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Werner Ellmann oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 9, 2008

Werner Ellmann (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's Note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

Michael Hirsh: You're pretty much a kid in this—

Werner Ellmann: I know it, I know it.

MH: The oldest guy I've talked to was ninety-six.

WE: Oh, my God.

MH: Give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

WE: Werner, W-e-r-n-e-r, Ellman, E-l-l-m-a-n-n.

MH: And your address here? ... And your phone number? ... And your date of birth?

WE: February 16, 1924. They were still shining horses. (laughs)

MH: Where were you and what were you doing before the Army?

WE: Oh, dear. I was a student, graduated from high school. Then I went to a business college for about three months, and then I was drafted in the Army.

MH: This was in Chicago?

WE: Yeah.

MH: Okay, but you were born in Germany.

WE: Yes.

MH: And came over here when?

WE: Well, let's see, I think it was about 1929. And my mother came with me and my brother, my younger brother.

MH: You were five years old when you came?

WE: Just about. Somewhere in there, yeah.

MH: So, your mother and your brother came with you?

WE: Yeah, the other two were left in Germany. We didn't have enough money. And then, when he didn't have enough money to send for all of us, he intended to send for the other two. Well, then the Depression hit, so he never did amass the money, because he was out of work for eight years. And then they ended up in the army. The younger one, Wilfried, he was killed. He was a medic. His unit was going to Leningrad, got there, got off the train, and a shell came in and killed the whole bunch. So, they never saw any action. That's the one you saw a picture of.

The other one, Herbert, he was in the infantry in Russia. He was wounded, and after he was released from the hospital, he was sent to the European Theater, where he ended up

the war. And he says that he used to go to Regensburg, which had a big, big army group there, and then they'd get a lot of transient people coming through, so he began to cook there for the army. But every day, he would look at the guest registry to see if I'd come through. I had no intention of visiting him [or] my grandmother, who was still alive—my father's sister—because of the hatred I had developed for the Germans because of the Holocaust and all the things that I saw. And I vowed I would never go back to Germany.

MH: Let me back up, though.

WE: Oh, sure.

MH: So, you're going to school, and you get drafted?

WE: Yeah.

MH: Where's the Army send you?

WE: Fort Sheridan, then I was sent to Camp Callan.

MH: This is what year?

WE: Forty-two [1942], forty-three [1943]—forty-three [1943]. And at Camp Callan, I was given basic, and also I was—a lot of guys were being sent out, and I wasn't. I later found out that the reason I wasn't was that my background—I was German, and the Army would prefer to send me to Japan, the Pacific. And I didn't want that. I asked specifically to be sent to Europe.

MH: You spoke German?

WE: Yeah, I spoke German, because at home we did nothing but speak German.

MH: And the Army, at that point, didn't see that as an advantage?

WE: Not until I explained it to them. Well, you know, the Army's like any other people; it depends on who you're dealing with. But anyway, they then sent me to [Camp] Carson, where I was given winter and mountain training, then to Fort Bliss, where I was sent to the desert to get desert training. And then I was sent to London.

MH: With a unit or as a replacement?

WE: Not as a replacement, and not really with a unit, but to be assigned. I did some time with the British, and then eventually I was assigned to the 11th Armored Division. I finished the war with them.

MH: When did you actually get on European soil?

WE: Oh, boy, that's interesting. I'm guessing some time about August. It was after D-Day. It was the [Battle of] Hürtgen Forest, it was a big major—and on the sixteenth of December, it was the [Battle of the] Bulge. I was in Bastogne with the 101st [Airborne Division].

MH: What were you doing with the 101st?

WE: A liaison. And then, of course, when we were surrounded, that was it.

MH: What was your rank at that point?

WE: Sergeant, tech sergeant.

MH: So, tell me about being at Bastogne.

WE: It was horrible, really horrible. It was so bombed out; it was so cold, at times as low as ten [degrees] below. And we were never in a house, always out in a hole. And I think in that period, I had one hot meal, and almost ran out of ammunition by the time the 4th Armored broke through.

MH: Did you have winter clothes?

WE: No. No. What I did was the first American soldier I found, I took his coat off and wore it. You know, that's what we did. It was very primitive, but it was very caveman-ish. It was horrible.

MH: You were with the 101st.

WE: Well, I was not totally with them. I was there as a liaison. I got caught in there, didn't get out again, because on the sixteenth, when the Germans broke through, it took a couple of days before they could get to Bastogne. And what the Army was doing—they were really caught with their pants down, but they did have enough sense to have announcements goes out in Paris, where most of the 101st was billeted for R&R, rest and recreation. They got all over the place. But anyway, they were all called back into Bastogne, and they managed to get into Bastogne just before the Germans got that far. That was a vital spot, because it had six major highways, and that really slowed them down. They never did get through.

MH: How many men were you with at Bastogne? How many men do you think were there?

WE: Oh, God. I'm gonna really guess and say something like a third of a division, which is approximately 5,000 or 6,000 guys.

MH: When did you realize you were surrounded?

WE: That's a good question. I always think of it as "immediately." Maybe it was that close. You know, everything happened so fast.

MH: How fast is "fast"?

WE: Well, on the sixteenth, they began the Bulge, and I think by the first or second day, they were 500 miles in. They went damned far. It took—from the start of the Bulge until the end of the Bulge, getting back to the place where it started was about the end of February or someplace in March.

MH: Pushing them back.

WE: That's right. That's right. I mean, it was a tremendous operation that he [Adolf Hitler] had there, and we were surprised at the number of fresh troops that he had. I admit they had some damn young ones. At times, we were fighting fourteen-year-olds. He was desperate towards the end. But that was quite a breakthrough, and they were heading for Le Havre, the harbors, and he could've broken our backs. But anyway, I just developed such a hatred for the Germans. I would not visit my grandmother after the war, nor my mother's sister—

MH: Let me take you through it. You're at the Bulge. Were you wounded there?

WE: Froze my feet. I was never wounded, period.

MH: But you had frostbite, which still affects you?

WE: Yeah. I still have problems. It didn't get you a Blue Cross, though—a Purple Heart.

