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Eliot Hermon oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, May 12, 2008

Eliot Hermon (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: Okay, first of all, give me your name and spell it, please.

Eliot Hermon: Okay, my name is Eliot Hermon, H-e-r-m-o-n.

MH: And your address?

EH: And the Eliot is one L and one T. We were a very poor family, couldn't afford more. In fact, we were so poor the neighbors had me and my sis—no, no, my parents had my sister; she was an only child.

MH: Your address, please.

EH: Where do I live? ...

MH: And your phone number?

EH: House....

MH: Speaking of telephones.

EH: Yeah.

Pause in recording

MH: Okay, your phone number again?

EH: ... And the cell, which is the one I like people to call me on whom I like....

MH: And your date of birth?

EH: December 25, 1925.

MH: Which makes you?

EH: Eighty-two plus.

MH: Eighty-two plus, okay.

EH: Born at 8:25 at night, which my father tells me ruined my parents' plans to go out for dinner on Sunday.

MH: You should have thought about it nine months earlier.

EH: Well, I don't know whether they had it down to the exact time.

MH: I see.

EH: However, I was born in the Williamsburg Maternity Hospital. They closed it down after I was born, I understand; they reopened and kept closing it down. It's gone now. We

lived in—my parents had a fourth floor walk-up apartment in East New York, in Brooklyn. Shortly after that we moved over to East Flatbush, and from that point until I got married—not counting Army time—we never lived more than half a mile from the intersection of Church Avenue and Utica Avenue. If you know Brooklyn—

MH: I don't.

EH: Okay, you check it out. It is an intersection where the streetcars crossed. The fact is that from that point on, never lived more than eight and ten blocks from that intersection. Moved on both sides, but that's something else.

I'm one of six cousins of my generation that I know of who served either during World War II, Korea, or Vietnam. My cousin Elaine went in before me, she was a WAC [Woman's Army Corps] in the Air Force; she made corporal. My cousin Arnie went into the Coast Guard and ended up as Coast Guard Officer Commanding, Binghamton, New York, which is landlocked. Don't ask me what they need Coast Guard for. I joined the National Guard. Well, I'm also the seventh generation to serve. I joined the National Guard the day after I was fourteen years old.

MH: You were allowed to join then?

EH: No way was I allowed to join. However, in 1939, if a battery or company commander, a troop commander, did not have—I think it was 65 percent of his TO, any strength on the floor—he didn't get paid for the drill. So, they turned a blind eye to guys who had a blind eye, who had asthma, who might be a little underage. I know I did not look like I was eighteen, but I had a birth certificate that said that I was. So, I joined.

My father had given me my first .22, a single shot lever action, when I was nine years old, taught me how to shoot. When I was twelve, he bought me a Krag carbine. So, I had a real rifle, which I learned to shoot. He gave me a lot of training. He had joined the National Guard himself when he was fifteen, his father's old artillery battery up in Worcester, in Massachusetts.

Let's see. I joined the Guard, we went away—and of course nobody knew that I was in. My mother didn't know, my father didn't know, except my father took me aside one day shortly afterwards, and he said that if my work in school suffered, he was going to go down and see that I got my butt got kicked out of the Guard. But I maintained my grades. I was going to Townsend Harris High School, which was part of CCNY [City College of New York]. It was a prep—they called it Preparatory High School of the College of the

City of New York. It was an honor to get in: you took a test. They took 200, 250 a semester.

I did all right, went to summer camp. I had a radio operator's license at that point. I went into the National Guard as a radio operator, but they trained me to shoot a water-cooled .50. It was an anti-aircraft outfit, 212th Coast Artillery, anti-aircraft. We went up to camp. I was qualified as a radio operator; there was no problem with doing that. I knew my drill; there was no problem with that. I qualified with my firearm, and I came back from camp promoted from recruit to private, at which point my father, who didn't know I was in the National Guard, took me to see friends on Governors Island.

Before we did, he went up into the closet and he pulled down a box that I had not really noticed, and he pulled out the hat that he bought when he was in the National Guard and served on the Mexican border in 1914, and had worn through World War I. And he gave that to me, which kind of felt like a medal. And he took me to Governors Island. Now, we were peculiar, because I had been issued a pair of straight-legged pants and regular field shoes, but I had also been issued a pair of enlisted man's boots and britches. We were coast artillery, not horse artillery; I don't know why I had them. So, my dad had me dress up in the boots and britches. My mother made sure that my uniform was cleaned and pressed. She didn't know I was in the Guard, but she made sure that it was cleaned and pressed. And my dad took me to Governors Island and took me for a tour of Governors Island. And then, he took me to meet his friend.

My dad was a mail carrier. Oh, I don't know how to describe him: lean, had a big beak of a nose, looked more like an American Indian than like a Jewish boy, to be honest. They took him for Italian or Native American. And he made friends; wherever he went, he had friends. Apparently he made friends, either during the Mexican Border campaign or he came to the attention of the same guy, a colonel who was on [John J.] Pershing's staff. Guy's name was Drum, Hugh Drum. That's Fort Drum, New York now.

