

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

**Beginning Tape One, Side A**

Question: This is the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Norbert Hilsberg**, conducted by **Esther Finder** on August 12, 2002, in **Rockville, Maryland**. This interview is part of the museum's project to interview survivors and witnesses who are also volunteers with the museum. This is tape number one, side **A**. What was your name at birth?

Answer: **Norbert Victor Hilsberg**.

Q: And when were you born?

A: Sista -- September 3, 1914.

Q: And where?

A: In **Vienna, Austria**.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: My mother's name was **Henrietta Hilsberg** and my father's was **Leon Hilsberg**.

Q: What did your father do for a living?

A: He was a banker in **Vienna**.

Q: What work did your mother do?

A: My mother was a piano teacher and voice coach.

Q: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: No.

Q: How long had your family been in **Vienna**?

A: Since 1914. As a matter of fact, one day before I was born, they arrived in **Vienna**.

Q: Where did they come from?

A: From **Lemberg, Poland**.

Q: Do you have any memories or can you think of any ways in which World War I impacted your family?

A: I was too young, although I heard some stories after I grew up, which my father told us.

Q: What kinds of stories?

A: Well, for instance, there was a meat rationing naturally, and meat was hard to get and my grandmother lived with us, and my father usually was staying in line to -- to get some meat. And my grandmother used to tell him, don't ever bring any horsemeat home, because I will not cook it. And one day he did bring horsemeat, so of course she did -- he'd -- she didn't know about it. And after cooking and eating, my father asked her, well, how did she like the meat. And so she said it was very good. And so he said, well you ate horsemeat. Of course, she was very upset and she didn't like it.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: What made your family move from **Lemberg** to **Vienna**?

A: The beginning of World War I, which started on September the -- well, actually, my father was a Russian. He was -- he was a Russian citizen. He was born in **Warsaw**. And of course, he was afraid that he would have to join the Russian army. So therefore, my uncle, my mother's brother, who was in the military at that time, arranged with the last transport out of **Lemberg** to **Vienna** to have my mother put on -- on a train, being ready to give birth and the next day I was born when they arrived -- after they arrived in **Vienna**.

Q: Did you ever go back to **Lemberg** to visit relatives or anything?

A: I was -- no, not to -- not to **Lemberg**, no.

Q: Did you have any family in **Vienna**?

A: Yes. I had my aunt and I had several cousins and my uncle and that's about it.

Q: What was the **Vienna** of your childhood like? Was it industrial, was it commercial? What kind of city was it?

A: It was commercial, mostly, and art.

Q: Were there many Jews?

A: Yes, as a matter of fact, the city when I grew up had about two million population and the Jewish population was almost 10 percent of the city.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: How would you describe the relationships between Christians and Jews during your childhood in **Vienna**?

A: It -- there were no problems, it -- n-naturally **Vienna, Austria**, the whole country was about 98 percent Catholic, but I didn't feel any anti-Semitism personally, and I didn't hear of any other people talk about it.

Q: Did your parents ever give you advice on how to -- to relate to your Christian neighbors?

A: No.

Q: Did you live in a Jewish neighborhood?

A: No.

Q: Was there such a thing as a Jewish neighborhood?

A: Yes. There was a -- a section of **Vienna** called **Leopold staat**. It was the second district and that was mostly populated by Jews.

Q: Was your family religiously observant?

A: Not really.

Q: What traditions did you observe?

A: Orthodox.

Q: Can you give me some examples of holidays, how they were observed?

A: Well, there was nothing but Orthodox religion in **Vienna** at that time, so

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

naturally, whatever you -- whenever you visited a synagogue when -- it was Orthodox. So I didn't know any difference until I came to this country.

Q: Did you have a favorite holiday when you were a child?

A: Surprisingly, it was Christmas. It was always a lot of fun.

Q: Can you elaborate what you did on Christmas?

A: Well, we celebrated like everybody else. Was just a -- a -- Jews as well as Christians celebrated the holiday. Of course, sometimes, speaking of holidays, not really -- I was -- going to school I was looking forward to holidays because I didn't have to go to school.

Q: When -- when you said that Jews and Christians both celebrated Christmas in **Vienna**, can you explain what that tradition at that time and that place was like, cause I don't think it's like what most people think of today when they talk about Christmas.

A: Well, it was more or less a tradition. I -- I do remember for instance that in my uncle's house -- he was a general in the old Austrian army, in the medical corps, and I guess he was exposed to the celebration of Christmas throughout his career, and he always had a Christmas tree in his home. And we all got together and then celebrated the holiday, exchanged gifts like anybody else. And I was -- to me it was just normal. Was not something which was unusual for me to look forward to.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

But of course, as I got older, I understood more about the difference between Christianity and -- and Judaism.

Q: Did your family observe any Jewish holidays?

A: The only Jewish holidays we really observed were the **Rosh Hashanah** and me -- and **Yom Kippur**. And that was the only time we did go to the synagogue and we -- well, that's it.

Q: Did you have any religious education?

A: Yes, yes. Through my entire school year, elementary as well as high school, I had two hours a week religion -- religion classes, conducted by a rabbi.

Q: What else do you remember about your early years in school?

A: There were good days and there were bad days. In general I enjoyed school. I enjoyed the camaraderie, had many friends, and we played different sports together and we were very active, and got together and went to the opera and went to the movies, standing in line, getting into the various -- into theaters.

Q: What kind of school did you attend, was it public or private?

A: Public school.

Q: Did you have any favorite subjects?

A: Well, I always enjoyed history and geography and that was my forte.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: Did you experience any anti-Semitism when you were little, in school, or on the playground, or anywhere?

A: Not really. There was always friendship and there were no -- no arguments. I mean, I personally stayed away from any arguments about religion or any of that -- or politics. I never joined any -- any group, any special group. I stayed away from it. I do remember one time I was in high school and somebody made a statement which I did not care and we got into a fight right in the classroom, the benches were flying and everything else. But that was the only time, and I -- I knew if anybody made any comments about Jews or religion or anything of that sort, I fought back, because I was proud to be a Jew and -- and I didn't hide it either.

Q: Do you remember the statement that provoked that fight?

A: I don't -- I do not remember, but I didn't like it.

Q: Were most of your friends Jewish?

A: It was sort of -- I would say about 50 - 50. And we got what -- got -- got well, I mean, we -- we -- we laughed together, we played together and there was n-never any expression of you are a Jew, you are a Catholic, whatever.

Q: When you were a child, what did you think you would want to do when you grew up?

A: I was always into science, I liked that. Yeah, and I also wound up doing it.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: You told me some of the things that you did for fun when you were a kid, movies and opera. What else comes to your mind about some of the things you did when you weren't in school when you were a child?

A: I -- I don't know, I can't -- can't separate it for some reason.

Q: As you became a young adult, late teens, early 20's, what was your social life like in **Vienna**?

A: Well, social life. We always had parties at home, and some -- we -- well, do you mean social life as in -- within the family or among friends, or --

Q: Both, and I was also thinking in terms of dating an-and -- just the kinds of things that young adults do.

A: All right. We had always a lot of fun together as students, and we went out mostly to the opera and the different theaters. And we also had parties at home, mostly at home. We never went out to -- to bars or any of that sort. And it was a different life then than it's today, that -- that I know. We le -- we -- we lived a -- a clean and healthier life. We also took a lot of trips, hiking trips and mountain climbing in those -- in my day -- young days. Went skiing away for a few days or a couple of weeks during the wintertime. Yeah, I -- we played all kinds of sports. I was a member of one of the sports clubs, the **Vienna** football club. And I was very active in tracks -- in -- in track and -- and in soccer, and was active in the junior



**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

league and even won couple first prizes in the track. So we were always thinking about not just having fun but something substantial, where you accomplish things or when you enjoyed things like the theater or the opera.