MH: When do you get back to the 11th Armored Division?

WE: After the breakthrough, the 4th Armored is the one that broke through; and I think the 11th was on the other end, and they were coming through, also. And then I was assigned to work a little with the British 6th Airborne, who were over in Liège, and we used to go through German lines to get there in a Jeep. That was the same time when the Germ—

See, a lot of Americans went back to Germany. I had a very dear friend. His father was the head person at the cemetery on Pulaski and Foster: a huge, huge place. He had a terrific job, lots of people working for him. He had five sons, and he went back to Germany with the sons.

MH: Before the war.

WE: Before the war, right. All five of them except one, my friend, got killed. The wife went mad because of all of her kids, and he shot himself, I think. There were so many of them that did that, so what the Germans did during the Bulge is they put them in American uniforms and dropped them, and they began to pose as American soldiers. And that was hectic, because of the psychological effect and everything else, and the questioning that would go on to establish whether or not you were a legitimate American

soldier, like, “How many touchdowns did Babe Ruth make?” You know, all these kind of questions. But my thought always was that, Christ, they would know that as well as I do, because they grew up there, and then they went back. But they really did create a lot of problems.

MH: How’d you ferret them out?

WE: Well, different ways. Like, I remember one night, the captain and I had to go through the lines to get to the British; we’d usually leave around one or two in the morning. And the windshield for the Jeep is all down, you know, you’re sitting there totally exposed. And on the road are these two American soldiers. I didn’t stop, but the captain said, “Stop, let’s see what’s going on.” Okay.

Well, right off the bat, I thought something was wrong, because these guys had pretty new uniforms, and you didn’t have that at the Bulge. And they’re already in the Jeep, and they’re sitting in the back and the captain and I are sitting in the front. I kind of took his hand and squeezed it, giving him a signal. I don’t know if he caught it or not, and slammed on the brakes, and these guys tumbled right over our heads. And it turned out that they were Germans. I mean, it was horrible.

MH: In the movies and books, you read that they changed the direction of road signs.

WE: I guess they did that, too, but mostly they were out knocking off GIs and creating real psychological problems. I mean, really. Everybody was on tenterhooks, and here you’re going around, everybody you meet, you’re suspicious of. And I even—I remember at one point, we were already moving to go back to where we were originally. We were in the village—I think it was in Luxembourg or Belgium; I don’t know which. When you’re in a village or a town of a neutral or regular—you know, country that’s allied with the Americans—you could not take their housing. You had to go in and ask for permission.

When we went into this town—it was really cold—the captain said to the unit, “You wait here. Werner and I are going in and we’re going to get lodgings for everybody.” And we did, walking down the street, and I’d ask them in German. Then the captain said, “You stay here and hold onto this stuff, and I’ll come back with the troops.” Which he did.

MH: So, you’re by yourself.

WE: Right. I'm going to take myself a shower, a bath or something, because it's nice and warm. Hell, I'm gonna have a bath, which I hadn't had in months. And the next thing you know, I'm dead naked, and the door crashes down, and two American paratroopers with bayonets got me pinned up against the wall. "All the villagers tell us you're a German. You speak German and you are German, and we're gonna just take care of you." You can never believe what I had to go through to convince those guys.

MH: What'd you do?

WE: I don't even remember. I was in a panic. And they finally said, "Okay." Well, I guess, too, if I remember correctly, the unit started arriving, and of course the captain knew where I was. And he saw this other Jeep there, so he came right in. I guess maybe he's the one that saved my life. But it was quite an experience.

MH: That had to scare the hell out of you.

WE: Oh, God, yes.

MH: So, take me through what happens as you get into Germany.

WE: We're fighting our way in. We're meeting older people and young kids. We're seeing a lot of people who're having their white flags hanging out. And, to a person, the first thing they would say to you, "I was not a Nazi." (phone rings) Excuse me.

Pause in recording

MH: So, their phrase is what, "*Nicht Nazi*"?

WE: Yeah. You know, in Germany and in Europe, a lot of people have as second language of English, so a lot of them would speak English. "I was not a Nazi. I was never a Nazi." Horseshit. In 1938, my grandmother sent enough money for my brother, my mother and I to go to Germany, and in 1938, for seven months, I lived in Nuremberg. I saw the army going through Nuremberg at night: the tanks, the infantry, on their way to Austria. A year later, they're in Poland, so everything was hot, hot. "*Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!*" every place you went.

MH: What would happen if somebody didn't?

WE: If they knew it, caught you, Dachau. The first prisoners in Dachau were political. The second group, what was that? It wasn't Jewish. The Jew was the third. The gypsies and the lame then came last. But they had—you know, they were all—all Jews had to wear that star. And if one of my neighbors didn't like me, they could go to the Gestapo and say, "Werner's a Jew." That's it. I'm done. They can come and kill me right there; whatever they desire or want to do, they do.

MH: Well, how did you—I live in an area where there's a number of people from Germany.

WE: Non-Jew.

MH: Non-Jewish, yeah. The woman who cuts my hair is from Germany, okay. And she said her—she's in her forties, so this would be what, her—

WE: So, she didn't see any of Hitler?

MH: No, she didn't, but her parents did. And she talked about—I think she talked about her parents—her father, at least—being in the Hitler Youth, but she said, "Nobody had a choice."

WE: Oh, no, that's right, that was compulsory.

MH: But—

WE: They got it wrong. The choice they had was in the thirties [1930s]. They didn't have it in the forties [1940s], but in the thirties [1930s], they had it and they didn't do it. Now, the communists did, weirdly enough. The communists in Germany fought the Nazis, and most of them ended up in Dachau or dead on the street.

MH: Buchenwald was apparently liberated by the organized communists in the camp.

WE: Yeah, yeah.

MH: But you do have a choice: you can make a stand on principle, which means you're gonna die; or you go along with it.

WE: In the end of this film—I'm the last one, because Mauthausen was the last—I make the statement that I hoped that if I were in that circumstance, I would have the courage to end up in the furnace.¹ Because I would have the courage and the morals, whatever you want to call it, to oppose, to be a resister and have the courage to do that, because I can't say I could or couldn't. But I hoped I could.