In 1939, 1940, General Drum was the commanding general of the—I believe it was the Second Service Command. And he had a headquarters on Governors Island, or at least he was there on Governors Island. So, my dad took me there to meet his friend. Here I am—I am a private, I am fourteen and a half years old, and I sat there with my mouth locked shut, stiff as a board, unable to make a sound while my dad and this three star general sat there and exchanged stories and talked to one another.

Afterwards, General Drum took us to lunch at his table in the officers' mess. It might have been the general officers' mess; I don't know if there was one. And he said to me afterwards, "You know, I wanted your father to become an officer during World War I, but he said he didn't want to do it. And I told him if he would have stayed in, I would

have seen he went to West Point, and he could have made it. Now it looks like we are going to be going to a war very, very soon. There's a war on in Europe, and we're going to be in it. And I'm afraid you're going to be in it. I know you going to make us just as proud as I was of your dad. So, you don't fail us. I'm going to keep an eye on you." And he did.

In September of forty [1940], they instituted the draft. In October of forty [1940], the National Guard was federalized. And the old man called me up in front of his desk on the bridge. He and the first sergeant were there, and they said, "When are you going to be eighteen?" I said, "Sir?" He said, "Private Sandler, when are you going to be eighteen?"

MH: Private Sandler?

EH: Private Sandler. I said, "Um—" He said, "Tell me, Sandler, did you—how did you change your birth certificate so well?" And I said, "I didn't change my birth certificate, sir." He says, "Well, it says you're over eighteen." I said, "Sir, I didn't change the date on that; I borrowed somebody else's birth certificate." So, Private Sandler was told he was out on his—well, he said, "Well, when are you going to be sixteen?" And I had to admit that I wasn't fifteen yet. And he said that was a little bit too young to risk taking me in on active service, because at that time if you were sixteen or older and you managed to get into active federal duty, you could not ask to get out, and your parents couldn't ask to have you discharged. If you were under sixteen, you could just simply say, "I'm under sixteen," and they would discharge you.

So, I got what they called a bobtailed discharge, discharged without character. They cut the bottom off the old discharge form, and the bottom inch, inch and a quarter was where character of discharge was listed. And I was sent out. But I couldn't stop attending drills after the unit went off to service, because my discharge didn't come through. Didn't come through until—I guess it was April, beginning of May of forty-one [1941]. So, I had to report to the State Guard unit that took over the armory.

When my discharge finally came through, I had been going in to the State Guard on their drill night and I had been going in on headquarters night, and they had made me an acting sergeant. I managed to enlist in the State Guard. So from 1939, December of 1939, until the middle of November of 1989, I wore one or another uniform of either the federal service, the Army Reserve, the Army, the Army National Guard, or the New York Guard. I was in uniform for just six weeks short of fifty years. I managed to outlast all those bastards, and I made brigadier general. I never expected it; I thought it would be wonderful to be sergeant before I was finally discharged.

Let's see, where did we start? I got discharged. I finished high school in forty-two [1942], started—we went automatically into City College if we wanted to. I started in City, pre-engineering. I went for three semesters, including the summer. They had the ASTRP, the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program, at that time, which you could join if you were in college and if you were over sixteen. They had also an ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] unit, which was assigned and taking classes at City College.

So, I convinced my mother—my father knew what I was doing, but I convinced my mother that if she would approve my signing into the Army Reserve, they would let me go to school with the ASTRP and they wouldn't call me to active duty until I graduated. I had to go full time, which meant two and half years to get a degree, and then they would draft me. They would take me in, and as an engineer they were going to make me a PFC [private first class]. Of course, if I had a college degree, as an engineer I was supposed to be a lieutenant, but that's another story.

My mother was taken in by it. She figured, well, I'd be at least eighteen and a half before they called me, and the war would be over by then. My father knew better. He'd already tried to convince my mother to let him go into the Marine Corps. They were offering Postal employees the opportunity to come into the Marines as gunny, or as—what would it be, warrants?—to run fleet post offices for the Marine Corps. My dad had volunteered, and my mother said, “No way. If your son's going to be drafted someday, you're not going to be in the service, too.” Fortunately during World War I he served in the Army, so I didn't try and join the Marines. At any rate, as soon as I was seventeen I volunteered for active duty. They accepted me and January of forty-three [1943] I went in on active duty.

MH: Why the reference before—when I talked about the ASTP, you said, “You must have been talking to a lot of Jewish guys”?

EH: Okay, I'll come to that. (laughs) That's a good—this is the Army's attitude towards Jews, particularly Jews from New York City who went to City College. I went in, and the morning that I left, my dad left the house at five o'clock in the morning to get to work. He woke me up to say goodbye, and he gave me the best advice that an old soldier can give a new one. He said, “Keep your eyes and ears open, keep your mouth shut”—I've never been able to do that—“and whatever you do, don't volunteer.”

