would sit in her living room, usually. Her parents knew where we were. My parents knew where I was.

They would leave us alone. And we'd talk to the wee hours of the morning about the kinds of things that teenagers talk about, boys, girls, sex, dating, so forth. But those were serious times. And we both knew what was happening in Europe.

So the conversation would always steer around to what we thought was happening in Europe, to the war, to Hitler, obviously, and his gobbling up most of Europe, or at least parts of Europe. And we would get around to the subject of concentration camps sooner or later. She had information. I believe-- I can't be absolutely sure of this. But if my memory serves me correctly, she was getting information from relatives in Europe, which we non-Jews did not have. And the news media at that time gave very little attention to the subject of whether the camps existed, and if so, to what extent.

Was she Christian or Jewish?

She was Jewish. I can recall getting into many-- and I practically want to cry at this now. I would argue with her and say, no, no, no. Things cannot be that bad. Man cannot treat his fellow man in such an atrocious way.

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And she would look at me, shake her head. She called me her starry eyed idealist, or that poor little Quaker boy that didn't quite know what the world was all about. And that's what we would do.

And this continued on until I went off to college. I was 16 at the time, but I went to college. I turned 17 in my freshman year at Oberlin.

Did you-- we'll get to your college years in a moment. Did you have other Jewish friends? Or was she your only Jewish friend?

Yes. I had several others, boys. But she was special. She was the sister that I always wanted.

And somehow, we had a simpatico relationship. I understood her most of the time. And she understood me most of the time. We just liked each other.

It's interesting that because she was two years younger, and teenagers being what they are, we just never saw each other in a romantic light. Who would think of dating a girl two years younger? I used to take her out to a movie, but as I would a sister.

And her name?

Doris, Doris [? Wile. ?]

Did Doris go to your school with you?

No, she went to an all girls school, a private school. She was quite well to do. Her father was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. But she was economically better off than I was. They had a summer place on the Jersey Shore to which she would go every summer, which plays a part later when I returned from the war.

What kind of work did your father do?

My father was a CPA. During the '30s, he was a manager of a savings loan association. In those days, they were called building loan associations. Subsequently, I don't recall exactly when, I think it was after the war. He put into practice firms for himself and set up his own little accounting business, which my two brothers later joined.

Did you go to Sunday school?

Simply the Unitarian church that I mentioned earlier, and I did that, probably, I would guess during the latency period from probably age eight to perhaps 12 or 13. I don't have a memory of attending church before the age of eight.

Do you have any memories of hearing about Hitler marching, annexing Austria in the spring of '38 or the war starting in Poland in September '39? Does any of that mean-- bring back anything?

My most distinct memory is, in 1939, climbing Mount Washington with my father and my older brother, I believe it was. We came down off of Mount Washington. And we're going to stay in a cabin, but they had cabins in those days for people stayed overnight.

And there was a radio on the cabin table. And my father turned it on. I still remember hearing Neville Chamberlain give his famous speech. My father looked at us and said, boys, this means war. And we're going to be in it one of these days.

Roosevelt will not stand for this, or comments to that effect. So that must have been 1939. So at least, by that time, we were definitely aware of what was happening. But my father's comment was that he was certain that we would be in the war.

Were you frightened to hear that? You were, what? 13, 14.

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13, 14, I don't recall. All I can remember is his saying that and saying, boys, this is the way it's going to be. I probably was. I mean, what does a 13, 14 year old know about war?

So then you said you graduated from high school at 16. So that would be in 1941?

'42.

'42, and then what happened?

I entered Oberlin College in the fall of 1942.

Let's back up. What happened with the bombing of Pearl Harbor? What were your memories?

I don't remember much of that. That's interesting that you ask, because that was 1941, start of my senior year or that summer. And that would have been what?

December 7, '41.

December 7, [INAUDIBLE] my senior high school, yes.

United States is now at war.

I don't remember much of that. It's interesting that you mention that. Because at some point later, I remember thinking in those discussions with my surrogate sister, we hardly ever talked about the Pacific theater. It was always Europe. I guess, the Pacific just seemed so far away to Easterners.

Where had her family come-- you said she had relatives that were still in Europe. Do you remember where they were?

No, I don't. No, I don't. I think her parents were American born. This must have been grandparents, or I don't know.

Extended family, so then you decided to go to college.

Yes. I entered Oberlin College in the fall of 1942. Part of the reason for that was that my older brother had graduated from Oberlin College the preceding June. I chose Oberlin for several other reasons.

One, it was a small liberal arts college. Number two, it was a college that one could attend without very much money. I also had a scholarship, which got me through my freshman year.

Number four, is it? Third or fourth reason, the only condition my mother made on where I went to college was that it be a coeducational school. You'll recall I went to an all boys school. And she felt that I lacked something in my education. And that I should get a [? look ?] away to college.