Q: How much education did you get in **Vienna**? How high or how far did you go in your education?

A: I finished the [indecipherable] technical college in **Vienna**, graduated in 1936.

Q: And you were qualified to do what with that degree?

A: I was a civil engineer, and that qualified me for quite a few ways.

Q: Did you follow the events in **Germany** in the early 1930's?

A: Not until **Hitler** became chancellor in 1933. Then, especially the Jewish people were aware what's -- things -- what -- what's going on in **Germany**. Although, times really got bad for the Jews when **Hitler** took over **Austria**.

Q: We-We'll get to that in a minute, but you're -- you're running just a little ahead of me. So when **Hitler** became chancellor -- you said that's when you first really became concerned, what were some of the thoughts that you had and what -- do you remember any of the conversations that your Jewish friends had at -- at the time that he first became chancellor?

A: For some reason we never were -- had any conversation about it, or exchanged any views. But -- that -- we always felt that it won't happen to us.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: Do you remember reading reports of the **Reichstag** fire and -- and the emergency decrees that came after that?

A: Yes, I [**indecipherable**] excuse me. Yes, I followed the -- the news, of course, in the newspapers as well as the radio. And something -- as a matter of fact, speaking of radio, that's a radio which my father and I put together ourselves. And was quite a big success.

Q: What was going on in **Austria**, specifically with **Dollfus**. Can you tell me a little bit about what was going on with the politics of the country in those days?

A: Well, mostly under **Dollfus**, things were pretty -- pretty steady and were no problems as far as anti-Semitism is concerned. The administration tried to make it as -- as easy as possible for the Jewish population, and they -- they tried not -- tried to make the Jewish population feel at peace that nothing would happen to them. And he did try to protect the Jewish population especially, and fought the -- the Nazis in the city continuously.

Q: Were you aware in the early 30's about the existence of **Dachau** and about the book burnings and about some of those things that were happening in **Germany**?

A: Just was aware of it, but nothing else.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: What was your reaction when you heard about the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses? Did you have any reaction to that or was that something that kind of seemed to fit the same pattern?

A: Not -- not until **Hitler** marched into **Austria**.

Q: Before he came into **Austria**, though, did you see any of the Nazi propaganda that was anti-Semitic?

A: Oh yes, definitely. You know, there were lots of political pamphlets, pasted information on lampposts and w-walls and prints and all that. It was very uncomfortable too, to see it and to read it.

Q: Can you remember any of the things that you saw or that you heard at that time?

A: Well, as a matter of fact, I was interested in collecting all these stickers, political stickers. And as a matter of fact, I brought it with me to the **United States** and I give it to the Holocaust Museum. And they -- they, as a matter of fact, displayed it on the third floor.

Q: Did you ever listen to **Hitler** on the radio?

A: On the radio? Yes, yes, many times.

Q: What was -- what were your reactions when you heard him on the radio?

A: I just -- I think -- I think he sounded to me like a crazy man, that's all I can say.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: You mentioned before that the Jewish community was a little concerned. Did the Jewish community do anything, or was there any activity at that time to show that the Jewish community was concerned about what was happening right across the border in **Germany**?

A: They were concerned, but they always felt safe in the city.

Q: What was happening in your life during the early 30's?

A: You -- the early 30's? Well, there was actually no change. As a matter of fact, the only experience I may have had a few times when I went to the college, that some of the anti-Semitic organizations, student organizations tried to start a fight. Sometimes they were successful, a lot of times they weren't. But I myself, personally speaking, always tried to keep out of things, just minding my own business. And just, as I said before, I never joined any political organizations. But there were a few scraps between the students, whether they were Jewish or -- or Gentile, but -- but somehow it didn't affect me in s -- in any way. I was upset about it, of course, but nothing I would do about it.

Q: You mentioned before that **Dollfus** tried to keep things quiet, especially for the Jewish population, was fighting Nazis in the streets. How much did you know about the Nazi attempt to seize power in **Austria** in '34? Did you know anything about that?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: Oh, in -- that was -- well, that was the time when **Dollfus** was killed, and -- it was murder, as a matter of fact. No, I d -- I -- I don't -- I was not too much interested in that.

Q: When **Hitler** started moving, before he even came to **Austria**, what were your thoughts, if you can remember, when he entered the **Rhineland** back in '36? Do you remember when he entered the **Rhineland**?

A: Yes, yeah. Well, it was -- it was just another -- another act of his, and we in **Austria** just -- we were more or less like a neutral country. We were hoping and trying to -- to stay quiet and --

Q: Did you have a sense of increasing alarm, or was it still status quo when he -- when **Hitler** signed with **Mussolini**, when they signed their **Berlin-Rome** access. Were you -- were you beginning to get concerned, or did you still feel safe?

A: No. No, no.

Q: Still felt safe.

A: Yeah. City was still normal. No changes.

Q: Did you have any knowledge of what was happening in the **United States** with respect to the Jewish community and the protest against **Hitler**? Did any of that news ever filter out to **Vienna**?

A: No. Was never anything written up in papers or otherwise.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: Did you follow the 1936 Olympics? You were a big athlete, I was just wondering if you -- if you followed the **Berlin** Olympics.

A: Yes, we did. Yes, yes, we did. I did personally listen to the radio, watching the radio.

Q: Any -- any memories of the Olympics that stand out in your mind?

A: Not really, I -- I knew, of course about the -- the black people who -- who represented **United States**. There was a lot -- lot of talk about that, and -- and in a way we were glad that they won. We were -- were very happy about it.

Q: Were there any newsreels at that time showing the Olympic events?

A: No, not -- not -- not that -- I don't remember.

Q: It's okay. What was happening in your life right before the **anschluss**? What were you doing? Were you working, were you still a student? What was happening to you?

A: Well, that's a good question, because as I graduate the college, I also had to have -- had to serve three months in the military. And it's like an -- like we'd call here **ROTC**. And I reported to the -- to an artillery regiment, which was an exclusive regiment at that time, and my uncle helped me. And served for three months, going in in January 1938. And I was out of town on maneuvers, and March the 14<sup>th</sup> we -- there were rumors that the Germans may take over **Austria**,

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

and Chancellor chus -- **Schuschnigg** at that time said that he does not want to see any blood flowing in the streets of **Vienna**, or for **Austria**, or the entire country. And he would not issue any -- any orders to fight or anything. Those were the initial orders given, and of course we, as a military unit, we were prepared. Suddenly, over -- it was a weekend, Saturday to Sunday, when the invasion started. And of course my commanding officer knew that the -- I -- a-as a matter of fact, I think I was the only Jew in the whole regiment. And he immediately notified me that I could go take the next train back to **Vienna** to see my parents. And that he would see me again in the barracks back in **Vienna**, because they were packing up and ready to go back to **Vienna**. And that was one sight I will never forget. When I arrived at the railroad station in **Vienna**, I was in uniform, in the Austrian uniform, military uniform. When I arrived in **Vienna**, got off, got out on the street, I couldn't believe that I -- I was in -- in a city where I not only was born, but raised and went to school. It was a completely strange atmosphere. First of all, there were people on the streets. Everybody had either a flag or an armband, Nazi armband. Flags all over the place, which never occurred during my lifetime in **Vienna**. And I took the streetcar, go home, and I noticed of course at -- at that time, at th -- at this particular moment I didn't know that they were all Jews who were down on their knees scrubbing the sidewalks. And I just couldn't -- couldn't believe, couldn't see