This is from a guy who volunteered at fifteen for the National Guard, and when World War I started and the draft started—he was in New York City by that time—he went down and tried the Marines. They wouldn't take them; he had a hernia of some kind. So, he went to the Navy; they wouldn't take him, he had a hernia. Went to the Army; they wouldn't take him, he had a hernia. Then they started the draft, he volunteered for the draft. And this is the guy that told me not go in—and then volunteered for surgery so he

could go overseas; otherwise they would have kept him in the States. Told me not to volunteer.

So I reported to—what was it?—Grand Central Palace, they called it, where everybody who was being drafted or enlisting was going in to their physicals, which I already passed. I went through the physical, and then there was a Navy chief at the end of the line. He looks at me and says, “You’re going to look great in a naval uniform.” I said, “No way, Chief.” And he says, “Listen, if I say you’re going in the Navy, you’re going in the Navy.” I said, “You’re a little bit too late; I’m already in the Army.” And then he took a look, and he says, “Eh, too bad; you would have made a good sailor,” which was a nice compliment, I thought.

I volunteered for active duty, and I went off. I went through basic, which I could go through blindfolded and walking backwards. And—

MH: Where did you have basic?

EH: Oh, I was down at [Fort] Benning.

MH: Okay.

EH: I went back and forth to Benning a number of times. So, anyway, I’m down in Benning, and somebody comes around and they’re checking our 201 files, our personal files. They come up with the fact that I’d been studying French from the time I was in the third grade. So, they wanted to know if I could speak French. I said, “Yeah, I speak French. I can read and write and understand French.”

“Any other languages?”

“Yeah.” I grew up in a mixed neighborhood. We were Jews, Italians, Irish, some Germans, a Swedish family lived behind us, Norwegian—a couple of Norwegian families across the street. I had a buddy, Giorgio, whose grandfather was a professor at Columbia [University] teaching Greek. So, I picked up Italian, I picked up some Greek, had a year of Latin in grade school. I had all kinds of good benefits.

So, they asked if I’d be willing to take some testing in languages. I said sure. I had figured, you know, maybe with this I can end up an interpreter. I’ll go to—if I speak

French, they'll have to send me to Europe when the time comes; they won't send me to the Pacific. I didn't want to go there. So, they sent me up to—I think it was [Camp] Holabird—and they tested me. By the time I got through, I was fluent in French, I was reasonably fluent in Italian, I had some German. My folks used Yiddish as a secret language that they didn't want my sister and me to learn, but I guess I had the sound of Yiddish in my ear and I picked up German. So, one thing or another, they finally said, "Are you willing to volunteer for hazardous duty?"

I said, "What kind of hazardous duty?"

"Well, you're going to have to jump out of an airplane." They didn't tell me why.

I said, "Yeah, I think I would do that."

"Fine." They promoted me to sergeant, and I discovered that I had volunteered for a Jedburgh team.

MH: A what team?

EH: Jedburghs. Jedburghs were teams—

MH: J-e-d?

EH: J-e-d-b-u—I think it was b-u-r-g-h. It's named after a town in Scotland where they trained most of the Jedburghs. The teams were supposed to jump into France ahead of the invasion and provide information as to German movements, troop locations and so on. Kind of hazardous, but fluency in French was what they were after for that. So, I had to jump out of an airplane. They assigned me to a team. We had a light colonel, let's see—I'm trying to remember. We had a couple of captains and five sergeants, and I was a buck sergeant.

They sent us down and we jumped. We trained with the 507 [Parachute Infantry Regiment], I think it was, at Fort Benning, my second trip to Benning. And I had to get pushed out of the airplane. I found out I'm an acrophobe. I couldn't jump out of airplanes. And I'm standing there—as long as we were jumping on the trolley or jumping from the tower it was real easy, because from the tower I had a roof over my head, I had

the canopy—which was open; I didn't know. But when I stood in the door of the plane, I discovered that I froze. The jumpmaster says, "Jump!"

I says, "I can't."

He says, "Jump! Step back."

I said, "Push me out."

He says, "What?"

"Please, push me out!" Well, I won't say that he pushed me hard and I won't say exactly where, I'll just say it was somewhere around the—relatively close to the small of my back. But he gave me a shove with his boot, a shove, and I swear I cleared the wing tips straight out.

MH: (laughs) Yeah.

EH: Afterwards, we gathered the chutes, they picked us up in trucks and they brought us back, and he took me aside and he said, "Are you going to freeze again?"

I said, "You know, I don't know. I think I might, but if I do, will you push me again?"

He says, "You know, we're not supposed to do that."

I said, "I know, but if I want to stay with my team I have to make the jumps."

He said, "You're crazy. All right, we're all crazy, or we all wouldn't be here. I'll push you if you need pushing." On my fourth jump, I sprained an ankle, so they do what they always did—did you take jump training, by any chance?

MH: No, no, no, no.

EH: But if you jump—

MH: I'm of the school that says there's no reason to leave a perfectly good airplane.

EH: To jump. That's my—that's been my line ever since. There's no reason to leave a properly functioning airplane before it lands all by itself safely, while you sit comfortably.

MH: Sort of.

EH: At any rate—well, you didn't fly in C-47s to be comfortable, only on airliners.