And there was one final reason for choosing Oberlin. They had no fraternities or sororities. And to me, that was a more Democratic institution. Hence, for all those reasons, I entered Oberlin in September of 1942.

And did you know what you were going to study then?

I had not the foggiest. I just wanted a liberal arts education. And I just thought I would wait and see. I was interested mainly in the social sciences. I knew that at that time.

How much knowledge did you have, at that point, of history and geography, especially if you are-- did you have much?

No. I had precious little knowledge.

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So then you began college. And then what happened when you turned 18?

As the end of my freshman year was coming to-- as my freshman year was coming to a close, excuse me, my mother suggested that I spend that last summer of freedom, the summer of 1943, doing something that I might not have a chance to do again. So I spent the summer of 1943 in a Quaker work camp in Indianapolis, Indiana, working in a Black slum with a group of Quakers. We were helping to renovate a settlement house.

This had come on the heels of the race riots that occurred in Indianapolis in 1943, as I recall. So this was during the aftermath of that. We spent the summer, boys and girls, all of us working in this area helping to renovate, as I say, and build a new settlement house.

I became more and more interested in the issue of pacifism at that time, because many of the members of the work camp were pacifistically oriented, or had tendencies towards that. In fact, there were several people in the work camp who were actively pursuing a noncombatant course in the war effort, if you will. During that same summer, my mother made this suggestion. Because she knew I was wrestling with what kind of a stand I was going to take in the war, that I visit my older brother in civilian public service camp.

At that time, he was in a government camp located in Big Flats, New York, which is between Corning and Elmira. It was a so-called forestry camp, meaning they were pulling weeds. I took her suggestion. I took her up on her suggestion, and it must have been in late August of 1943. I hopped on the train and went up to visit him and stay with him for a week in the civilian public service camp.

I was appalled, frankly, by what I experienced there, what I saw there. Here were these well-trained, well-educated persons like my brother who were idling away in this camp doing nothing but pulling weeds, doing menial tasks. And I think most of them were depressed. And the whole atmosphere was just overwhelming to me. And I came away from that thinking, that I could never take.

Even though I already had doubts about my ability to take that kind of a stand, this put the lid on it. Or it kept it for me. To see that kind of an atmosphere to me was-- it was just appalling to see people just sitting there doing nothing.

Your--

Morale was, the morale was very, very poor, as you might imagine. I remember my brother waving his hand at the beds in the tent in which they were living. There were perhaps 14, 16 cots in the tent.

And he said, we could staff a small college with the degrees that are here in this tent. And he was one of them. He had a college degree at that point.

When you were in your freshman year in Oberlin and this summer experience, how much did you all talk about the war and what was happening? How much did you know what was happening?

We talked quite a bit. There was a Quaker meeting on campus, a student Quaker meeting. And I attended that on a regular basis.

The whole war effort was on our minds constantly, partly because men were being drafted right and left. My fellow students were. One or two would leave every week to go into the service. This was constantly on our minds.

My roommate at that time had suffered polio as a child. It was obvious that he was going to be a 4F, was a 4F. Two other housemates were 4F, one with rheumatic heart disease. I've forgotten why the other was.

This obviously led us into more and more discussions about who was taking what position. And of course, the 4Fs wished that they could serve. And they were asking me what my feelings were about it. And of course, this got us into a number of discussions, because they didn't quite approve of my feelings.

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Were you upset that the United States was at war?

Yes. I was upset. I think somewhere along the way I had been taught or got the idea that World War II was pretty much the direct result of World War I and the aftermath, the Versailles Treaty, and so forth. I don't wish to oversimplify that but just to make that statement that I became convinced that, even though by that time, 1942, '42, we were past the point of no return, obviously. And with what was happening in Europe there was no other way to stop Hitler.

But I felt that the Quakers had been saying all along that things should have been handled differently possibly back as early as the late '20s or even early '20s. And so a witness was being made by certain people. And I think that was the position that my older brother took, for example. And that was the basis for his pacifism.

I became torn between those kinds of thoughts and the feeling that I was part of society. I owed something to society. And I simply couldn't turn my back. So I struggled with this. I was on the horns of a dilemma, if you will, wanting to identify with my family, at the same time wanting to identify with society.

I finally decided that I would take the 1-A-O position, the 1-A-O stand. And I applied to the local draft board with that in mind. That meant that I would serve in the Army or whatever branch of the military as a non-combatant. So when I turned 18 in November 1943, that's exactly what happened.

Had you started your sophomore year at college?

Yes, excuse me. I had re-entered college in the fall of 1943 in November. Because Oberlin had gone on a trimester system. So they didn't start the fall trimester until the 1st of November, which happened to be my birthday.