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

it. And I got home and met my parents. And my father -- that was on a Sunday when I arrived, my father went to the office the next day on Monday, and when he got -- got there, there were two Gestapo men waiting in front of his office. And they introduced themselves and said that they were here to transfer the business over to the German banks. And as a matter of fact it was -- I think it was like a contract, that he would be safe under their control until September the first of 1938. And they were more or less watching every move he made during that period, and in the meantime, my -- my mother contacted my family in the -- in the **United States** and started procedure, getting an affidavit to get me out. At that time we also unfortunately found out that as far as I'm concerned, I could leave **Vienna** without any problems as a -- soon as I got my visa. But my parents, unfortunately, my father was under the Russian quota and my mother came under the Polish quota. Both of those quotas were -- were closed, and they just could not get a visa to get to **United States**, so naturally -- we had contacts in **Yugoslavia** and other places and my parents were able to arrange -- leave here now to go first to **Yugoslavia**. But going back to -- to myself, on Monday morning I got back to the barracks, to my barracks, and believe me or not, I got into my room and I couldn't find any of the -- my personal belongings. And, as a matter of fact, the whole regiment couldn't find anything of their own belongings. And what we found out is



**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

the German -- Germans moved in. As a matter of fact when I arrived in the barracks, I saw the Germans drilling on -- on -- on the field, just like it was theirs.

Q: I have to interrupt you because --

A: Sure.

Q: -- we have to change tape. Just one moment.

**End of Tape One, Side A**

**Beginning Tape One, Side B**

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Norbert Hilsberg**. This is tape number one, side **B**. And you were telling me about the barracks, coming back to your barracks and what you found there. And if you would, please continue.

A: As I said, when I came back into the barracks, I couldn't find my personal belongings and we later found out that the Germans just took over and threw everything down into the cellar of the barracks. So we all had to scramble and find our things. I eventually did. I immediately contacted my commanding officer about the situation, that my parents a-are going to get me out as quickly as possible. And so he said don't worry about it. Of course, I also explained to my commanding officer that I couldn't leave **Vienna** until I get my mili -- mil -- military passport, because those are requirements to get the visa. So he said don't worry about it, I'll

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

take care of everything. I was in the Austrian uniform for almost two weeks -- over two weeks, as a matter of fact, which helped me considerably, moving around the city without any fear. And so the day when the commanding officer had the military passport for me, he called me in the office and said, now here's the passport, but I won't give it to you. I said, why won't you give it? He said, because I want to make sure that you're gonna deposit th -- in the American embassy, where it belongs. I said, well then, let -- take it out, I'm going to the embassy right now. He said, no, I'm going to call a taxi for you, put you in the taxi and -- and you -- you take it. Which I did, and I went to the embassy directly from the barracks and deposited a passport in the embassy and then went home. Of course, after that I had to take off my military uniform because I was not in the military any more, I was discharged; although I was, up until 1956, I was considered a reserve officer in the Austrian army, wa -- at that time of course, in the German army. And as a matter of fact, I still have my military passport with me. And so a -- twice -- we -- we lived in a -- an apartment building and [indecipherable] apartment building near the American -- well, wi -- American embassy as a m -- as a matter of fact, a new American embassy after the war is located within a block, walking distance from where I used to live. And w -- our concierge was very cognizant of the situation and always informed us whenever the Gestapo came by to inquire about

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

the Jewish residents, to notify us that they were here. And so whenever that happened, my parents of course were safe because my father had the contract with the Germans to be in his office until September the first, but for me, I had to leave the city twice. And just went to the far -- far suburbs of do -- **Vienna**, and stayed there for about a week, then I came back again. Well, finally I received my visa in June of 1938 and packed everything up, wh-what I wanted. And of course I could not leave **Vienna** with more than eight dollars in my pocket to go to **United States**. And of course my father, being in a bank, he arranged prior, long prior, my -- before my departure, to have money picked up in -- in twa -- in **Paris** when I arrived there from **Vienna**, which I did, was very lucky. Of course, everything -- before I left **Vienna**, my passage was completely paid and taken care of from **France** to the **United States**. And of course I was concerned about my parents, what -- what will happen to them, but luckily they were -- they got the visa to **Yugoslavia**. It's only for about I think six weeks. And then they traveled to **Italy** and from **Italy** they went to **France**. And in the meantime, my uncle who had -- who lived in **Philadelphia**, and he had contacts with the State department, and arrangements were made that my parents take a -- buy a round trip ticket -- of course sh -- that's the only thing they could buy, a round trip ticket to the **West Indies**, a cruise to the **West Indies** and arrive in **Cuba**. And so naturally my

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

parents bought s-some cruise tickets in **Paris**, and they left **France** on that cruise ship in 1940. And they cruised and of -- when they arrived in -- in ha -- in **Santiago de Cuba**, the port, the representative of the American embassy in -- in **Havana** that greeted them and took them off the ship. And my parents stayed in **Havana** for -- until April of 1941, when they finally got their visa to enter the **United States**, they came. So that is my story.

Q: I -- I have a lot of question to --

A: Sure.

Q: -- to ask you. If your father was able to get money out before the **anschluss**, when did he already start making plans for you? When did your parents already start thinking about getting you and getting themselves out?

A: Ma -- my mother was the driving force really, because my father s-said -- I -- I had nothing to say anyway. I was a good boy. But my -- my father just took it easy, he said, well, everything will be go -- will go back to normal, nothing will happen. And -- but my mother was the driving force, and she -- she really did a fine job to get us all out. As a matter of fact, there's a very interesting -- very interesting story. Se-September -- September first came, and of course --

Q: Which year?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: 1938. And my father left -- on that day, he left for the railro -- for the railroad station. I don't know what for, he went downtown on something else also. And luckily, he called home to tell my mother something, and my mother said, don't come home any more. And the reason was is while my father was away, a knock on the door, and a couple men standing out in front of the door and then my mother says, can I help you? And they said, I would like to -- we would like to talk to Mr. **Hilsberg**. So my mother said, well, Mr. **Hilsberg** is downtown for a -- I don't know what -- well, when is he coming home? So my mother says, well, I really don't know how long he's going to stay downtown. He said, well we -- we'd like to talk to him. So my mother replied -- said, well you know that we are leaving today. So he said yes, we know, but we still like to talk to Mr. **Hilsberg** before he leave. So that was it and luckily my father called in the meantime. My mother said, don't come home. I'll just lock the door and I'll leave the key with my neighbors and say goodbye to everything. I'll meet you at the railroad station. And that's what happened and that's how they got out.

Q: But when did she start making arrangements? Do you know when she started?

A: I don't remember the date, or when they received the -- the visa to -- to leave **Vienna** for yu-yugos -- for **Yugoslavia**, but I do know that they were well prepared shortly after I left **Vienna**, where their -- their personal belongs were all -

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

- already packed, because arrangements were made that they would go to -- to **United States** to live there. So we ha -- I had one uncle in -- in **California**, and so everything was sent -- all the crates were sent to **California**. So --

Q: I -- I'm still trying to figure out when your dad got the money sent to **Paris** for you, because he di -- did he do it before the **anschluss**?

A: Yes, yes. As a matter -- that was good question, I'm glad that you asked me. What happened is when the word came that maybe -- that the Germans may wind up and enter the -- the -- **Austria**, that's when he felt that he better transfer some of the -- the money, the family money, as a matter of fact, to **Paris**, to the bank, which is -- was the main branch there.

Q: I do have some other questions --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- about what you told me. The -- the biggest question in my mind is why would your parents -- why would anybody take a cruise in 1940? The war started in 1939. I must be missing something. Was it -- did people feel it was safe to take a -- a cruise?