When you make a jump, if you sprain your ankle they give you a shot of Novocain to prevent swelling: not to prevent pain, but to prevent the swelling. They strap you—strap the ankle very, very tightly. You put your boot back on, and you can walk on it without discomfort.

I made the fifth jump less than twenty-four hours later, and this is a night jump, and I came down in a tree. I'm up high enough in the tree that by the time I lowered myself to the end of my harness I'm still like fifteen, eighteen foot above the ground. Well, you can drop that far and not get hurt, if you're trained. The only trouble was I favored the sprained ankle. So, I sprained the other one, and I got my jump wings leaning on a pair of crutches. The team went into town that night to celebrate. One of the other guys was really an outstanding athlete; he used to do thirty, forty one-handed push-ups for fun. He stepped off a curb and snapped his ankle.

But shortly after, I was transferred out, and a little bit later I got a letter from General Drum. And what I remember—all my stuff has disappeared over the years. What I can remember his writing was something to the effect that, "I have no intention of having to write a letter to your dad and tell him that you've been captured by the Germans and tortured to death. So, I'm having you transferred out of the Jedburgh team."

And where did he have me transferred? He transferred me to the inspector general, to the office of the inspector general—the inspector general, the inspector general from Washington. You know, the guy that everybody—he was the guy that God would walk over and ask—if he needed some advice he'd ask the IG, and the IG would check out to see that his robe was clean, you know, before he'd answer him. At any rate, they assigned me to various outfits as a private, as a PFC, as a sergeant: places that they had stories that

they wanted to either confirm or find were untrue. So, I moved around as an IG man for a while.

In 1944, in January of forty-four [1944], the ASTP down at Fort Benning had its basic training center. They formed a battalion that had—at least 90 percent of the men assigned to that battalion were—and this is why I told you about Jews before—were Jews from New York City who had, in general, at least been accepted at Brooklyn College, Queens College—City College, in other words. They were Jews from New York who had gone to City College, to CCNY. And to the Army, that meant that they were communists.

So, they're going to send somebody in to watch for communist activity. Well, what does the IG have for something like that?

MH: In forty-four [1944] they were looking for communists?

EH: They still—a Jew who went to City College was likely to be a communist, especially if he was from New York. This was a mindset that goes back to the 1930s.

So, I go through, and they check and they find out that they've got Sergeant Hermon. Now, as I say, 90 percent of this unit is Jewish. They're eighteen year olds. They're all 5'6", 5'7", 5'7½", 5'8". They're all dark-haired, dark-eyed—they're typical Eastern European Jews, in general. And what has the IG got? The IG has a bunch of guys, they have all these—oh, 5'10", 5'11", 6'1" blond, blue-eyed, Mormon officers. And they're going to fit right in, right? You know, you're going to put like them as a private and they're going to believe he's a private, and they were thirty years old.

And somebody remembers that they've got Sergeant Hermon. Now, Sergeant Hermon is Jewish, from New York City, from Brooklyn, and he went to City College, and he scored—what was it, 147?—on his AGCT [Army General Classification Test]? So, he would have been assigned as soon as he was drafted. Well, so they got papers that say he's just been—well, he's just enlisted and we're going to send him into this unit.

Well, at that point—let's see. From the time I was ten until I was sixteen, I took clarinet lessons. My teacher was a guy named Lenny Sherlin. Lenny Sherlin ended up as principal of the Jefferson Music School or School of Music. He was a communist; he and his sister were registered communists. He had talked to me as a youngster about friends of his who

have been in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.¹ As far as I was concerned, that was something romantic.

I didn't know anything about communists. I wouldn't have known a communist if he came up and bit me on the kneecap. And I'm the guy they sent to listen for communists. Well, these kids weren't communists, they were simply kids from New York, and if any of their parents or grandparents belonged to the Arbeter Ring—that was not a communist organization; might have been socialist, but most of them joined it for the insurance and so the kids could go to camp, anyway. So, they sent me. I never found any communists in the unit. But that's why I say if you've been talking to ASTP, about 90 percent of them were probably Jewish boys.

MH: So, it's 1944—

EH: It's 1944. It was a fourteen week basic cycle and we'd just about finished basic, and they did away with the ASTP and everybody was assigned to infantry units.

MH: At that point, do you know anything about concentration camps, Holocaust, anything about that?

EH: Come on, I'm a kid, what do I know! I'm eighteen years old; I didn't know anything about that. I don't think any Americans, certainly at our level—there must have been rumors. I understand that [Henry] Morgenthau knew about it. And if he knew about it, people in his social class probably were aware of it, people he spoke to. I'm sure that there were many, many people—I understand that the people high up in Zionist circles were all aware of these things.

MH: But as a soldier who was bound for Europe—

EH: I knew nothing. I knew nothing. I wasn't bound for Europe. I was in the Army, that's all I knew.

MH: Okay.

¹The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was a volunteer group that fought in the Spanish Civil War for the republican forces against General Franco. Many of the individuals who fought in the Brigade were members of the Industrial Workers of the World.