I registered at that time in Oberlin, had the registration back to Philadelphia, to my draft board, which gave me a few more weeks of freedom as the correspondence went back and forth. I was formally inducted in Philadelphia in January of 1944. And actually, went into the service in February 1944, I was able to complete my third semester at Oberlin before I went into the service.

I actually didn't take final exams. I didn't have to. When all the professors teaching my various courses heard what was happening to me, they just told me to go. I didn't have to take finals.

What was the reaction of other family members and other friends to your decision to do this, become a conscientious objector?

Of course, my parents were pleased that I was taking some kind of a conscientious objector stand. They were not pleased that I was going to serve in the military. I think they probably wished that I would have taken the same stand as my older brother.

But they didn't object either. I was not told what to do. That was up to me to make that decision which I appreciated at the time.

What was your friend Doris' reaction?

I think she was worried. I can't remember exactly. I think she was pleased that I was doing something about it, that I was going to serve in the military.

But I think she was worried. She didn't want to see me go off to war. I think she thought I was a little too young to do it. But I--

So then,

But excuse me, I think she was pleased that I felt some obligation to society, that I felt that I owed society a debt to

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make some contribution.

At that point had you heard in any detail about the persecution of the Jews and other prisoners, or anything about camps? Did you know anything about that at that point?

I must have heard something from my conversations with Doris, my so-called sister from what she was indicating. I don't recall that the news media really gave us much information. But I was aware that something was happening.

To what extent, at least I was being told by her, for example, that the Jews are being persecuted. To what extent, I don't think we were absolutely sure. And this certainly had played a role in my decision to serve in the military also. I really can't add any more to that, I don't think.

Why do you say that added to your decision to serve in the military?

Because if something indeed like this were going on, even though I wasn't sure, and I would argue with Doris about it, if it turned out to be differently, I don't know how I would have felt if I hadn't served in some capacity. I can't answer that, of course. Because my decision to serve in the military was based on a number of factors, of course. It was a complicated decision.

What were the other factors?

That I wanted to give some credence to what my parents stood for, and what they had been teaching me, and the people with whom I had grown up. I was torn, as I say. I wasn't quite sure that this would be a very sensible thing to do. How does one be a conscientious objector in the military?

I remember going to the NSPRO in Philadelphia. That's the National Service Board for Religious Objectors, and telling them what my decision was. And I recall they're saying to me, well, you've taken a very difficult stand. It may not be easy, because what you're doing is neither fish nor fowl. It's not quite the way they put it.

And I recall being advised that, since I was taking a position that the Army would allow for, I nevertheless might find myself in some difficult situations. And if ever I did, I have never forgotten this. Never, never, never, waver, never let the Army know that I was in doubt. Because then they would try to break me down. And there came a time later when I was very happy to have had that advice which comes on later in the--

OK. Now it's, you said, wintertime of '44?

This is February 1944. I went into the Army and was sent to Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. And from there, shipped to Camp Barkeley, Texas, in Abilene, which was a medical training, basic training camp.

Were you with a group of other conscientious objectors?

In the unit, no, actually not. This was just simply a medical corps or a medical department to be strictly speaking. We were corps men but not medical corps. Medical corps was a term reserved for officers.

We were the medical department. There was the basic training camp for medics, if you will, to use a shorter term. What was the question? I'm sorry.

I was asking if there were other conscientious objectors.

I was assigned to a basic unit, which would later become some sort of a hospital unit. But we were not necessarily COs. As it turned out, there were six or seven of us in the basic training unit.

Was that the option for conscientious objectors in the military to be medics?

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We didn't have an option. We were assigned. Most of the time, COs did end up in a medical service of some sort. But occasionally, a CO might end up in the quartermaster corps.

He could end up in the finance corps, some kind of a non-combatant, non-combat unit. But basically, most of the 1-A-Os, as I recall, ended up in a medical unit. We were never told. The Army would never admit how many 1-A-Os were actually served in World War II.

I think they didn't want it to be known, because it might give more support for that type of stand, if you will. But there were rumors that there might have been at least 100,000 of us. But we'll never know.

There were six or seven of us in the unit, in my basic training unit. How we came to know each other, and how everybody else came to know us, was that when it came time for the unit to take their rifle training, they had to undergo two weeks of rifle training. We were assigned to the mess hall to clean the grease traps.

So every morning at roll call, when the rest of the guys were going to go off to the rifle training course, they'd call out our names, repeat the assignment. And off we'd go to the mess hall. We knew exactly we were going every day. But that was the Army's way of letting everybody know who was what, separating the sheep from the goats.

So this went on for two weeks. By the end of that time, of course, we all knew each other, and the rest of the fellows knew us too. We were treated pretty well. I don't think the other men really hated us for what we were doing. Many of them did not under understand us.