A: That was the only chance for them to leave **Europe** and they just took the chance, and it worked out fine.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: Before you were allowed to come into the **United States**, did you have to take any tests, any physical or mental tests?

A: No.

Q: In the time you were still in **Vienna**, after the **anschluss**, had you heard about some of the concentration camps and did you know anybody who was sent there?

A: I -- I knew a very close school friend, his father was sent to **Dachau**. And -- but I do -- do know that he was released from **Dachau** and came home after a few weeks.

Q: You also mentioned that you packed up your things and you left. What did you take with you? What of your personal items did you take with you besides the stamp collection that you donated to the museum?

A: Well, just took my -- my clothing, and that -- that's all, just what's on your back.

Q: You -- did you take any photos with you?

A: No, that was all packed in the crates.

Q: How did you personally travel, and did you travel with anybody else, or were you completely alone?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: I was all by myself. I do have -- I do ha -- ha -- I did have a second cousin in **Paris** I stayed with for about a couple weeks before I left **France** for the **United States**.

Q: You said you had an uncle in **Philadelphia** and an uncle in **California** and the -  
- the crates and everything went to **California**. Was **California** your destination also?

A: I assume it was my parent's destination, but it has changed because they finally settled in **New York** and everything had to be sent back to **New York -- California**.

Q: But when you came to the **United States**, what was your destination? Where did you think you were going to end up?

A: I stayed with my great-aunt in **New York** for a couple weeks and then -- that was in the summer, of course, of '38. And my uncle from **Philadelphia** picked me up and took me to his summer home up in **New Hampshire** and we stayed there all summer, and then went back to -- to **Philadelphia**.

Q: You told me to ask you about the hurricane of 1938; I did not forget. Can you tell me about the hurricane?

A: That was quite an experience for me because I'm -- I was never in my life exposed to it, even though it was only 24 years of my life, but I -- I never -- never



**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

experienced it myself and I certainly did. It was a little -- a home right on a lake, and that lake became an ocean. As a matter of fact, when I came over on the ship across the ocean to the **United States**, I went through a storm. And I just remembered that moment when that hurricane came over **New Hampshire** and that little lake became a -- became an ocean. And it was really very tough to get out because luckily the summer home was not hit by any trees, but trees were falling all over the place. As a matter of fact, the next day, my uncle and I, we had to move tree trunks in order to get out to the main road from the house. So it was quite an excitement for me. I -- I -- in a way I enjoyed it, but yet I felt very sorry for all the damage I saw in the way home from **New Hampshire** to **Philadelphia**.

Q: Did you speak any English before you came to this country?

A: Yes.

Q: Where did you learn it?

A: In school, in high school. I took classes in French and in English, and through my entire high school I had two hour -- two classes a week, which -- an hour in English as well as in French.

Q: What were your expectations of the **United States** when you first came?

A: I read a lot about the **United States** and I had my family, had family in the **United States** and they came to visit us many times in **Vienna** and stayed with us.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

So I had a pretty good idea as to what the units -- **United States**, especially **New York**, looked like. And I was not a bit disappointed or -- or surprised when I saw it myself with my own eyes when I arrived in **New York**.

Q: What about your expectations of the American citizens? How did the Americans strike you?

A: I liked them from the moment I arrived in the **States**. I think it -- I was -- I was used to that type of life and excitement and variety of life in the **United States**, and I felt very quickly, almost immediately I felt like it -- being at home.

Q: Did you realize at that time just how lucky you were to have gotten out?

A: I certainly was because as a measure f -- as a mat -- as a matter of fact, when I found out recently that I am considered a -- a survivor, I -- I just couldn't believe it, because I personally really did not suffer, and for that matter, my -- my parents didn't suffer. They suffered a little bit more than I did, but at least they made it out all right and didn't have these bad experiences. And -- and -- and kept on living.

Q: When you came to the **United States**, did people ask you about what was going on in **Vienna** and what was going on in **Germany**?

A: Well, they did, but I didn't have much experience except my just personal, couple experiences I had during my -- before I left **Vienna**. But otherwise no, I -- I couldn't -- couldn't really tell them. I -- ab -- of course I was able to tell them the

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

story what I saw while I was there, how they treated the -- the Jewish people, not only that, but the Jewish owners of -- of stores and so on. And life really changed overnight.

Q: Now, you had already left **Austria** when a lot of historical events happened, so I would like to ask you about a few of them, and if -- if you were not aware of them, that's fine, but let me just ask you.

A: Oh, okay.

Q: Had you heard about the **Evian** conference?

A: There was some written in the paper, that's all I -- I know.

Q: What was your reaction to the agreement between **Chamberlain** and **Hitler**, the peace in our time agreement?

A: Well, that was -- that was devastating really, because I personally didn't believe in it and it sure proved the point.

Q: How was that event, this peace in our time, that agreement between --

A: Yeah.

Q: How was that reported in the **United States** newspapers and on the radio?

A: I really -- I really don't -- I -- I can't express myself, I -- I -- I -- I really don't -- don't know, I -- I do know that everybody was upset, and the -- it was not believable.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: How did you learn about the events of **Kristallnacht**?

A: Through the newspaper and radio.

Q: And what were your thoughts when you read about these events?

A: I really couldn't believe it, what they have done. And just sitting here and -- and -- and trying to reminisce, it is just unbelievable that in the -- in this world things like this can be done, even in those days, which was 50 some years ago.

Q: What was the reaction of the Jewish community here and the -- just the general American public here to the news of **Kristallnacht**?

A: I really, really w-were -- was not too much aware of it except for just the news. I guess I was too young in the group I was with. They just did not pay too much attention to it, except of course that everybody was upset what has happened.

Q: At that time were you still in touch with people in **Austria**?

A: No.

Q: Can you tell me, besides the hurricane, what did you do those first few weeks and months that you were in the **United States**?

A: Well, the first -- first two weeks in **New York**, I had a marvelous time, I had a cousin, the young -- young girl who took me all over **New York**, showed me all the sights. And one night, as a matter of fact, she -- she took me to a café, dancing, and she couldn't believe that I -- I was up to it, to the latest dance available,

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

because **Vienna** was very cosmopolitan and of course, we just did the same thing in **Vienna** as they did in **New York**, or any other place in the **United States**. As a matter of fact, I also concentrated on seeing all the American movies in **Vienna** while I was still living there and that -- that helped my English also, naturally.

Q: Were you able, or did you need to get any more education in this country?

A: No.

Q: All right, you were here by the time **Hitler** annexed part of **Czechoslovakia**, and did you think that that event was reported accurately and well in the **United States**?

A: I really would not know.

Q: Do you remember hearing about the **Saint Louis**, the ship?

A: No, I didn't. As a matter of fact, not until the -- the -- I think there -- there was a movie about it? Yes. That was actually the first time that I really knew what was -- really what was happening. Truthfully speaking, I didn't read too much newspapers in the beginning when I was here. [indecipherable] I had other interests.

Q: Is there anything that -- that we haven't talked about that stands out in your mind about the period of time before World War II started?

A: How -- how do you mean?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: For example, did you experience any anti-Semitism when you came here? Or any anti-foreign feeling?

A: Here in the **United States**? No.

Q: September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939, how did you find out that war had started?

A: A friend of mine and it was on a Sunday, he went in the afternoon, in the mid-afternoon to the movies in **Philadelphia**. That's where I lived. And when we came out, there were extras, on World War wa -- World War II broke out. That was -- that's how I found out that the war started, the invasion of **Poland**.

Q: Did you still have any family left in **Lemberg**?

A: Where?

Q: In **Poland**. Did you still have any family left in **Poland**?

A: No, no, they're all gone.

Q: With the news that the war had begun, how did the American population react, and were you surprised in any way by the American reaction?