EH: I was going to go wherever they sent me. But in May, they sent me over to Italy, to 6th Corps headquarters detachment. They sent me to the security platoon. I'm a staff sergeant by this time; I've been promoted because I was doing my job well. I was promoted to staff, they sent me over, and when I got over there, security platoon didn't want Staff Sergeant Hermon. Because if I came in there with my stripes, that meant that good old buck sergeant what's his name wasn't going to get his rocker and some corporal wasn't going to get his third stripe and some PFC wasn't going to get his second stripe and nobody's going to get a PFC stripe, so they didn't want me.

They stuck me on a motorcycle and I was running dispatches around that part of Italy for a while. We weren't in combat; we weren't under fire, at any rate. 6th Corps was, of course, under—I believe in combat. 6th Corps was in support of—was part of the invasion of southern France. The invasion of southern France was timed so that the landing in southern France would be made to the minute in conjunction to the landing in Normandy, and we were right on time. We landed; we made the invasion and landed in southern France on August 14 [1944], I believe, which was good coordination for some of the things the Army did. I mean June 6, August 14, right to the minute.

I made about three hours on the beach. I was still running around on a motorcycle carrying dispatches, and I was alongside of a gun—what had happened was that we made the—the Americans made their landing west of—I think it was west of Toulouse [*sic*].² The French landed at Cap Nègre. And the landing at—the Americans had very little or minor resistance. The French ran into very heavy armed resistance, French commandos and so on, and they sent some of the American troops that were going to be landing in the American area over to support the French.

So, I was alongside of a cannon, a howitzer, which is what the gun companies had, some infantry gun company and a cannon company. I was alongside of the gun, and the next thing I knew—let's see. My leg was on the ground, the motorcycle was on my leg, my leg was on the motorcycle, and the barrel of the artillery piece was on my leg. I was pretty badly broken up.

MH: What happened?

EH: Uh, I have no idea. It could have been an incoming or it could have been a muzzle burst, but the gun was flipped over onto me. So, my legs were pretty badly broken up. It was very early on; it was about three hours after the invasion had started. They hadn't had all that many casualties and they sent me out to a Navy hospital ship. And I was

²Hermon means Toulon. Toulouse is located in the Midi-Pyrénées region in southwest France.

fortunate, because there's an orthopedic surgeon who had time to put my legs back together. Then they sent me back to the States, and I ended up in Oliver General Hospital.

At Oliver General, the orthopedist who was assigned—to whom I was assigned—told me, looking at the x-rays, he said, "If it had been a combat wound like that, I'd have taken your legs off. There would have been no time to repair. That guy was an artist." He probably was a really, really fine orthopedic surgeon, because the only—I used to know when it was going to rain, that was about it. But the legs stood up pretty well until I went for Chinese food one day and God said, "You shouldn't be eating *treyf* [non-kosher food]." I tore the quadriceps tendons out of the top of my kneecap. (laughs)

MH: Oh, not good.

EH: There were bad stairs. I was almost sixty-five then, so the muscles were stronger than the bones.

Anyway, I came back to the States. When I came out of the hospital, they assigned me to a field artillery unit—where they didn't want Technical Sergeant Hermon because Technical Sergeant Hermon was now going to keep one more level from being promoted. But they had me; they were stuck with me. And then they got a call from the 65th [Infantry] Division, which was down at Shelby, Mississippi. The 65th was getting ready to go overseas. They wanted some fillers, and they wanted people to—they wanted to go over with excess strength, and I was volunteered. I didn't know that I was supposed to volunteer.

I was volunteered and I was sent over. And for the first time, I hit the 867th Field Artillery and they welcomed me with open arms, because by this time I was communications trained, I—in my year at City College as an engineer I had had to take surveying, and so when I was assigned to the—it was the 270th Field Artillery Battalion at Gordon, Camp Gordon. They didn't need any more radio people, so they assigned me to survey an instruments section. I was qualified as surveying instrument chief, and as weapons—

MH: 65th Division was known as what? They have a nickname?

EH: Nah, not really. I made up a plate one time, before we knew what the SS really was, we put a flash, [George] Patton's SS, but no, no, Patton's Best. But we joined 3rd Army in January of forty-five [1945]. So, the division went over late.

MH: You went over by ship from where?

EH: I went over from New York, as a matter of fact from Rockland County. We went from [Camp] Shanks. At any rate, I joined the unit and they were happy to get me. They assigned me to their communications section. They had been about to promote somebody, and they decided they were going to give me the wire sections. They promoted him anyway, because they were allowed a certain amount of excess. But they gave me the wire crews. But they assigned me—now, I got there probably in October, and we sent the advanced detail; the division went across in November. The 69th [Infantry] Division trained in the same camp going over; they went over ahead of us. It was a coincidence. 69th was going to be assigned to the 3rd Army, but they sent them into England.