We would argue at times at night having discussions. But I didn't feel that I was being ostracized necessarily. We were a motley crew. As I recall, I was the only Quaker.

In that particular unit, there was two from the Church of the Brethren, one Mennonite, one Catholic, if you will, and two Seventh Day Adventists, a Motley crew. We served our-- we went through the basic training in Abilene, Texas, at Camp Barkeley, and then went into specialist training. We were to be given certain tasks in a future hospital unit.

And so we went off, a number of us were sent off to El Paso, Texas to the William Beaumont General Hospital. And we were to be trained either as surgical technicians, medical technicians, X-ray technicians, whatever. I was assigned to the surgical technician training course. And we went through a 90 day course, if you will. We called ourselves 90 day wonders.

I, personally, was trained to become a scrub nurse, if you will, a surgical scrub nurse, passing instruments and hemostats in the operating room. I was also trained to do ward work if and when necessary for bedside nursing. But chiefly, I was trained to be a scrub nurse in surgery.

Were they also telling you, besides that kind of specific medical training, of what was happening on the front, and in the war, and in Europe in general?

No, I don't-- well, yes, they probably told us what was happening in terms of the war itself, and troop movements, and that sort of thing. But there was no mention made of concentration camps that I recall. I don't think the Army knew that much about it, frankly, or at least, the extent to which things were happening.

We were more aware of just general troop movements, who was doing what where, what army was moving this way, that way, and so forth. Now, that you mention it, thinking back, I was aware of the campaign in North Africa. So that must have been in, what, the early '40s. I remember the Rommel, Desert Fox, and things happening in North Africa.

After serving in the technician training, we went back to Camp Barkeley, Texas. And at some point shortly after that, the 81st Field Hospital was formed. And that's when we really coalesced as a hospital unit, and were given definite assignments, and so forth and so on. Somewhere in, it must have been around late August, early September of 1944, we went to Camp Lee, which is outside of Petersburg, Virginia, for the final, if you will, putting together of the field hospital, getting people to know their roles, getting our equipment together, and really shaping up.

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How big a group was it?

We were approximately 150 enlisted men. I think it was about approximately 15 to 20 medical officers. And I recall about 30 nurses, but I'm not absolutely sure of those figures. I do recall we had, I think, 120 tons of medical equipment that had to be moved about. We had our--

Were all the men that you had trained with in that 81st Field Hospital group?

In the basic training camp? I don't think so. I think that the putting together of the 81st Field Hospital had its personnel. They took most of us from that basic training unit but not all. I think other people came from elsewhere.

We were of all ages. I was an 18-year-old. There were maybe a dozen of us. But we ranged up to men in their 30s who we called old men.

And many of them were men with certain physical disabilities that couldn't serve in combat units but were healthy enough to be serve in the Army in a medical capacity. But we were of all ages, 18 to 30, 35. We had one man was a grandfather, as I recall. He was in his late 30s, I think.

And you were still as convinced of your views even in-- this is August '44, September, August, September? Had you wavered at all are we still as definite about your views?

I was still pretty definite about my views, because nothing had happened to really cause me to waver yet. Things are pretty-- we were in the States. We got information about the war abroad. But pretty much our lives were pretty organized, getting the hospital together. And there was really no reason to really question my stance at that time.

As I said earlier, I wasn't being harassed by the other men in the unit. They pretty much accepted me for what I was, I think. I worked hard and learned my technician trade. And I think I was respected for that.

How long did you stay in Virginia?

We were there until we got orders to move to the port of embarkation, which was in New Jersey, Camp Kilmer. Is that the name? I've forgotten. I think it is.

We got orders to move to Camp Kilmer in December, must have been around the 20th of December 1944. I recall getting one last pass before we were to board ship. We weren't that far from Philadelphia. So we took that path.

We had a 12 hour pass. And three of us went down to Philadelphia, went to my parents' home, and spent two or three hours singing Christmas carols, then went back to Camp Kilmer and got on the ship. And we sat in New York Harbor on Christmas Eve 1944 and saw the lights of Broadway, moved out on the 26th of December, and joined a convoy. I think it must have been 30 or 40 ships, most of them Liberty ships.

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Dr. Samuel Hagner. This is tape number one side B. And you were talking about how you got your orders to leave, and you went home to Philadelphia and then came back to New York.

As I said, we moved out of New York Harbor on December 26, joined a convoy that was waiting for us outside of the harbor. It took us 21 days to cross the ocean. It was in January. It was an awful trip.

I've never saw so many seasick people in all of my life. I, fortunately, was not one of the ones that suffered from sea sickness as such. I recall having a dull headache. But I was able to take my meals regularly.