A: No.

Q: And you had no correspondence with anybody in **Europe** still, at that time?

A: No.

Q: How carefully did you follow the war news?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: Well, not until -- not until 1941 did I really follow that. Course, 1941, that's when I entered the services of the **United States** Army.

Q: Did you have any idea of how the Jews were being treated at that -- you know, in '39 and in '40? Before you got into the military, did you have any idea?

A: Only from what I read in the paper.

Q: In what ways was **America** changing in '39 when the war started and into 1940? Did you detect any changes in the American community?

A: No.

Q: Did you notice any alarm in the Jewish community?

A: Oh, I -- I heard, but somehow it didn't affect me too much.

Q: And what was happening in your life in 1939 and 1940? What were you doing before you got into the military?

A: Well, I graduated in 1936, and I got a job in a research organization, and at the same time also, I was always participating during my younger years, growing years, in -- in choirs, joining choirs and singing in the school, and -- and everybody in the family, including my -- my mother, of course, suggested that I have a beautiful voice, and I -- I should try to -- to learn, to study. And I just -- I'm always up for some -- always up -- ready to do something else, something different. And I had a -- a interview with one of the finest voice teachers in **Vienna** at that time.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

And he said, my God, I want you to be my student. And he -- I started to take singing lessons. And then he transferred me to his assistant, a Bulgarian man, and I studied voice and ca -- actually continued studying voice when I came to

**Philadelphia**, I went to the **Curtis** Institute and studied voice there. In the meantime also, naturally, I wanted to be independent so my uncle got me a job in **Philadelphia**.

Q: What kind of job?

A: Well, he was -- had connections with the city solicitor of -- of **Philadelphia**, and of -- my first job we came -- we came back from the hurricane experience in September of -- September of 1938, which was the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1938, and -- and he -- this man got me an interview with a person in the ci -- in city hall who had something to do with the library. Apparently they needed some translators. So I went up there, was -- had an interview at nine o'clock in the morning and we had a very pleasant meeting. And the last question he asked me, he said to me, are you a citizen of the **United States**? I said no, but I -- I already -- already applied for my -- for my second papers. I do -- I do have them. So he said to me, I don't care. And he pounded his fist on his table and said I don't care if even President **Roosevelt** is going to ask me to give you a job, I will not. That was that. That was my experience, my first experience trying for a job in -- in the **United States**. So I



**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

went back home and I told my -- my uncle about it. He says well, let me call Mr. **Sharfson**, and he called him. So the guy says to him, well, don't worry about it, I'll get him an -- a job. And sure enough, two days later I had an interview in the **Litz** department store in **Philadelphia** in the advertising department. And so I -- I -  
- I worked there until I went to the service in February of '41. And thit -- the what I did is, since I was musically inclined and knowledgeable in a way, I -- the department store had, every Sunday morning, a two hour classical music -- a -- a music hour, two hours. And I was in charge to arrange the program every Sunday morning. So that was a nice, interesting job for me to do. And of course I had to be careful, using the -- the time properly with -- with the commercials and so on. And on the side I have oth-other duties like filing and doing things in the advertising department. So I -- I liked that, I -- I enjoyed it very much, and --

**End of Tape One, Side B**

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

**Beginning Tape Two, Side A**

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Norbert Hilsberg**. This is tape number two, side **A**. And I'm sorry, we were talking about your job and the concerts, the Sunday morning concerts and -- and some of your other duties and responsibilities, and you were abo -- you were going to finish with that and about to tell me about going into the military. And I'd also like you to tell me if you were drafted, or if you volunteered.

A: Well, so as I -- as I was saying, I was proud to make my ow -- have my own money and do as I pleased. And in the mean -- also, I continued taking my lessons, singing lessons at the **Curtis** Institute in **Philadelphia**. And then in Octob -- was it October or November of 1940, Congress drafted th-the bill for conscriptions. And at that time when -- you had to go to the draft board and report, and -- and they gave you a number when you -- when -- the numb -- yeah, the number was a number -- if you had a low number that means that you -- they would call you for duty in a -- in a short time. An-And unfortunately, I -- I had an -- well f -- actually fortunately I had a low number. And it was, of course, winter of '40 - '41, and in those days, of course, you only served for one year. That -- that's the time period. So I liked having had the experience in the military in **Austria**. Of course, I was

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

aware that the summertime, especially the summertime in the Amer -- in the American camps, I -- I found out were located, most of them in -- in the beginning of the -- the war, in -- in the south. So -- and I always hated hot weather. So I figured well, if I can -- since I have a low number, I found out when they're going to call me, which I did and they told me, well, your number would indicate that you probably will -- will be called in April or May. So I said, April or May? I said -- so I asked him, would -- could they take me now if I -- if I decide? But of course, I have to check with my boss first. He said well, if you want -- want to volunteer, we'll take you in right now if you want to. Said no, le-let's wait. I went back to my job and I talked to the boss and he said fine, go. If you feel -- if you want to go now, go ahead and go into the service. We'll keep the job for you. When you come back, I guarantee you, you will have your job back. So with that, I felt good about it. I went back to the draft board. That was about -- must have been about January and I volunteered for a year, and February 18<sup>th</sup> of 1941, I went to the service. I was taken to Fort **Dix** in **New Jersey** and I had my physical and I had interviews. I had the intelligence test and during the intelligence test they asked me, do you have any special -- special unit you would like to join? So I said, well I really -- I really don't care. So the -- the interviewer says, well, you have engineering background and you wa -- do -- what-what else did he say? Don't -- don't remember.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Engineering background and what was the other one? Oh, the military service, of course, in the Austrian Army. So wha-what would you like, engineering? I said, I really don't care. I'll just go in and finish my year and that's all I'm interested. So they sent me to Fort **Bell** wa -- which is -- which is an engineer camp, and -- and I went there and they put me into mapmaking. And of course, that's my -- my forte. I like geography and of course, in my engineering ground -- background helped me to learn quickly how to make maps. My math and -- and geology is included in -- in that. And I -- I started out as a private in 1941, and shortly I became promoted and my commanding officer and the executive officer of the battalion which I-I was attached to, came over to the drafting room every morning for inspection. And as I was sitting in my drafting table and so my commanding officer and my b -- company officer st-stayed th -- I -- I was the only table, always stopped, talking to me. At the other tables they just passed by. He says well, how's my little refugee feel today? You gained some more weight. And so came -- was in November, or -- or must have been end of November or early December, that was December seventh. Yeah, it was December seventh, of course. Was December seventh, it was in a Sunday. A friend of mine, we took off. I got a pass to go into town. We went to **Washington** and the reason was that th-the [indecipherable] choir gave a concert the Constitution Hall at three o'clock in the afternoon. Well, in those days,

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

before the war s -- before the **United States** was involved in the war, of course, they -- they didn't care too much for the soldiers. And -- so we went to the Constitution Hall and it was all sold out, no tickets available. Otherwise in the -- in the later days, after the war started, well they gave you free tickets and everything was available for the -- for the u -- **United States** soldier. So we wound up in the -- went to the Library of Congress to play some chess. But five o'clock was the time for the Library of Congress to close, so we returned the chess set, and the guy behind the counter said, okay, good luck boys, won't see you any more. I said, what -- what do you mean, won't see you any more? That was five o'clock in the afternoon, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. So he said, well don't you know that **Pearl Harbor** was -- was bombed? **Pearl Harbor** was bombed? What? We went out -- well, it was really chaos in -- in the city of **Washington**. There were army trucks all over, picking up all the soldiers from th -- on the streets and taking them back to the camps. Well, we decided we're not going to get caught. We went through side streets and through alleys and we wound up at **Basil's** delicatessen on **Pennsylvania** Avenue and **E** Street, and we figured we'll have the last good Jewish meal. And we came back -- we took the bus back to the camp, to Fort **Belvoir** and my God, everybody was packing, everybody was ready to go. But

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

luckily our outfit was attached to general headquarters in **Washington**, so -- and of course we were not involved in that. So that's -- that's my story.