Well, I went over with the advanced detail. We were supposed to set up quarters and so on; why they sent sergeants I don't know. It was December 24—I had, incidentally, I enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner on the USS *Monticello* standing at a chest-high mess table welded to the floor eating a complete turkey dinner out of a steel compartmented tray. And don't let anybody ever kid you, but vanilla ice cream with gravy on it is delicious. You may not plan it that way, but it was delicious. But on the other hand, sailing on a Navy ship, you sometimes will get baked beans for breakfast on a Sunday morning.

MH: I've had the experience.

EH: Oh, then you know. I'm not the only one it happened to.

MH: Twenty-eight days at sea on the USNS *General Nelson M. Walker*.

EH: Oh, how wonderful.

MH: Yes.

EH: That was—oh, USNS?

MH: USNS, yes.

EH: 'Cause the—you know the Army had a navy?

MH: Yes.

EH: I once interviewed a captain.

MH: My father was a doctor in the Army on board—the ship he told us was the *Mormac Dove*, so I guess it was the Moore-McCormack Lines' *Dove*, and they were carrying prisoners back from Africa, mostly.

EH: Oh, I came home on the *Mormac Sea Robin*, which was a nice deal, but we didn't get that far, did we?

MH: So, anyhow, where did you land in Europe?

EH: Landed—well, they sent us to England. We were sent to facilities someplace in the southern coast. The day before Christmas, there's a knock on the door. There were four of us in a room that probably would have had two people comfortably. This major—ooh, I looked for him; I looked for him afterwards—knocks on the door. I open the door, he goes to me. "Sergeant, what's your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]?"

I told him, "Communications sergeant."

He says, "Any other specialties?"

I said, "Yes, sir, I'm surveying instrument."

He says, "Fine, get your carbine and come with me." Son of a bitch. If I ever caught up to him, I was going to kill him, and I was going to gut shoot him and let him die slow. He knew where I had to go, but he didn't say a word about it.

Well, England, the southern coast—it was December and it was kind of raw, and I was dressed for it. I was wearing my GI long johns, and over that I'm wearing ODs [olive drab]—you know, shirt and pants—and over that I've got my fatigues. So, I grabbed my sweater and I put it on. I grab my field jacket, I put it on. I've got a pair of gloves in my jacket pocket; I don't realize that I got a spare pair and I put in the other pocket. And then—I don't know why, but I grabbed a couple pair of socks and stuck them in my shirt

pocket—in the breast pockets on the jacket. I left my overcoat there, I left my overshoes there. The next thing—I spent Christmas Day crossing the Channel on an English landing ship. Landed, they sent us in, and I was assigned to the 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion in the Ardennes.

MH: Chemical mortars means what?

EH: 4.2s, the same as a 105[mm] shell but you fired it out of a trigger fired mortar. They were tall; they were like 4'2" long.

MH: But when you say chemical, what are they shooting? White phosphorus?

EH: Well, we shot a lot of Willie Pete. You could shoot HE [high-explosive], you could shoot—they did have gas shells for them, though we never fired. The nearest we came to anything chemical warfare was Willie Pete. And the Germans afterwards, I understand, complained that we were violating the Geneva Accords—which we never signed, incidentally. We were using the white phosphorus, and that stuff, you know what it does to you if you're exposed, your skin burns particularly if you're a little damp and we were using it on them. We were using everything we had. We were lucky; whatever we had we were firing.

I was up there as an FO [forward observer], and the only reason that I kept all my fingers and all my toes is that I was able to keep changing off my socks and keep changing off my gloves. And what I was doing, I would have a pair of socks in my inside shirt pockets, my inner shirt pockets. I have two pair of wool socks on. And we had the—by the time I went overseas, they took away our leggings and gave us those elk hide—you know, the rough outside with the attached legging boots.

So, I kept changing them each time, every morning when I woke up, if I got to sleep. But at least once a day I would take off the inner pair of socks and put them into my inner shirt pockets. I would take the ones from my inner shirt and put them on my feet. I would take the ones that had been on the outside and put them the inside and put a fresh pair—so, I kept changing my socks daily. About four, five days into the battle I acquired a pair of overshoes and an overcoat from some guy who didn't need them any longer. It was a little creepy for a couple of days, and then I realized he probably didn't mind that I had them. He wasn't getting any colder.

So, the battle ended and I was fortunate enough to be sent back to my own unit. And we came across—

MH: Your unit that you had left in London, in England?

EH: Which I had left in England.

MH: And where were they now?

EH: The division came over. The division landed around—I don't know, the thirteenth or fourteenth of January, sometime around the middle of January. The division was sent directly into France, to Camp Lucky Strike. That was one of the four cigarette camps.

There's something in this week's book review section, *The [New York] Times*, where they're writing about—I think it's a book that's been written by Kurt Vonnegut's son.³ Vonnegut, after he was released from the POW camps, was sent back and he wrote a long, long letter. If you haven't read that, get your hands on it and read it. And he was writing from a—what was a “Reppel-Deppel” [replacement depot], really, by this time—on the northern coast of France. It was one of the cigarette camps, 'cause he was near Le Havre. These camps were between Le Havre and Dieppe. There was Lucky Strike, Twenty Grand, Herbert Tareyton, and Chesterfield; those were the four camps. They wouldn't use names like that anymore.