So they assigned me to the infirmary, the ship's infirmary. And I remember going out as teams and finding these poor guys, who had crawled off into cubbyholes who couldn't keep anything down, and dragging them back to the infirmary,

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putting them in bed, and giving them intravenous fluids. It was my first real experience with people who were deathly ill.

If we hadn't found some of those men, they could have died. Because they literally wanted no parts of anybody, food, or anybody. They just wanted to be by themselves.

It was the long trip. We finally got to Southampton, England, towards the end of January, must have been this third week in January. They had no orders for us.

We were on the HMS [? Volendam, ?] a Dutch ship with a British crew. So they let off the ship those for whom they had orders. They sent us across the English Channel to Le Havre, France. They had no orders for us there either. So they sent us back to Southampton, still no orders.

So they sent us around Wales and up to Greenock, Scotland, to the Port of Missing Men, as it was called. As you pulled into the Harbor at Greenock, Scotland, there was this huge, huge ship that towered over us. It looked like a skyscraper, battleship gray. It was the Queen Liz that had been converted into a troop ship. They got us off the boat, put us on a train, and sent us back to within 30 miles of Southampton, England.

What was the point of sending you up there then?

Nobody knows. That was the Army. By that time, we began to realize that the Army did things in mysterious ways. Having no orders on us, they assigned us to army hospitals in England, in Wales, actually. This was taking care of battle wounded that had been flown back from Europe. So that was very we really got our first clinical experience, if you will, working on wards. That's where I first learned to do bedside nursing. These were men who had been seriously wounded. In fact, I was trained by Army nurses on a colostomy ward, nothing but colostomies, 40 of them in one ward.

That was during-- you said, during your training in the United States?

No. This is in England. We are now in England, no orders. They don't know where we're supposed to be, so they assigned us to these Army hospitals located in Wales, England. And these were taking care of men who have been flown back from the front.

Oh, I see.

To get further medical care.

Yeah.

We were in England for about six weeks.

How were you able to handle seeing people who were injured and wounded? How did you adjust to that? Or was this your first experience dealing with people who were so severely wounded?

That was my first experience dealing with the severely wounded. It was a bit of a shock. It was kind of appalling.

But I got so immersed in nursing that I didn't think anything about-- I didn't think too much about that part of it. I became so engrossed in learning to take care of the ill, the sick, and the wounded. Specifically, I was being trained to change dressings on the colostomy patients. So I had nurses showing me how to do this. And that became my job 12 hours a day.

What were your thoughts about seeing such terrible wounds, not because someone was ill, or a disease, but because of man's destruction of other men? In a sense unnecessary, not coming from a disease, but--

I see what you mean. I guess, what you're asking is did I feel that this was right, or what kind of impact this was having

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that men had suffered these terrible injuries as a result of war? It certainly reinforced my feelings, my negative feelings about war, as a way of trying to solve problems.

Yes, look at these young men who had one-- maybe days earlier had been perfectly healthy and were now lying there, most of them, possibly to be crippled for the rest of their lives. I don't know. There's no question about it. That was reinforcing my disgust, if you will, with war.

So I think what I did was, just as I said earlier, I immersed myself in the nursing end of it to try to deal with it. At least, if I could lose myself in the nursing, I didn't have to think too much about the other side of it and that I was part of it. And in a sense, I was aiding and abetting by taking care of the wounded.

Why were you aiding and abetting?

Well, possibly, I might help to send some back into battle. In fact, the friend that I mentioned earlier, with whom I spent the night several nights ago, my former companion in the Army, he felt that way, definitely, that here he was trying to send people back to the front. And he wondered about it. He, by the way, was a CO and a member of the Church of the Brethren.

And so you stayed in England for how long?

We were in England for about six weeks. And then suddenly, we move fast. They found orders. We were supposed to be in Germany.

So they rush, rush, rush, and put us on a boat, and send us to Le Havre, France. And within hours, we were in Germany crossing the border, the Mannheim River, as I recall, and catching up with the 7th Army. And rumors had it that the 7th Army, when our commanding officer walked into the headquarters of the 7th Army said, where have you been all these weeks? We've been looking for you.

What was it like for you to put your foot down in Germany knowing that the Germans had started the war?

It was getting to be scary. I do recall seeing tanks burning by the side of the road. We didn't see actual fighting, because we were still that too far behind the front lines. But we're seeing evidences now of smoldering tanks, villages that have been burned, bombed. Things were now getting serious.

We all began to get that feeling that, well, we've been in training all these weeks and months. And now, here we are. What is going to happen now?

How are we going to deal with this? How are we going to help the wounded? How is this all going to work out? Ironically, we never did find out what it was like to take care of the battle wounded.

This is now, mind you, this must be early March 1945. Their Wehrmacht was pretty much on the run. Luftwaffe had been pretty much blown out of the sky.