MH: Tell me about what's going—Mauthausen was the only camp you saw?

WE: No, no. Later on, after—

MH: No, I mean as you're coming through Germany.

WE: Oh, yeah, that's the only one I'm aware of, yes.

MH: What did you know about the camps at that point?

WE: Nothing, not a thing.

MH: How come the Army didn't tell people? Did you ever find out?

WE: Beats the hell out of me. Beats the hell out of me.

MH: So what—

WE: And the officers didn't know it, either. Everybody I talked to was totally in amazement that this kind of a thing exists and we didn't know it.

¹ This film, *Nightmare's End: The Liberation of the Camps*, was a television documentary directed by Rex Bloomstein for Channel 4 England, which aired on the Discovery Channel in 1995.

MH: You're in the 11th Armored. You're riding in what, a Jeep or a tank?

WE: In a Jeep.

MH: Okay. And tell me about the day you come to Mauthausen.

WE: We were on our way—our orders were to get to a certain place on the river, because the Russians were coming, and we were to meet them there.

MH: The Elbe River?

WE: Yeah. We were to get there as quickly as possible, and that's all that's on our mind. We're soaring along, and all of sudden—

MH: How fast—when you're in a convoy with tanks, how fast do you go?

WE: Depends on the roads. You know, maybe sometimes only ten miles [per hour], fifteen. Not too much. These convoys were pretty long, too. But here it is, and we don't know what the hell's going on.

MH: What do you see?

WE: The first thing I saw: skeletons walking in certain kinds of uniforms.

MH: Barbed wire?

WE: No, no, this is outside the camp.

MH: Outside the camp.

WE: The guards had left, except some—

MH: The SS.

WE: Yes, except some, because we did capture some of the officers. What they did—I wasn't there, but I did see the officers lined up. It's in May, early May; there's still snow on the ground. And they've got these guys—it seemed like about a dozen of them—and no shoes and socks, bare feet. And, as I understand it, they told them they were free to go.

MH: SS.

WE: Yeah, the prisoners.

MH: Wait—

WE: The Americans—

MH: The Americans told who?

WE: The prisoners, the SS, they can go. And after they were gone about five minutes, they screamed out, "They've escaped! Help us get them back." And I understand they were brought back piecemeal, because the prisoners just devoured them, you know, like piranhas. It was horrible.

MH: They ripped them apart.

WE: Just, you know—well, it was a savage life. It was a savage world.

MH: Did you see that?

WE: No. I heard about it. I had gone into the camp for my own look at it, and then I came back and reported. And what I said was that—because I had gone out into the field, and I saw—

MH: But the first thing you see, you're coming down the road—

WE: All right, I see these skeletons walking out of the camp—

MH: Walking out of the camp?

WE: Right. And I go up to three or four of them, and I say, “What goes on?” and it’s in German.

MH: How do you say it in German?

WE: “*Was ist los hier?*” You know, “What’s going on? *Was ist los hier?*” And they died in front of me, in fright.

MH: They died of fright?

WE: Yeah. God, they were so close to dead anyway. These people—you’ll see scenes in here.

MH: Tell me what happens. You’re standing there on the road.

WE: All of a sudden, the guy collapses, or somebody else gives him a piece of bread or something to eat. He dies. I mean, you don’t do that.

MH: How does he die?

WE: I don’t know. He just falls down, and he’s gone. These people—

MH: Did you bend over and try and see if you can do anything?

WE: You know, it’s so hard to tell, because we’re in such amazement and such confusion, we don’t know how to make anything out of this.

MH: Are you with somebody else at that point?

WE: Yeah, my driver. And he doesn't speak German. But it's so hard to describe, because the condition of these people, they are obviously civilians and not soldiers. They don't have guns; we do. And they look at us, and they think we're Germans. I speak German, I'm in uniform, and I got a gun. And they're just scared shitless.

MH: No American flags around?

WE: No, that's movies. We don't—you know, we're just a bunch of hard-fighting guys on our way to a river to hook up with the Russians. We're pretty sure the war's almost over.

MH: Meantime, the convoy is still rolling or the convoy's stopped?

WE: Again, I don't know. I would imagine the convoy stopped where they began to see these people. Those that didn't maybe didn't see anything, but if you see the gates—it's like a prison, a regular prison.

MH: This was the stone wall place?

WE: Yeah. That's where they had the stone—the gravel pit down below, and that was the way they got rid of people, too.

MH: But in your Jeep, in terms of the convoy, the convoy's what, hundreds of vehicles?

WE: Oh, yeah.

MH: Where was your Jeep in the convoy?

WE: We're the lead group, pretty much, to get there and set up conditions.

MH: So, you're up front?

WE: I'd say there was probably a company of tanks ahead of me, a headquarters company.

MH: What's a company of tanks, forty?

WE: Yeah, something like that.

MH: You pull over to the side of the road when you see these people.

WE: Yeah, right, and I want to know what's going on. Talked German to them, and they can't handle that. In the meantime, my guy who's driving the jeep, he's feeding somebody, and he dies on him. When we went into the camp, there were still 20,000 people in that camp: inmates.

MH: That's a number you got later on, obviously.

WE: Right. One week later, when our Army went in with hospitals and got all set up, there were only 10,000 left. The rest died.

MH: The rest had died.

WE: Yeah.

MH: We couldn't save them.

WE: No way.

MH: So, you're talking to these people, they're dying, and what's going through your head? How old are you at this point?

WE: Eighty-four.

MH: No, no. I'm sorry, at that point?

WE: At that point, I think I'm about twenty years old, nineteen or twenty. Oh, I went crazy. I did. You know, when I went out into that field, and I saw these farmers out there, and I stopped them—I drove out there, and I said, "What goes on in that camp?" and they said they didn't know. I carried a Thompson machine gun, .45 caliber. I was just about ready to blast those people. Just about ready to blast them.

MH: Why didn't you?

WE: My jeep driver knocked my gun down. And then I went back in, and I said to the commanding officer, "I think every one of those people in that village should be made to come into this place, see what exists here, and then be made to clean it up. Bury those people with a proper ceremony and a proper grave, and make every one of them see what's going on here." And they did that.