Q: After **Pearl Harbor**, did your duties or responsibilities change?

A: Well, it was s-secrecy all around, especially in -- in my job because we -- we started to be involved in preparations for -- for war maps and invasion maps and that sort of stuff. So naturally, secrecy was all around us.

Q: When you first joined the military, what was your citizenship status?

A: I was still waiting for my citizenship. As a matter of fact, I did not become a citizen until April of 1943.

Q: I'd -- I'd like you to tell me about some of the changes that you saw unfolding in this country right after **Pearl Harbor**. In those first weeks and months after **Pearl Harbor**, what did you see around you, not just in the army, but did you have any contact at all with any of the civilian centers, like any of the cities or anything?

A: No, not -- not at all. I do know one thing, that we were very busy in doing our job, and there was little time left for other st -- things to do. And we had very little conterwi -- of course we -- we wer -- we were told to have as little contact as -- contact as possible with the outside.

Q: So tell me what you were doing generally or specifically in 1942. Were you still -- you were Stateside? You're nodding your head, bu --

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: Yes, we were -- we were Stateside, and working pretty hard. We -- I myself put in anywhere from 10 to 12 hours a day to prepare all the maps necessary for the -- for north **Africa** especially at that -- at that time. And in 1942, when things became more and more involved for the **United States**, our general headquarters decided to send us overseas to be attached to a general headquarters in **Europe**. And at that time also there was -- they started to prepare for the European invasion, and that would be a good location to do what we have to do. Unfortunately, or fortunately, whichever, I was still not a citizen, and even though my commanding officer did his utmost to take me along, the war department -- at that time war department would not allow me to go because it was too dangerous if I were captured as a -- I was still, more or less I -- an Austrian, or an enemy, anyway. And so they kept me here and they formed a new cadre for a new battalion for mapmaking, because they needed more than one, so of course I was left back in the **United States** and we formed a new outfit. And -- and we -- we put all these newcomers through basic training like I used to go through, in the beginning. And -- and we worked. We're still attached to general headquarters in the -- **Washington**. And then come 1940 -- '43 -- of course I was a citizen in April, but in November of 1943, our outfit -- the new outfit was sent to north **Africa**, and that's where I left for overseas in November of 1943. And I stayed in north **Africa** for about a year. We took over a

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

little French si -- town, little ti -- cher -- **Cherchell**. And we set up shop there and did a lot of work for the invasion of southern **France** with the seventh army, and also worked for General **Mark Clark** in -- in **Italy**. And started preparing, as a matter of fact, started preparing to work -- make military maps of **Austria**. And of course, I was in charge, naturally. But we did not finish it because we were asked to be sent back to **United States** and back to the **Pacific**, and we went to **Hawaii**. We attached to **Pacific** Ocean headquarters and started to work on all the invasion maps of the islands and **Japan** and so on. And as a matter of fact, on -- on **V** -- not so **V** -- no. Yeah, **V-J** day, that's when the -- when **Japan** finally gave up. On **V-J** day the war didn't end for our outfit, because it just so happened that we worked on **Tokyo** bay and General mar -- **MacArthur** would not move in with the **Missouri** into the bay, unless he has all the information available to him. He just didn't trust these guys, naturally. And so we -- for us the war wasn't over until two weeks after **V-J** day. And we finally were finished and that was in '45. And I was dischar -- discharged in November of 1945. And when my wife picked me up from Fort **Mead**, she told me that there was a letter from the war department waiting for me. And of course, I -- at that point I did not have any idea what I'm going to do. And I -- I would not go back to **Philadelphia** because my wife is a Washingtonian



**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

and she has all her family and friends here and so I decided we're going to raise a family here, in **Washington** area.

Q: I want to stop you before you go any further because I have several questions. I don't even know where to start. What was your final rank at the end of the war?

A: What?

Q: Your rank.

A: The rank? Master sergeant.

Q: While you were still working on maps of **Europe**, whether you were in the **United States** or in north **Africa**, did you have any idea of what was happening to the Jews inside the **Reich**?

A: Just what I heard on -- on radio broadcasts, that's all we had at that time.

Q: So you had no maps or no intelligence on the camps themselves?

A: Not on the camps, no. We knew -- we knew that there were camps, but we didn't know more about it.

Q: Were there any reports, either in the regular newspapers or in "**Stars and Stripes**" about what was going on while you were already in **Hawaii**?

A: Yes, yes, we knew that, yes.

Q: What -- what do you recall about reading "**Stars and Stripes**" for example, and do you remember reading about the liberations of some of these camps?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: Yes. But that's -- that's just about all the -- they were just short reports, there were no details.

Q: You also mentioned a wife. Now, you have to back up and tell me when you met your wife and when you got married, because you kind of forgot that part.

A: It was -- I believe -- I think it was in April of 1942. I -- friend of mine and I, we had the early evening off, and we went to the movies in a ge -- in a -- in Fort **Belvoir**. And th -- we were at the early show and the show was over, I think it was nine o'clock in the evening and my friend, he always went to these dances. They brought in girls from the Jewish community center or from other organizations to dance with the boys, entertain them. And on that particular day there was some Jewish org -- something of -- I think it was from the Jewish community center, were sent to Fort **Belvoir**. And my friend says to me, let's go. I -- I want to go. He usually went to these affairs, I didn't. And so he said, come on, don't be a spoilsport. I said okay, I'll do you a favor. So we walked into the hall where were - - they were dancing and a buddy of mine was working the record player. So he saw me and he called me up on the stage and said, come on, let me dance while you -- if you want to work. I said, sure, sure, I'll ta -- I'll take over, I'll play the records. And for the rest of the evening, was almost until about 10 o'clock or so, I played records. And the dancing -- and I -- I just looked and enjoyed watching the people.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

And -- and all of a sudden -- it was the last dance, all of a sudden I see a girl coming by the stage right -- right below me and sh-she had a do -- red -- red dress on, or was it a jacket or something, but she just hit my eye. So I said, I want to dance with her, and I jumped off the stage. And I asked for the dance and that -- whoever [indecipherable] passed it on, and we were dancing. And I said -- I said to her, my first words -- words were, where have you been all evening? So one word led to another and as a matter of fact I -- I was supposed to, since I was in charge, I was supposed to bring the records back -- back to the barracks. So of course, was late at night and -- and the records were heavy. So it just so happened that my wife-to-be had a car with all the girls in there. So I said, do you mind to drop me off with the -- those records? So she said, I really don't have any room. I really have full of -- they had, you know, she had about a half a dozen girls in th -- in the car. So, in those days they had the standing boards on the cars, on the old cars. So she said, if you want to, you can stand on a -- on a -- on a boar -- on a body board, or whatever they called it and I'll take you back to the barracks. So -- so she took me back to the barracks and before I -- I left, I said, can I have your phone number? So she says, I'm in the phone book. Just like that. And that's the -- that's the beginning of the story and here we are almost 60 years later.

Q: And your wife's name?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: **Maxine.**

Q: Let's go back to the war years. What memories do you have of hearing of the death of **Roosevelt** and also the death of **Hitler**?

A: I was sitting in a [indecipherable] of -- in the **Schofield** barracks in **Hawaii**, writing a letter to my wife. It was 11 o'clock in the morning, **Hawaii** sty -- Hawaiian time and the news just came over the radio about **Roosevelt's** death. And I ex-expressed my -- my sorrow and then how I felt in the letter to my wife at that time. Don't remember any more of the details of what I wrote. But that was my first moment when I found out about **Roosevelt**.