The front line was moving so rapidly that every time we would move towards the front lines and set up our hospital unit, we were too far back to do any good. We had to be within a certain distance from the front lines to be of any help as a field hospital. A field hospital had to be fairly close to the so-called battalion aid stations to be of any real effective use. And every time we would try to get close, they'd move the front lines again.

And so we'd wake up the next morning, and we were too far away to do any good. So we'd pack up and move on. We'd pack up and move on. I think we moved at least four times, what we called dry runs, and never saw a patient. They kept moving trying to keep up with the battle.

During one of these moves, I experienced probably the most frightening experience that I had in the war. It's silly, because this had nothing to do with the war as such. It had nothing to do with battle wounded, had to do with my own

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personal safety, or lack of. And this is why I feel a little silly about it now. But it was the most frightening time.

I wasn't the most frightened by being possibly strafed or shot at. As I'm about to tell you, I was most frightened by this one experience that had nothing to do with the enemy. It came time for the hospital unit to move again towards the front lines.

Each time this was done, they would send up an advance party made up of an officer, perhaps two officers, and a handful of enlisted men, to select the new site to which to move the hospital. On this one particular move, I was elected to go up with the advance party for the reason that I spoke a little bit of French, high school French. Nobody spoke any German. Well, they figured, well, maybe I could speak a little French to the Germans.

So up I went with the unit-- I mean, excuse me-- with the advance party. I was the only objector in the group. I was the only CO.

We arrived at a certain, I think it was a suburb, really, a German suburb. It was a private neighborhood. There was no battle around. But our commanding officer walked over to one of the private homes, and commandeered the home, and told the people that they had to leave. They had 15 minutes in which to get out, that we were taking it over as a billet, if you will, for us to stay, spend the night.

How proud I was, ho, ho, ho, to watch these people have to leave their homes, while we, the Americans, are standing there watching them leave. That I wasn't very happy about. I think that bothered me almost as much as anything else that I'd seen up to that point in time, standing there, as bullies, and making these people leave their homes. Even though I was to find out later that somebody else was the much greater bully.

So they left their home, and we moved in. And we were assigned rooms, roommates, and paired off. And we had just the one officer with us. He was a surgeon. He was a captain.

I can remember his name, Captain [? Riesman. ?] He decided he wanted an armed guard. You might say, armed guard? Weren't you a hospital unit? Didn't you have red crosses on your helmets?

Yes, we did. We had an ambulance with us. But we were armed. Our aimless drivers had rifles.

This particular officer was packing a 45 on his hip. I can't explain it. We were abusing. We were not following the Geneva Convention. And I know the Germans knew it.

I might say, parenthetically, that periodically we would get strafed by German aircraft, our hospital unit would. And a person not knowing better might say, well, what an awful thing for the Germans to strafe an American hospital unit. But I'm sure they knew we were armed. And we shouldn't have been.

I, to this day, I have no explanation why we were armed. People just did it. So on this particular night, the captain ordered an armed guard to walk around this house for the rest of the night. And guess who got the first call to walk? Sergeant said, Hagner, you take the first walk, the first guard.

And I said, all right, Sergeant. But there's something you have to know. He said, what is that? I said, well, I'm a conscientious objector. You're a what?

He was from Georgia or Alabama. I don't think he'd ever even heard of the term. He looked at me and kind of blinked. He said, well, what does that mean? And I said, well, I'll walk guard, but I won't take that rifle.

He was just rigid enough, and I think had that much experience enough to take back his order. He had already given an order. And he couldn't rescind that order.

So he said, all right. Then go out walk guard without the gun. I thought, this is interesting, kind of ridiculous, but all right. So I went out in the dark with a flashlight and started walking around the building in the dark, pitch dark,

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wondering about how ridiculous this whole situation was. Why even have a guard if I'm out there without a gun?

This went on for maybe 15, 20 minutes. And out came the captain to inspect the guard. He found me in the dark. He looked at me.

And he said, where's your gun, soldier? I froze. I could hardly talk. I thought back to the NSPRO, that National Service Board for Religious Objectors in Philadelphia and what they said, don't ever waiver. And the time had come.

Here we are. Do I waver or don't I? Not because of my beliefs but for my personal safety, I couldn't waver. I looked at the captain, and I said, sir. I'm a religious objector.

He said, you're a what? I could hardly talk. I choked out the words. And I said, well, sir, this is how I came into the Army, with this in mind that I would not bear arms. He looked at me.

He said, do you mean to tell me that if I give you a direct order to go back and get a rifle that you wouldn't do it? This is here we are. I'm at the brink. Do I say, yes, or do I say, no?

Because I knew that in a combat zone, the commanding officer is-- I mean, martial law exists in a combat zone. And a commanding officer is everything. He's court. He's judge. He's jury. He's executioner.