MH: You're out with these people by the jeep. How long before you actually drive in—you drive in or walk in to the camp?

WE: Oh, I think we drove in.

MH: And then how long after—I mean, I'm trying to take this thing minute by minute.

WE: Within minutes, right. Because you're so confused now by what you've seen, you need to go in there and find out what the hell's going on here.

MH: You pull into the camp, and just describe the vision for me. What is it you see?

WE: All kinds of people scrambling around—GIs—in there. Some are throwing up and crying, and others are just, you know, in shock. It's so hard to describe.

MH: Any shooting?

WE: I don't know. I heard some gunfire. But, again, you know, you hear things subliminally, but you really don't remember everything.

MH: Do you see bodies lying around?

WE: I think so. Yeah, I think so, pretty sure. And when I saw the stone quarry and I found out from—I think we had some prisoners, Germans, who were not really SS. But there were also civilians working in the camp, and I made them give me some information. And they were telling me things, like they remembered when 200 American flyers had been captured, because their planes were coming back from a bombing raid and they had to parachute out because the plane had been kind of disabled. They had 200 of those they took to Mauthausen.

They started them one morning to go down and get those rocks, didn't stop them until they were dead; either they collapsed, they were shot, bayoneted or whatever. But all 200 of them were liquidated that way. That's what they did with the prisoners. How sadistic can you be? And how can you walk away with any kind of good feelings about the people who did it, much less than that's my ancestry. That's my ancestry.

MH: That has to screw with your head, really.

WE: Oh, my God, does it. Does it. I couldn't even—you know, in seventy-two [1972], I said to Liz [his wife], "Liz, I've got so much hatred in me. I have to get it loose, and I think the way to do it is to go back to Germany." And we did. I went to visit my brother, and I said, "I want to be in a room with just you and me." We stayed for six hours in that room, and I blasted him all over the map.

MH: Younger brother? Older brother?

WE: Older. He was the oldest of the four.

MH: How much older is he than you?

WE: Well, Herbert, I think, was about six years older than I was.

MH: What do you mean, you blasted him?

WE: I told him how I felt about the Germans and him and what they did. And every time he said to me, “Werner, I wasn’t a Nazi,” I felt like blasting his face with my fist. When we walked out of that room, we had settled some stuff, and I began my healing.

MH: Let’s come back to that; we’ll get to your healing in a minute. Come back to the camp. How long did you stay inside Mauthausen?

WE: Well, because we had that mission to go on, it was not too long. I know a certain part of the group had already been told to go on. I wasn’t that important, so I could stay longer. But I’ll guess that I spent three or four hours in the camp.

MH: Did you talk to more prisoners?

WE: Oh, yes.

MH: Tell me about that.

WE: I talked to a lot of people.

MH: Where were they from? Who were they? What were they?

WE: You know, I don’t remember, really, what I talked about, and I don’t think it made much sense, because all you wanted to do was just help these people, you know? And I don’t think that in any way—if I didn’t want to talk about it, I’m sure they didn’t.

MH: And you couldn’t help them. You couldn’t feed them, ’cause you saw it killed them; you could give them some water.

WE: I don’t think we gave them anything. Once we saw, and the word went around, “Don’t feed them; they’ll die on you,” everybody just took hands off. If he begged for water, I think most of us just said, “I can’t give you the water until a doctor comes here.” It took the Army almost a week to get all that in there.

MH: And people are dying right and left.

WE: Ten thousand in that one week. Half the people in there had died—that's 10,000 out of 20,000—before we could get in there and start saving lives.

MH: Did you go into the barracks?

WE: Oh, yeah.

MH: Tell me about it.

WE: Filth. Straw, no mattress, long planks; a number of people would stay on it. And, you know, when you got out in the morning, you had to line up outside. Let's say there were twenty people when you went to sleep; possibly there were only ten that woke up in the morning. They were dying all over the place, because—I don't know if you've ever seen any films, but this film shows you. You know, they're bones. That's all they are. We had seen killing. For Christ's sake, that was nothing new to us, but that was too hard to handle. I mean, we'd just start crying and throwing up. I don't know. It was horrible.

MH: But you didn't have the immediate impulse to run out of the place.

WE: That's a good question.

MH: I try with good questions.

WE: I don't know.

MH: Something kept you there.

WE: Yes.

MH: 'Cause you could've left.

WE: Yes, I could've. Yes, I could've.

MH: But you didn't.

WE: No, I didn't. I don't know. I wanted to help people, but I didn't know how.

MH: Did you touch them?

WE: The live ones?

MH: Yeah.

WE: You know, I don't know. I don't think so, because when you're looking at a person in that state, you either think to yourself, "If I touch him, he'll fall apart," or maybe it was even—I don't know, disgust—

MH: You're disgusted at the filth, fear of disease?

WE: Yeah, all those things. I don't think that was in my mind. I think it was more subconscious.

MH: They had to smell horrible, be living in filth.

WE: The whole place, the whole place, the whole place. But I do feel that I had a compulsion to go through that place without running out of there. Some guys did. And when I went out in the field, those people were in jeopardy, because that hatred was instilled in me at that point. And I had killed people; why the hell couldn't I kill them? The first is the hardest.

MH: Yeah, after that it's easier. I've heard from many guys who said that after Malmédy —

WE: Oh, yeah.

MH: And then after seeing the camps—

WE: Five hundred of them.

MH: They didn't take prisoners. They said, especially if they captured SS, "We'd take the shirt off, look for the tattoo, and we shot them."

WE: Look, we shot them anyway. Now, what're you gonna do? All right, you've captured, let's say, a dozen guys. You're a squad. You're fifteen. I got to put those guys some place away, right? I gotta take five guys to guard them. I can't afford to take five guys off the line. I can't do it. The one guy takes them, you hear five shots or ten shots or twelve shots, they come back, it's over. You know, war is war.

MH: Did anybody say—did anybody say—I've been in war. We carried a Geneva Convention card. We called it our "I fight clean" card. But did anybody ever say, "The Geneva Convention says, 'Once you take prisoners, you're responsible for them. You can't shoot them'"?