MH: Probably not.

EH: Probably not. At any rate, they took the advanced party from the division and sent us down into France, where we were putting up the big tents. You know those twenty man tents that they had?

MH: Right.

EH: What we did was to put up the ridge poles and main poles, the corner posts, corner poles, and stake them out. And when the division got there in the middle of the night—

MH: They throw the camp.

³*Armageddon in Retrospect and Other New and Unpublished Writings on War and Peace*, by Kurt Vonnegut, published in 2008 by G.P. Putnam's Sons. Mark Vonnegut wrote the introduction.

EH: These guys had to put the rest of the pegs in and put the rest of the support poles in before they could go to bed. We were there, and what had happened was that the 69th Division had sent so many replacements in during and after the Battle of the Ardennes that they could not be sent into combat immediately. They had to be—have a lot of fillers sent in to the division.

So the 65th, which was supposed to go into England when the 69th came into France, was sent directly to France. Instead of being the first division to make contact on the Elbe [River] we made contact with the Russians outside of Vienna. So, we were assigned 3rd Army. We went into combat on the Siegfried Line, against the Siegfried Line. My battalion—here's something. 867th Field Artillery has a distinction that only that battalion and the 868th have: they were the two battalions that were reconstituted to fire the Atomic Annies. They had those—what were they, 240s [mm]?—that were supposed to fire nuclear shells; fortunately, it never became necessary.

So, the 867th went into combat. We were in a village near Metz called Bisten [Bisten-en-Lorraine], and we were firing on the Siegfried Line, and we kept firing on the Siegfried Line until there's a breakthrough. I went back to get more wire for my wire section. We weren't going to pick up any wire; we just grabbed our instruments' switchboards. So, I took some trucks back to a depot and loaded the trucks up with reels of cable and batteries and so on. And they gave us a—by mistake, they gave us a darkroom outfit, a field darkroom and Speed Graphic camera. I latched on to that. Won't go into that story. I gave it back. I left it when I came home. I did not steal it. I bought my Speed Graphic.

Got the stuff, and we're coming back, and we're coming through Metzervisse, which was the village on the other side of the border from Bisten. I look up in the road, and there's this great big ugly monster of a—I'd never see anything like it; it's tremendous. Armored—I can't tell you what it looked like, all angles. It's towing a tremendous trailer, and it's got a boat on the back of it. And there's a machine gun ring up on the roof of the tractor, and there's this guy in a gray/green uniform and a gray helmet. And I grabbed for the machine gun on the truck, and then I realized I was looking at a Navy foul weather jacket and a gray Navy helmet—fortunately, before I hit the trigger. They were towing—they were bringing the landing craft for the crossing of the Mine—of the Rhine [River]—on Dragon Wagons.

MH: What's a Dragon Wagon?

EH: M25A1s. They were armored tractors, tremendous armored tractors, which towed a very, very large trailer which was used for battlefield recovery of disabled armored

vehicles. They discovered shortly after that nobody was going to go in and drag a tank out on a trailer under fire. When they needed to do that, they would usually hook another tank up, would hook up and tow them out with the tow cables. So, these guys only went in after the battle was over, and they ended up—they stopped building armored cabs and they put soft skinned cabs on them. As a matter of fact, I've got kits downstairs to build both versions—which I will complete!—one of them complete with a landing craft of it, an LCVP [Landing Craft Vehicle, Personnel] because that's what I saw.

Anyway, we crossed the Rhine at Saarlautern, S-a-a-r-l-a-u-t-e-r-n. We broke through at Saarlautern, we crossed to Mainz, and the division headed east. I was communications sergeant by this time, but I was working with one of the FO sections, liaison sections.

MH: What are you riding in?

EH: Most of the time a jeep, very often a three-quarter ton. But I had a jeep that had more goddamn guns in it than God had little liver pills. We used to—I used to carry M1s in the back, or carbines, depending, because we're usually working with pretty much the same units, 260th, 261st Infantry. I always had a load of carbines in the back. We'd get into a large town; the guys didn't want rifles, they wanted the carbines for close infighting. They dumped their rifles in my trailer and take carbines, and afterwards they'd take their rifles back.

So, I always had weapons. I carried a Thompson most of the time, and I wore a .45. My dad gave me my first .45 when I was fifteen in the Guard. I started shooting competition and he dug out a gun I never knew he had brought back from Europe in 1919 when he came home. He gave that to me. As a matter of fact, I still have it, and I fired it in competition for years. I was carrying it when I was wounded the first time, and for some reason—

MH: When you were wounded the first time, when your legs were crushed?

EH: When my legs were crushed. When I was wounded at that time, for some reason they took my pistol belt and stuck it in—or wrapped it around my musette bag—and put it on the stretcher with me, and it went on the naval ship with me. And nobody stole the pistol. I don't know why.

MH: Do you believe in miracles?