Q: When did you hear that **Hitler** had died? When **Hitler** died. Do you remember hearing about it?

A: Yes, I heard about it, but everybody was al -- naturally very happy, and celebrated.

Q: Where were you on **V-E** day when -- when the war in **Europe** was over?

A: **V-E** day was in May of '45. Yeah, I was in -- in **Hawaii**, working hard, working about 12 - 14 hours a day.

Q: What were your thoughts and reactions?

A: Well, it's finally over, but I -- I'm still not finished. I have to continue.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: At the time of -- of **V-E** day, did you have any idea at that time again, any idea as to the extent of the genocide?

A: I had the inclination because I believe I -- my wife did give me some -- some information about it in the papers.

Q: Did you experience any anti-Semitism while you were in the military?

A: No.

Q: Is there anything else that stands out in your mind about the war years that we haven't discussed, that you'd like to talk about now, before we go to the postwar?

A: No, nothing really. Nothing I -- which was special or anything, no.

Q: Okay. After you were discharged from the service, what did you do next?

A: Well this I -- this I mentioned before, I -- when I got home and I opened up the letter from the war department, they offered me a professional position in the war department, continuing what I have done during my army service as a civilian.

Q: Was there ever a time, any time in your life up until then, where you thought possibly of going to **Palestine**?

A: Not really.

Q: I want to talk about some of the events that happened after World War II that were related to the Holocaust. Did you follow the **Nuremberg** trials?

A: I -- I followed it, just reading the papers, not -- not too much into detail, no.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: Did you feel justice was done?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you follow the **U.N.** debates on the partition of **Palestine**? Was that something that was of interest to you?

A: No.

Q: Did you have any reaction to the birth of the state of **Israel** in 1948?

A: Yes. Yes, I was very happy that the Jewish people have to -- have their own place and live their life, hopefully in peace. But th-things turned out differently, unfortunately.

Q: Did you follow the **Eichmann** trial in the early 1960's?

A: Just what was written in the paper, just pure curiosity.

Q: During all of these events, did you get a sense of how the American population was reacting to the **Nuremberg** trials and the partition of **Palestine**? Do you have any memories along those lines?

A: No, not really.

Q: You stayed in the military after the war.

A: No.

Q: Oh, you sta -- in a related field, with the mapmaking --

A: Yes.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: Excuse me, I'm sorry. You were in **Washington** during the Korean war and the war in **Vietnam**.

A: Yes.

Q: Do you have any thoughts about those events in American history? Any -- do you have any reaction or any thoughts about those events. Well, how did you feel about the wars at the time?

A: Well, of course I was involved in -- in working on these areas and doing my best to -- to help the American soldier. Other -- otherwise no, I -- I don't have any other reaction.

Q: As a Jewish refugee, what was your reaction to the Civil Rights movement in this country?

A: Well, I was very interested naturally, and I felt that it was about time that we forget the -- the fights among black and white or whatever color is involved. And after all, I personally feel that we all equal and deserve the same treatment regardless of color or religion or whatever.

Q: The 60's were a very turbulent time in this country. Do you have any thoughts about some of the events of the 60's, whether it was Civil Rights, or the **Kennedy** assassination or even the sexual revolution. An-Anything strike you as, you know, did anything strike home with you, based on your life experiences?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: The only thing which disturbed me, and the -- what -- what -- which I personally feel caused the -- the 60's to turn out the way they did is the drug revolution. I -- I personally believe that if not for the drugs, things would have been more normal than what they turned out then, and unfortunately continue today.

Q: I'd like you to tell me about your professional career over the years. Wa -- about your professional career.

A: Are you speaking of while I was working for the Department of Defense? Well, I continued to -- doing what I was doing in the service. Of course we were very busy regardless, whether there was no war, or -- or peace. We had our problem with the **Soviet Union** and with -- with the Eastern Bloc.

Q: I'm sorry, I have to interrupt you, we're very close to the end of the tape.

**End of Tape Two, Side A**

**Beginning Tape Two, Side B**

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Norbert Hilsberg**. This is tape two, side **B**. And you were talking about the work that you were doing with the maps, with respect to the **Soviet Union** and the Eastern Bloc.



**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: Well, it's -- ma -- in my profession the war still continued as a civilian, and we were just as busy as we were during the war years, working long hours. We have all these problems like the Cuban crisis and the **Bay of Pigs**. And I was always involved in those activities. And kept us busy, it was very interesting work, very challenging work, tiring at times. And of course with the revoluti -- revolution of the computers, things became easier to handle, but yet, they were even more complicated than before. I personally was very pleased with -- with my life during that period. I feel that I accomplished a lot and I was also re-rewarded with nice reports. And -- and I continued climbing in the echelon of my office, and finally wound up as a -- in a staff position in the headquarters as a production e-engineer, and had additional responsibilities, was not involved in doing it myself but directing other people how to do it and what to do. And that's about it.

Q: You have children?

A: Yes, I have two daughters, four granddaughters and two great-granddaughters.

Q: What have you told your family about your childhood and your experiences in **Vienna**?

A: Actually very little. We -- just lately my family has got more and more interested in my life and experiences, especially since I was asked to give this interview, they're very an -- very anxious to listen to the results.

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

Q: Has your view of religion, of Judaism changed since your days in **Vienna**? Are you more religious, less religious? Has anything changed?

A: I'm more conscious of being a Jew, and -- although I still don't belong to any temple or synagogue. But I -- I do think more about it and I -- I feel a lot closer to my people. I feel it's in -- in my age it's a little bit too late, but I do my best.

Q: Are you involved with any Holocaust related groups or institutions?

A: Well, I'm a member of the Holocaust Museum ever since it was established, even before -- before they started to build the museum itself. And I contributed some of my collections and I also contribute every year, as a member.

Q: Do you or your wife do any work with the Holocaust Museum?

A: No.

Q: Have you gone back to **Vienna** in the years since the war?

A: Yeah, I went back three times. The first visit back since I left was in 1971 and believe me or not, we did not feel -- my wife and I, we didn't feel too comfortable there. They -- they seemed to feel that th -- we're Jewish. They did not go out of their way to help us or talk to us, give us service and so on. But I also must say that I left in '38 and I came back in '71, that the city itself has not changed a bit.

Everything is the same. The streetcars are numbered, they go in the same places I'm used to, the buses, nothing has changed. And I was glad to see that, although

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

the people were a little bit sour. I don't know why. Just because I was there, maybe, I don't know. But anyway, the second visit we had is when my granddaughter spent her college semester in -- in **Florence**, and we all visited then. And that was really a -- the best time I've had with my children and grandchildren, when we went to **Vienna**. We met them -- we visited the first -- well, we went to o -- **Vienna** first and then my daughter and her husband and their three daughters joined us in **Vienna** when they came up from **Florence**. And we spent eight days in **Vienna** and I took them through the whole city, and I took them to the elementary school where I used to go to. But -- this is the nice thing about **Vienna** is -- compared to the **United States**, they'd rather destroy and build new in the **United States**, but in **Vienna** they -- they're trying to -- to keep it the way it is and maintain it properly. But anyway, [indecipherable] elementary school and my youngest granddaughter was a -- I think about seven or eight years old, and of course she just enjoyed it. I took her to the classroom where I was sitting for my -- my sec -- my second grade. And as a matter of fact it was a Saturday afternoon. Of course, school are still there Saturday -- Saturday morning, half d -- half day school on Saturday, so we just arrived there when the children left, and I was waiting until they are all out, and then I walked in with my family and took them into the school building. And in the classroom, one of the classroom the teacher was still there and

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

says, I told her, but she just couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe it. And I took her to the apartment where we used to live and of course that was a really high moment in my life, because I -- I noticed the children in my family were so interested in seeing where I grew up. And -- and the third time was in 1990. We took a talk tour to ma -- eastern **Europe** and we wound up in **Vienna** for the third time. And as a matter of fact, I did visit **Auschwitz** when I was in **Poland** and it was devastating really, even now. And I was in **Kraków** and I was in **[indecipherable] Budapest** and then I would up in **Vienna**. And in those -- as a matter of fact, I didn't mention that in the second visit to **Vienna** with my family, I -- that was in -- in ninet -- in 1990 and that was a complete turnaround as far as being a visitor there. People seemed to be very polite, very helpful, very pleasant and it was almost like being in any other city in the **United States**, really. But if course, in the back of -- of our head there was still -- still the past, naturally. And bif -- the third time, just a few years ago, and it was the same. I enjoyed it while I was there for about three days. And that's it.