WE: Not to my knowledge. Not to my knowledge. You mean an officer, maybe?

MH: Officer, yeah. I'm surprised at how many guys have said, "We just killed them. Once they were prisoners, we killed them."

WE: Right. I mean, this is a war. This is a war. My main purpose in this war is for me to live. For me to do that, I need a lot of guys with me to help me. I'm not gonna take five of them with those people to guard them. Can't afford that. And after what we saw, we did have hatred. You know, I came home, I spent one whole year drunk. Finally I got lucky, and they sent me to the University of Chicago when [Carl] Rogers was coming up with a new concept of therapy. And he went so far as when he first—you came to him, or his group. The first thing they determined: was it better for me to talk to a woman or a man? In my case, it was a woman. Another buddy of mine, his was a man. That's how in-depth they were working. And it was one year of therapy.

MH: At the U of Chicago?

WE: Yeah. Yeah, I went to Roosevelt College, too, on the GI Bill. But it wasn't until 1972 that I really went to work at destroying my hate. And then I got involved—because of Roosevelt, I started in Habitat for Humanity here in McHenry County. I set up a

volunteer program. I mean, I got so engrossed in volunteer work as my penance for what I'd done.

MH: You're at Mauthausen. The war ends a week later. Then where are you when the war ends, at the Elbe? You're in Austria?

WE: Yeah. We end the war there, but then we go to Bad Tölz, our group.

MH: Bad?

WE: Tölz.

MH: Tölz.

WE: It's a resort center. Gorgeous place in the mountains; it's a lake. And there I was the *gauleiter*, the mayor, American mayor. I guess I stayed there for a while, and then I was transferred to 3rd Army headquarters in Munich, and I was told that I was way beyond going home and that I had the right to go home tomorrow if I want. And I said, "Well, no, I'll sign on for another year."

MH: Why?

WE: Well, I felt that at my age, I was going to have a good education by staying there, that maybe it would help my mental attitude, too. And those things did help, and I had some wonderful friends who were officers. I had a Captain Hush—he was Jewish—and I had Captain—well, whatever. I have some names I miss occasionally. But all those people helped me. And three of us wrote a play. There was *Brother Rat* showing, and we had ours, *Hotel Rhythm*, that we'd written. Then the captain told me that there were sixteen or seventeen CATs in Regensburg. CATs, civilian actress technicians. They were sent there voluntarily to help soldiers put on plays. So, he said, "Go get a Jeep and put on your best uniform, wear all your medals, and go down there with this letter." He writes me a letter, says that he'd like us to have six CATs for our play. And I did, and I came back with not six but three.

MH: Women.

WE: Women.

MH: Americans.

WE: Yeah, young girls. Barbara Brewer was one of them, and we got pretty close. And when I got discharged, her father worked for *The New Yorker* magazine, and they lived in Evanston. I went out there to see them. When I came home, my parents said, “How did it go?” I says, “I’ll never see Barbara again. I can’t live in that world. I just don’t fit. I’m an uneducated guy who has all these horrible memories and nightmares, and as it could work in Germany, it could never work in Evanston.”

MH: Back to Germany. How did you end up at the Nuremberg Trials?

WE: Well, that was through Captain Hush. When I was sent over there, I was sent there to the 3rd Army headquarters in Munich because of my German and my knowledge of the culture. He had a case of a GI, a black GI, who was having an affair with a German lady, and while they were doing it, the husband came home. It was a pretty bad situation, and I think he ended up killing the guy. So, we were supposed to defend the guy, and I was the —

See, in an Army case, there’s a board of six judges. They’re all from different countries and they’re high-ranking officers, and they have their own interpreter. The prosecution’s over here, and they had their own interpreter; and the defense over here. They have a German lawyer and an American lawyer of their choice. Then in the middle sits the interpreter, and anything that’s said in that room has to go to him, from German to English, English to German. If it doesn’t go through him, it doesn’t go in the records. That’s the job I had. And that was a really strenuous thing, so I’d work a day and get three days off. And then from there, it worked its way to the war trials.

MH: Whose trial did you sit in?

WE: The first one I started? The picture I saw there. He was the mayor of a town, small town, and the airplanes—when they would bomb a major city, on the way home, they’d drop the rest of their bombs for two reasons: They didn’t want to land with bombs; and the other was, hell, let’s get rid of them where they belong. And in that process, his wife and kids were killed. So, the next night, he got all the people in the village—the men—to come out with their pitchforks as these planes flew over. Some were disabled enough that the crew had to ditch, and they landed. When they landed, they were pitchforked to death,

every single one of them. Now, he was tried, and he was convicted guilty, and his penalty was to be hung—no, sorry, beheaded. That's the worst thing you—

MH: Beheaded?

WE: That's the worst thing you can do to a German. He would plead, "Please, hang me; please, shoot me. Don't decapitate me." And they would just plead that that's—that was his punishment.

MH: I didn't know the war crimes trials were using the guillotine.

WE: They were in this case. They were in this case. Maybe it was just the feelings that the commander of that area wanted to have done. But then from there, it got to the war trials. Most of my work with the war trials, though, was investigative. I would either go out in uniform or in civvies, maybe go to a tavern and sit there and gab, you know, and find out what I could find out. I picked up a number of people. And then, of course, the SS, Gestapo, they had that—and there's no way they can get that off.

MH: What do you do when you find a guy with a tattoo?

WE: Well, probably I'd take out my .45 pistol and put it to his head and tell him he's going to walk with me to a certain place, and he's not gonna give me any trouble. And then I would take him where he needed to be taken.

MH: You're by yourself doing this?

WE: No, usually if I'm in civvies, there's a GI outside or someplace in there who's my bodyguard, and—

MH: If you're in civvies and you're wearing a .45, that's hard to hide.

WE: Well, no, I'm not wearing a .45 then. When I'm in uniform, I'm wearing a .45. But my guard—sometimes it's two—they're there, and I never really had any problems. They were pretty submissive at that point.

MH: Did the war crimes trials you sat in on—any of the big names?