The law was in his hands. That's what martial law is all about. I finally shook my head and said, I'm sorry, captain. I can't. And I did this then too.

He looked at me. I don't think he knew what to make of me. Oh, this is [? silly, ?] 53 years later. He went back in the house.

I didn't know whether I was going to live or die. I think he, up to that point, I didn't know him that well. He was the man under whom I worked. He was my surgeon.

And I really didn't know [? him ?] as a person. And he had that gun on his hip. A couple minutes later, one of my friends came out and said, Sam, go back in the house. And he had a gun on his shoulder. I'm taking over.

So obviously, the captain had-- excuse me. [? [BLOWS NOSE] ?] Had changed the guard. I went back in the house. A couple of guys are playing cards in one room.

A couple of guys sitting over there talking, you could have heard a pin drop. The captain was nowhere. He had gone off to this room. No one said a word.

[CRYING] I never felt so alone. I'm sorry. I didn't think this would happen. [INAUDIBLE].

I went upstairs to my room. And my roommate was sitting there. I still remember his name, Mark Stark from the Bronx. He called me Sammy boy. And he had a Brooklyn accent like you've never heard your life, or Bronx accent.

He looked at me. He says, Sammy boy, come over here. He was 28 years old. He was like an old man to me, like my father.

He said, sit down, Sammy boy. I sat down. He put his arm around me. He says, Sammy boy, he said, I'm here because of Hitler and what he's doing to the Jews.

But he said, I couldn't kill anybody either. I know where you're coming from. And he held me. And I cried. And he held me most of the night.

I've never forgotten [? that. ?] The next day the sun came up. Nothing happened. Nothing happened.

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The captain never said a word. It was like it had never happened. Nobody ever said anything. It was all over. It never came up again.

And I had to work under that captain in surgery for the next number of months. He even promoted me from tech five to tech four and later, tech three, which is the same as a staff sergeant. And he never mentioned it.

You ask me, why? I don't know. Maybe he knew what he saw, a scared kid, a kid I was. But I think probably, he just crossed me off the books as a religious fanatic.

And what are you going to do with a guy like that? And I was a good worker. I was one of the best that he had under him in the operating room. I remember he used to drill me on how many CCs of this would it take to give a hypodermic to somebody. And I could rattle it off.

That [INAUDIBLE], was the most difficult. Again, it's just me. I'm not talking about concentration camps are I? I'm just talking about me. Well, things went on. We never, still didn't see any battle wounded. [BLOWS NOSE]

The war was about over, and we all knew it. And that's when the day came. And we got this mysterious order to pack up and move over now near Munich, to pack up and move to an unknown destination. And within the next day, we'd moved into Dachau.

What did they tell you about where you were going? Was there any preparation?

Nothing, not one word. Told us nothing. We had no idea we were going, just suddenly, we were going into this camp. What was this? And somebody mentioned the word Dachau.

Did that mean anything to you, the name?

Yes.

What did it mean to you?

Somewhere I had heard of Dachau, as I had Auschwitz, and Buchenwald. Somewhere they had become that I knew. I don't know how, but Dachau, I knew.

Did you get close? Were you walking or by truck?

Pardon?

How did you get to the location camp? Were you walking or by truck or?

We were trucks. We were in trucks, ambulances. We had I don't know how many ambulances. We had two semitrailers in which all of our equipment was stored.

Did--

We were in trucks, yeah.

Did you sense anything as you were approaching? Did you feel anything, have any sense, an atmosphere, as you were--

First reaction was-- this absolute first reaction just numbness. What in God's name? Because first there was the bodies like cordwood, stacked up like cordwood.

The stench was absolutely overwhelming. [? I thought, ?] what in God's name? How could this be?

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I don't remember when I saw the crematory ovens. That came somewhere, next hour or two. I don't know. But I thought, no, this can't be.

And all, suddenly, somewhere, I must have thought about all those discussions I'd had back in Philadelphia with Doris. And I said, no. But this. When the numbness wore off, and that took a while.

And somewhere in there, they started us-- I mean, after we got, were walking around and looking. They started to give us assignments. DDT teams to go into the barracks, which came later, and typhus inoculation teams but, [BLOWS NOSE] somewhere before that happened, and I can't give you the sequence.

When the numbness started to wear off, the strangest thing happened. I began to feel unspeakableness, rage. Something that I had never felt before in my life, not to that degree. Oh, I'd been angry, sure. We all get angry. And I used to fight with my parents.

But not this, this was rage. It scared me. I could've killed. I became overwhelmed with fantasizes of revenge.

I imagined all kinds of things like-- and maybe this did happen. I don't know. Maybe you know. I imagined finding an SS guard and throwing him into the compound, the prisoners compound, and letting them tear him apart. Maybe that happened.