Q: I had asked you before, and I'll -- I'll ask you this again, maybe I can get a -- a different perspective. During the war you didn't realize the full impact of the genocide. When did you realize just what you had escaped, what you -- you know, by leaving when you did? When did you get the full impact of the genocide?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: Unfortunately, I lost all my family in **Poland**. Had family in **Warsaw**, had family in **Lódz**, I had family in **Kraków**, I had family in **Belgrade**, and they were all gone. I tried to -- as a matter of fact, i -- bef-before -- and let's see, it was -- must have been in the 50's, yes, it was in the 50's, my father -- I don't remember how he found out that the cousin of mine from the family in **Warsaw** survived. And he is in -- he was in **Paris**, he lived in **Paris** and my father got in touch with him and tried to bring him over to the **States**. He was married at that time already. And -- but in turn his wife found out that her father survived -- I don't -- I think it was **Auschwitz**, and lived in **Tel Aviv**. So naturally they decided that they're going to **Tel Aviv** rather than come to the **United States**. And so at least found out that one survivor. Then, a second survivor I found out is -- I -- I -- I -- throughout the years, since that time, up until the -- this moment, I tried to find out what happened to them, and I got in touch with the international Red Cross. And through them I found out that my uncle, who lived -- they lived in **Lódz**, he died in the ghetto, **Lódz** ghetto. But my aunt and their son wound up in **Auschwitz**, and of course, unfortunately my -- my -- my aunt -- my aunt, she just didn't survive the camp in **Auschwitz**. But my cousin, who was then in his late teens, they sent him to **Dachau**. And I found out through the Red Cross that he was liberated in **Dachau** and they gave me all the information available, but they could not find out for me

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

what happened after he was liberated. And I'm still trying to -- to locate and find out what happened to him, but no luck so far.

Q: Did any of your childhood friends from **Vienna** survive?

A: I have a dear friend, we grew up together in high school and through our late -- latter years. He came to philadel -- **Philadelphia** too, shortly after I arrived there. And once in awhile he -- he goes -- he went back to **Vienna** more often. Now, he was half Jewish and he was half Catholic. So he had the easier rap -- rapport with the people -- with our school friends, and he saw some of them and -- and he found out that some died during the war, were killed during the war and other survived and they just make a bare living, which I don't really care about the ones who survived, truthfully, as far as I'm concerned, even though I didn't have any bad experiences during our time in school, they were -- they were fine. It's very possible that they -- they felt bad about it, too, but after all, they had to survive, and they had to do whatever they had to do. I do have one experience myself. The first -- first visit in **Vienna**, I noticed that a school friend of mine in high school, he was the -- the son of one of the big precision instrument stores in **Vienna**. And when he came back, his -- the -- his -- his father's store was located nearby where I lived, where I grew up, so we came by and I noticed the name -- same name still on there, so I figured must be the son who is in business. And so just of curiosity I walked

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

in. He was a Gentile. And I walked in and I w -- I recognized him immediately, and he was busy with a customer so I stood on the side waiting until he was finished. No sooner the customer walked out, he turns around, he says, **Norbert**, where have you been? Where have you been; that -- that hit me. He should have known. But anyway, well he welcomed me and -- back, and let's get together. And I said, I'm sorry, I -- it's my last day and I wanted to show my wife some other things. So that -- that -- that was my personal experience going back to **Vienna**.

Q: Did any of your Jewish school friends survive?

A: I really -- I hope they did, but I have no -- no contact.

Q: When you look back on your life in the **United States**, what would you say has been your biggest disappointment in the **United States**, or what has been your best surprise about life in **America**, or both.

A: We have no disappointment really. And it's accentuated what I always thought about the **United States**, because my original plans is -- of course, **Hitler** helped me -- my original plans was to -- to go to the **United States** and live there anyway. So I just -- just assimilated immediately, just like I -- I always lived in the **United States**.

Q: September of -- of last year, September 11 -- nine-11, given your life experience, how did you see that event and how do you see life in **America** today?

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

A: Well, Americans unfortunately, that's one thing I -- oh, anyway, I was going to say, Americans forget too easily, and I feel that we are -- little by little we -- we forget about September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. And I was very, very disturbed about what happened that day, and I just -- I still can't believe that we have people in this world who -- who do such things in a civilized society. I -- as far as I'm concerned they're the scum of the earth

Q: One or two more questions. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to add? I mean, you didn't tell me much about your parents after they came here. Would you like to talk about your parents a little bit and how they managed here?

A: All right. My parents settled in **Manhattan**. My father tried to get into -- back into the banking business, but he was not very successful at that time, I don't know why, but at that time I guess, they just said they didn't hire anybody and maybe -- maybe his English was not too good, I have no idea, or the -- they both spoke pretty well. So -- but he was always a very handy man. He made furniture and I built radios with him. And so he found himself a position in a -- during the war, he found himself a position in a naval ordinance factory in **Brooklyn**. And he worked himself up to an inspector. And he worked hard. He had to get up early to get the subway to **Brooklyn**, and came home and he was tired. But he made a nice living.



**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

And of course my mother started to give piano lessons and she was very successful in that, throughout the years.

Q: Did you ever sing professionally after the war?

A: No. I -- I do remember during our stay in north **Africa**, in that little town of **Cherchell** -- no, no, I'm sorry, not to **Cherchell**, it was **Affrevielle**. During the -- we -- we became very friendly there, mostly Jewish -- Jewish families living in that little town who escaped from the mainland. And we have quite -- we had a few Jewish fellows in our outfit and we became friendly with these people. They -- they invited us for Friday night **Shabbas** and Saturday and went to the synagogue, and -- but we also helped the people, the local people celebrate Easter. And so one of my close buddies, he played the piano, so he played the organ in the church, they didn't have any organist there. And I sang the **Ave Maria**. And well, we made the local people very happy, and I enjoyed that.

Q: And you are retired now?

A: Now, yes, yeah.

Q: Yes. Wh-What's still in store for you? What yet would you like to accomplish?

A: Well, first of all, celebrate my 80<sup>th</sup> -- 88<sup>th</sup> birthday and secondly and most important, cel-celebrate my 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which is only a few -- couple -- two or three weeks away from now. And hopefully, hopefully I -- I will enjoy to see my

**Interview with Norbert Hilsberg**  
**August 12, 2002**

great-grandchildren grow up. Maybe I'll see them in school yet. I -- I hope so. I do my best. They -- they keep me alive, they keep me going.

Q: I want to thank you and this concludes the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Norbert Hilsberg**. Thank you.

A: Thank you.

**End of Tape Two, Side B**

**Conclusion of Interview**