WE: No. Those were at Nuremberg. I operated out of Dachau. You mean [Hermann] Göring and that bunch?

MH: Yeah, those bunch.

WE: No.

MH: We didn't talk about—how'd you get to Dachau? From where?

WE: Well, first, from Bad Tölz, I went into a huge building that was in Munich. It was an old German barracks, and from there, then I had to do—the trials were headquartered in Dachau, and there they had provisions for my staying there.

MH: Where'd you stay, in the old officers' quarters?

WE: Yeah.

MH: Where were the trials, though?

WE: In Nuremberg—I'm sorry, in Dachau.

MH: In the camp itself?

WE: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

MH: Did they clear out a building?

WE: The pictures, you see—yeah.

MH: This is a building in the camp?

WE: Yes, yes, and there were Germans that could witness this. They wanted them there. They should hear these things.

MH: What were the crimes that the people were charged with that you sat in on?

WE: Most crimes that were being charged there had to do with acts they had committed against Americans, or as SS or Gestapo and that sort of thing. It could be across the board.

MH: And you're interpreting?

WE: I wasn't the only interpreter.

MH: Okay, but you're interpreting at these trials?

WE: Yeah.

MH: And you got this— (phone rings) Excuse me.

WE: Oh, sure.

Pause in recording

MH: And when you're sitting in these trials, you still have this rage burning inside you. What's it take to suppress it?

WE: Probably the lawyer.

MH: Move in a little.

WE: Yeah. Does this show the composition? Yeah, this is the defense over here. (looking at a photograph) Here, the judges are up here.

MH: How long do they have you on this duty?

WE: One day, three days off.

MH: But for a month, two months?

WE: Until the end of the trial. And then if there's a new trial, they need an interpreter, they'll say, "Werner, you're gonna do this." Or, "You're gonna go over into Brookhaven and stay a day or two wearing civvies, see what you can pick up. We're looking for some people over there, like Nazis." Whatever.

MH: How many months did you do this?

WE: Well, I would think that I did this until I left, but I did get involved in another thing with that play—which incidentally, after I left, played in Moscow, in Paris. It played to over a million people after I left. That was quite—

MH: What was it called?

WE: *Hotel Rhythm*.

MH: Was it a musical?

WE: Yeah. We had a lot of fun with that. So, more and more, these people that I were working for, the officers, we were all pretty friendly, and they all said, "Well, we'll kind of give you less to do, spend some more time on that play." And—

MH: Were you performing?

WE: No, I was kind of running the thing. And we had a really good thing going there. It was really interesting and fun.

MH: When do you finally come back to the States?

WE: I come back to the States in 1946. I think it is March.

MH: And you come back to Chicago?

WE: Yeah, yeah. My parents lived in Chicago.

MH: You get out of the service.

WE: Yeah. I got out of the service.

MH: What was your rank by the time you got out?

WE: Tech sergeant. Tech sarge.

MH: And so you get out of the service—

WE: And then I went to—you know, the GI Bill was really great. I would never have gone to college, never. But because I stayed a year longer, the colleges were just full. And every time I tried to place someplace, it was full. So, I found out about this college that was starting in Chicago, Roosevelt, which had no quotas. No quotas whatsoever, the only college in the United States that had no quotas.

MH: For?

WE: Jew, black, whatever you are. No quotas. And I went there. It was the first semester of its existence, on Wells [Street] downtown; and then later it bought that big building on Michigan Avenue. Today it's a university. And that put me in the middle of the civil rights movement.

MH: Nineteen forty-six?

WE: Oh, yeah, there was already starting. Not big, but it was fiery in the school, because all these kids that are—and I remember that we were really out there fighting for equal rights for the blacks. In order to understand, we would spend nights out there with families and learn about them. And I just got so involved that, ever since then, I've just been involved in civil rights things.

MH: But you said you stayed drunk for a year.

WE: I was still, you know, not drunk enough to go to school. I didn't do too well my first few semesters. I almost flunked out. But the drunk was—you know, I don't know how to explain that, either.

MH: Today they call it self-medication for pain.

WE: Is that right?

MH: Yeah. You were self-medicating.

WE: I can believe that. It was horrible for me. I don't know. There were so many factors: my being German, my family being there. I didn't have a family here except my brother, mother, and father.

MH: Did you know you were screwed up?

WE: That's a good question. I think if you knew that, you were on your way to recovery, yeah? No?

MH: At what point did you know?

WE: That I was screwed up?

MH: Yeah.

WE: Well, that's interesting. I never thought of it. I would imagine when I first sat down with the woman that was going to be my counselor, and when I was leaving, I said to her, "You know, I don't understand this." She said, "What's the matter?" I said, "I did 90 percent of the talking. Why didn't you say more things?" And she laughed and she said, "That's the kind of therapy we practice. You were curing yourself." And it was true.

MH: What were the kinds of things you had to unload?

WE: I think most, I was ashamed about being a German and of my relatives. I had another thing. I'm trying to remember what that was. I didn't like myself, didn't like myself at all. I always remembered that I took life, and to this day, I still can't live with that. I'm not for gun control; I'm for complete destroying of all the guns. We don't need them. And I think I'm constantly trying to pay my penance. I was raised a strict Catholic—you know, Hail Marys and all that when you sinned, vow to never sin again, but you do. And I lost that religion. I lost all religions. I became an atheist. Today, I'm a deist. I'm a deist. I'm in church 24/7. And I'm always acting in that context.

MH: Did you lose your belief in God?

WE: I don't concentrate on that. Whether he exists or doesn't, it doesn't make any difference. If he does, that's wonderful. I haven't done anything that he would not like, or I try not to. And if there isn't, that's okay.

MH: Did you question—you see Mauthausen, you see those images, you see what was happening and did you ask the obvious question, "If there is a God, how could he let this happen?"

WE: Oh, yes.

MH: When did you start asking that question?

WE: Well, I know this: that one time before a major engagement, we were told we could all go to a service of our denomination. I went to the Catholic, and the priest did nothing but berate the other side and that they should pay for this crime and we should all be preserved and not be hurt, not die. And I kept sitting there thinking, "What the hell's going on here? My two brothers over there, they're probably hearing the same thing,

except now I'm the bad guy. What's going on?" I think that was the first time that I really began to question. And that doesn't happen overnight. That's a process.