Part of me says, I heard that happened. Did I hear screams of that really happening? And yet, maybe I made that up. I don't know, because I could have easily made it up. Because I was so angry.

And it was-- what was scary about it was it was not a nice, hot, fiery anger. It was a cold rage. That's the worst part of it, a cold rage, a murderous rage. And that's not fun. That's not funny.

To begin imagining all kinds of things, torturing Germans, guards, SS guards, SS guard-- the Germans civilians I didn't have anything against. It was the guards. Even the soldiers, I think they were just like us doing what they had to do. [BLOWS NOSE] [INAUDIBLE].

For some reason, I got in my mind that the SS, the Gestapo, they were the perpetrators of all of this. Yet, I never even saw one in person, I don't think. And this went on for a number of days.

Somewhere in there I sat down to write a letter to my parents. I don't think I could at first. But I know I wrote to Doris and told her, OK. You're right. I was a dumb kid. And I don't know.

This is what I'm feeling, I guess, I must have told her. I don't know how much I put-- I don't know how much I could put into words of that. But I did tell her, I remember saying this to her, I'm not sure what I'll be like when I come back.

Her response caught up with me in six weeks, and that was most unusual. Usually it took months for mail to catch up with her. Somehow my letter got to her, and it got back to me, her response came back to me within about six weeks. That's amazing.

She was graduating from high school, May or June 1945 in Philadelphia. Her letter was tears stained. [BLOWS NOSE] She tried to write a little poem in the letter, something about her dog was sitting by her side. He smells like he's been in formaldehyde.

And then she said, I'm glad you now see the world for what it is or what it can be. I guess that's the way she put it, the way it can be. I'm terribly sorry that you found out in a way which you did.

I guess, my rage must've gotten through to her, because she said something about I want you to come home. I can't wait till you do, but I'm going to be a little bit afraid. I thought, afraid? Of me?

All I could think was, maybe I've turned into some kind of a monster. Somewhere I thought, the whole world's gone

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crazy. And maybe I'm going crazy with it.

I don't know when I wrote that letter. I've never seen that letter since. I never saw it. I just knew, when I got home, that she, obviously, had it.

But I'm getting ahead of my story, I guess. I wrote, at some point in there, to my parents. And that's the letter that you now will have in the archives. There's nothing of this anger in the letter to my parents.

And I wonder why, all these years? All I could think is, number one, I didn't want to frighten them. Number two, if I started to tell them about my anger, my rage, I'd have to also tell them about another anger. Not a rage, but an anger, anger at them, those kind, gentle Quakers who somehow let me down.

They didn't tell me. They didn't prepare me for this. I can't accuse them of setting me up, no, but they let me down. I really felt that they had let me down. They had betrayed me, whereas Doris had been trying all those years in those discussions in Philadelphia to prepare me.

She did her best. So I didn't, all I did in my letter to my parents, and as you'll see, it's quite evident. I intellectualize. I try to explain to myself how these camps could have existed, how the German civilians could have allowed them to exist. Because they knew they were there.

In fact, I can remember talking to some of the Germans, the Bavarians. We'd go out when we had a chance and talk to some of them, ask them about the camps. And at first, they wouldn't admit it.

But they knew they were there. But they were farmers with their pitchforks. And I'm sure they were terrified, at least some of them must have been.

So I didn't say anything about that to my parents. I just talked about, well, this is what I think happened, and why the camps existed, and so forth. I never did tell them about my rage. So you won't get that in that letter.

Only Doris got that. But you have it in the Oberlin College notes. And you have it here.

We only stayed there about a week. I can remember going into the barracks. That was-- the people standing there staring at us, eyes deep in their sockets, in those striped uniforms, staring at us, hardly able to stand up, the urine running down the bedpost, lying in their own excrement. And what do you do with the DDT spray in that situation? They're infested with lice.

30,000 people or something like, that 28,000, and you couldn't even feed them, because they couldn't eat. They couldn't take solid food. And you couldn't let them out. Because where are they going to go?

So they kept them in the prison compounds. Even that didn't seem right. They keep them locked up, even though they were liberated. Ho, ho. Yeah, liberated.

I don't think the Army really knew the immensity of the problem. When they realized what was going on, they knew that we were not big enough to handle it. So at the end of, I don't know, five, six days, we were given orders to leave. And two general hospitals, I remember as we were leaving, two general hospitals were moving in, maybe 1,000 personnel each, to take over. And I'm sure others had to follow. Because what do you do with 30,000 people? [BLOWS NOSE]

I think one of the worst things too, before leaving Dachau, was this one building. It was a warehouse of bodies. They weren't even outside. They were inside, and walking into that building, turning around and throwing up.

I can't believe it. So we left Dachau. I don't know, must have been 8 or 9 of May. We went into a-- oh, this is another great episode.

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Well, let's stop here for the moment.

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