MH: Was this before the Bulge or after the Bulge that that specific thing happens?

WE: Probably just before. It might've been a little before that, because the Hürtgen Forest was another biggie. Maybe that was the one, because I never went back. And it made me really start thinking, and it takes a long time. It does.

MH: So, you're back in this country, you're in therapy. What do you do?

WE: I go to school.

MH: For how long?

WE: Well, I went to school, I think, for five years. I know what I did. I had a very dear friend, Donald, and he was in California. He was going to one of the universities there, and I was at that time still at Roosevelt, and he said, "Werner, how would you like to come to California and we'll join the 52/20 Club." Now, the GI Bill gave us four years, and no more, of college. One year for every year in service, two months for every month in combat, so I had the full forty-eight.

The 52/20 is unemployment. For fifty-two weeks, you could be unemployed and get twenty dollars a week. I think it's a week—no, two weeks, something like that. And they have to find you a job of your decision. You could pick three jobs. If they couldn't find you any one of those three jobs, you could stay on it until they do. And, of course, you pick things like "chicken sexer" and you knew they weren't going to.

MH: (laughs)

WE: We lived in an attic on Bonnie Brae and Wilshire Boulevard with a hotplate, and he read all the French and I read all the Russians, from [Aleksandr] Pushkin all through. In one year's time, we did nothing but read. Then, when we went down to collect our twenty dollars, then we might hitchhike to Tijuana and spend a couple days there, or Las Vegas or whatever, and then come back to reading. And I never forget that. That was one of the best things I ever did, I think.

MH: Are you still fighting the demons at the same time?

WE: Yeah. Yeah. I wonder why I picked Russian. That's interesting, too. Well, anyway, I still fight the demon. Liz'll tell you I'll wake up at night screaming or something. I don't think you can ever cure yourself of that. I can't. All the guys you've talked to, if they've been able to cure themselves of all the things they did—

MH: Some yes, some no. Most don't put it in terms of the "the things I did." They put it in terms of "the things I saw."

WE: Ah. That's interesting.

MH: You may actually be the first person to use the phrase "the things I did."

WE: Is that interesting. I feel that, though. I think that may be the cure for me. I really do. I think the Rogers group—and it was so real, I mean, to have actually talked to a woman that I would sometimes think to myself, "Yeah, I never would've said that to a man." And the Rogers people, they did a good job.

MH: What happens after Los Angeles?

WE: Then I came home, and I met Liz. And we met in April and got married in September. It was a short—we both knew what we wanted, and we're married now for fifty-seven years.

MH: Kids?

WE: Three boys, six grandkids.

MH: What did you do for work?

WE: I published magazines for McGraw-Hill before I started—I first started as a subscription trainee, to go out and get subscriptions for the magazine. Then I was given a promotion and told that I could go out and sell advertising. I would have a quota of three

half-pages, which is nothing, and before my time schedule, I had sold eight, I think. So, they gave me a territory, then they said, “We’re going to start a new magazine, and you’re gonna go out and research it.” So, I spent a year researching it, and then I became a salesman for advertising for it, then the sales manager, and then I became publisher.

MH: What was the magazine?

WE: This one was *Actual Specifying Engineer*. It went to consulting engineers who did electrical, mechanical, heating ventilator, air conditioning, plumbing and so forth, and it was a good magazine. It started out in October and it’s still being published. And I enjoyed it. To me, that was fun.

MH: How did the war experience keep coming up?

WE: Oh, associations. Sometimes things would happen that would remind you, or you’re watching the news or something. Various ways.

MH: What happened when the Korean War broke out?

WE: I don’t remember, but I’m sure something did.

MH: What about Vietnam?

WE: Oh, God, Vietnam, I was so active. I told my sons—only two, because Matt was too young—“I’ll take you guys to Canada, but I’m not gonna let you go in the Army.” And they didn’t. They both got low draft—is it high draft numbers or low? Far removed from —

MH: The high draft numbers don’t go.

WE: Yeah, they both got high. But I was convinced that I would take them to Canada, and even live there if we had to. I became very anti-war. I remember a friend of mine said, “Why don’t you join the American Legion?” I didn’t want to join anything like that, but he convinced me, so we went. This was a building way up, the second or third floor; top floor is where there was a big hall, and that’s where they had the meetings. And then I was there, and they had some controversial subject come up, and a guy from the rear

yells, “Free beer in the basement.” Everybody but a few run down into the basement. We stay. Then they debate a very important thing, get the vote they wanted, then they cut off the beer. And that’s when I said, “I’ll never join the American Legion.”

Then there was a group called the American Veterans, and that was a very liberal group. I joined that. That’s about it. I don’t go to reunions, never wanted to. I just don’t want to have anything to do with killing and war and soldiers. I’d like to see the world become a peaceful place.

MH: What did you do during the whole civil rights movement, during that era?

WE: You mean for work? Well, a friend and I started a business. We would pick up tailoring from all the haberdasheries and the cleaners. We had at one time nine tailors working for us, and everybody was making money but the two of us, because the costs just added—when we couldn’t make the payroll, Ernie, my partner, who was a tremendous poker player, would go out and play poker and make the payroll. (laughs)

MH: Oh, jeez. And this is when, the sixties [1960s]?

WE: Yeah, it was in the sixties [1960s]. And then I left—we closed it up, in debt. And then I got a sales job selling nuts, screws and bolts in Indiana. I want to tell you something: with twenty-eight competitors out there, I couldn’t even get a quote. I mean, I couldn’t even get a quote. So, then I started to meet the salesmen, the other ones, and I’d always ask them the question, “Who are the crabs in the territory? The hard-to-get-along-with guys, so I don’t stumble in there,” pretending I want to know so I won’t go there. And I got the names and all the things I needed on all the crabs. And when I went to see them, after a while, they’d say, “Anybody who can put up with me has got to be a good person,” and I made a pretty good business out of it.

But I didn’t like selling nuts, screws and bolts anyway, so I heard about this job because Liz had once worked for a company, and they advertised in one of these magazines. I said, “I think I’ll go there,” so I did and they hired me as a subscription sales trainee. And I enjoyed it so much I worked my way up the ladder. In those days, a lot of magazines were owned by one guy, and he had maybe two or three magazines in a stable. When he died, the widow didn’t know what the hell to do with it, so the McGraw-Hills and the Connors—the big ones would come in and buy it up. That’s what happened with us. He died, and she sold it to McGraw-Hill, and then I went with McGraw-Hill.

MH: You’ve made that one trip back to Germany?

WE: Oh, no, we've gone repeatedly.

MH: How's that?

WE: Well, he's died now, my older one [brother], and all the family. Many of those that are still living were too young to be involved in that whole—that was the first thing I learned, you know. I was into mass hate, and then one day I figured it out. How the hell can I blame some young fifteen-year-old kid? He had nothing to do with it. And you can only feel guilty about the kids, the ones who were guilty, and they were the adults. So, that was all part of the healing process. I think it was to my good. I think I came out of it a better person, even with having had the experiences I had.

I know at one time, there was a big riot in the South Side of Chicago, We were at a party and the phone rang, and it was from somebody that knew somebody who was at this party. About six college professors, who were in the riot area, were being beaten up by some of the rioters, and the police came and arrested everybody. But they threw the professors in the same big cell with the ones who were beating them up. That's gentle, isn't it? And we need to get down there and bail them out. So, we collected a lot of money. We had six cars, and we all drove down. Well, most of them were all veterans. One of them was a paratrooper.

MH: The professors?

WE: No, the ones going down. So, when we got there, the three lawyers said, "We'll go in and negotiate it and get the deal done; you guys wait out here." All of a sudden, six guys come out of the station and they have these shiny, pointed shoes—you know they're detectives—and everybody breaks and runs.

In the process, I trip, and they get to me. And they put all kinds of—I had twenty-eight stitches put in my mouth. Perry, the paratrooper friend, grabbed me, threw me on his shoulders, he's running down the street and they're chasing him, and a black cab driver stops his cab and yells, "Throw him in the back seat!" and he had opened the door. Threw me in the back seat and took me to a hospital. But that kind of stuff, you know, getting involved in those days, it was pretty rough. They weren't playing games. You know, that was my penance.

MH: How often do you have nightmares now?

WE: It depends. It depends. It seems to run in little clusters. Something can tick it off, and I don't even know what the hell it is. But all of a sudden—it was last night—I think it was last night or the night before. Liz had gotten up to go to the bathroom, and I heard that, and then next thing I know, there's someone coming at me in a uniform. And I start screaming. So, I don't know what triggers it.

MH: Have you ever gone to the VA and said you have post-traumatic stress disorder?

WE: No, I haven't. Do they give—what do they do for that?

MH: First of all, they'll give you money.

WE: You're kidding?

MH: No.

WE: I'd rather have it be given to somebody else who needs it more.

MH: They're not going to run out.

WE: No?

MH: No. But they do have therapy for it.

WE: Yeah, I don't know. I don't know if therapy can erase it totally. It's too big a happening, you know? I mean, I don't know. I can't take it as a minor thing that I took life. I just can't. I can't live with that. I mean, I just—I don't think I can ever get that out of my head. Besides, at eighty-four—

MH: When you saw what those people that you killed were doing to other people, to innocent people—

WE: Well, I'm not just talking about that. I'm talking about on the line, you know. I remember one guy—I don't know why—I took his wallet out of his pocket and looked, and there are pictures of his family and his kids. You know, you don't forget that. I didn't know him from whatever. He never hurt me; he never did anything to me. It's so insane to have these wars.

MH: What do you think about Iraq?

WE: I think it's terrible. Oh, my God. You know, my oldest granddaughter married Jason. Jason's parents are both pharmacists, but they made these kids—his brother, too—to join the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] and commit themselves to six years in the Army to get free college educations. They could've paid for that. So, Jason graduates on Sunday; Monday, he's indoctrinated into the Army, and he asks me to make his first salute. I'm the only one that's civilian; all the rest of them are asking officers. And now he's in Iraq for fifteen months.

He's going out on a patrol in a Humvee with three other guys, and just before they leave, he's called by headquarters. They want to talk to him about something and do something, so he appoints somebody else to go in his place. And all four of them are killed. All four. He was home for eighteen days. I told him and Megan, "As much as I would love to see him, I don't want to have you spend an extra minute talking to me, to Liz, or anybody else, for that matter. Just the two of you, stay together for the eighteen days." And they did. They gave me a phone call, I had a nice little chat with him, and then they went to Hawaii. And so they spent the whole eighteen days together, which is only right.

But anyway, I just think it's atrocious. It's not a war for purpose or principle. It's a war for oil. That's what it is, I think. That's what we're doing. I think it's the second-richest country that has oil. How do you feel? I shouldn't ask you—I'm not interviewing you. Go ahead.

MH: Well, what do you see as the future of this country?

WE: This country? God, if [Barack] Obama gets in, I think we're gonna have a good future. I think we'll get back to the folk theory. I think we've lost that, I really think we have. I don't think we have the independence we had and all these things, but I think it's retrievable. And I hope to hell he gets in.

MH: Do you think the Holocaust could happen again?

WE: Oh, yes.

MH: Why?

WE: It happens around now. It's happening. Rwanda, the Tutus, the Tutsis—I mean, it's still happening. It hasn't stopped. Because man's greedy, I think, and then somehow or another, the folk just seem to follow along. When's the day that they say, "No more, no more"?

MH: Anything else?

WE: No.

MH: You sure?

WE: Yeah.

MH: Nothing else you want to say.

WE: I appreciate what you're doing, and I think you do a good job of it. You make me want to talk. I also will guarantee I'll have a nightmare tonight. That's my remembrance for you. (laughs)

MH: And with that—

WE: How many have you interviewed?

MH: We'll turn the tape recorder off.

WE: How many have you interviewed?

MH: I'm in the sixties at some point. It'll be a hundred by the time I finish.

WE: God, that must be fascinating.

End of interview