EH: I believe that I was meant to keep that .45. So, I—but after I came out of the hospital I had managed to hang on to it. They put in my musette bag and made sure that the bag was sealed when they sent me to the hospital. I managed to get it back home and didn't carry it again with me until—well, that was another war.

At any rate, we crossed the Rhine at Mainz, and then I was usually with the point, with divisional point, which was very often up there with 3rd Army point. We were running with an armored division; usually I think it was the 11th or 12th Armored that we seemed to be with quite a bit. That's if my memory is no worse than it usually is. So, we headed in, we got as far as Weimar, and then went south. We hit Regensburg; we hit Neumarkt; ended up in Austria.

However, on—let me check. On the sixth of April, I was in the third, maybe the fourth, vehicle to enter the gates of a concentration camp. It was a satellite camp of, I believe, Buchenwald. Buchenwald was the one that was in Germany, outside of the village called—or a town called—Ohrdruf. Ohrdruf was the first camp that was opened by American troops on the ground. It was the first time that American soldiers saw concentration camp survivors.

MH: Okay, let me back up for a second. At this point in the war, did you know anything about the concentration camps, Holocaust, whatever?

EH: When I went through the gate was when I found out. This is when I first knew anything. Did anybody else know anything? I don't know. Had they—the Air Force must have had loads and loads and loads and loads of photographs. Now, we know today that—I think it came down from possibly from the White House—not to bomb the trains or the railroads leading to the camps. I know that there was a strategic reason. There may have been a tactical reason; I don't know what that reason was. I do know that this country was not right about the way it handled refugees.

MH: Okay. So, you're approaching the area of Ohrdruf—

EH: Yeah, we're just moving on a road.

MH: Okay. You were in a town?

EH: I think we approached from—before we hit the town, we hit the camp.

MH: Do you remember the name of the town?

EH: Yeah, Ohrdruf, O-h-r-d-r-u-f. D-r-u-f?

MH: Yeah, it is. So, you hit the town, you're in a Jeep—

EH: We hit the town. We're in the jeep, we go in.

MH: And it's a convoy?

EH: About—maybe a dozen vehicles; we were running point. If we ran into a strong opposition, my responsibility was to stop—we had started out with four liaison officers, one to each of the firing batteries. We found out first that—I believe that we got two extra guns in each battery, so we had six guns per battery. And we were firing so many fire missions that they felt they need more liaisons out there, more observers. So, I had started out working with one of the liaison officers. We picked up extra vehicles, we split the team in half: he had one, I had the other. I was a tech sergeant by now. He had one team, I had the other team, we each had another man with us, radio operators, drivers. We did everything. So, my job would be to stop and call down fire on any point of opposition, any concentration.

So, we hit this camp.

MH: Wait, you hit the town first?

EH: No, I don't remember hitting the town. All I can remember now when I—I put this out of my mind for a long, long time. I didn't start remembering until some—oh, it must be—it's more than twenty years ago. They had a program in Rockland County on the liberation of the concentration camps, of the death camps. And somebody spoke to me about it and I said, "I opened—I was there in the opening of this camp." "Would you speak?" And at that point, I was finally able to say something about it. I've never been able to watch movies about concentration camps. I've never seen *Schindler's List*.

MH: Really?

EH: I couldn't take it. I watched—what was it, *War and Remembrance*, when they ran that series? And at the point where—I didn't realize what I was going to see—at the point where the guy that was supposed to be—who is it, Bernard Berenstein? That art, the art expert who in the end—the Jewish art expert who in the end is sent to the death camp? When they get him into the camps and they stripped him, and I realized what I was watching, I turned it off. I never saw the end of that series. I couldn't watch that. Now—

MH: Back to Ohrdruf.

EH: Ohrdruf.

MH: So, you're in, what, the fourth vehicle, you said?

EH: Third, fourth vehicle.

MH: Okay. And it's up a hill?

EH: That I can't remember.

MH: Are there signs? "*Verboten*"?

EH: No, there was just probably, probably—now, again, this is not in my memory—probably it had that same "*Arbeit macht frei*."

MH: Oh, yes, it did.

EH: I think every one of those camps had that sign at the gate.

MH: What are you smelling?

EH: The wind wasn't in that direction, fortunately. I talk about this to middle school students who are studying the Holocaust, and I've made notes so that I tell the whole story. You'll speak to someone who was with the 2nd Polish Division who opened—I

think it was Sobibor; you'll be speaking to him later and he'll tell you about that.⁴ So, they knew about the camps in January; in fact, I think in October of forty-four [1944] the Russians had started opening camps.

MH: The Russians were liberating camps, right.

EH: Ohrdruf was, I believe, a satellite of Buchenwald. Its work camp was not a death camp, but the SS worked the prisoners to death. They starved them, you know.

Okay, I'm going to read something that I had to write: "When we entered the barbed wire, the first sight to meet our eyes were a number of dead and dying prisoners. There were fifty, maybe seventy-five of them." They were just in the middle of a paved over area; that was probably where they had the *Appels*.

The SS knew—well, some were dead, some were dying. The SS knew that we were coming, that we were going to liberate the camp. So, about half an hour before we got there—and I know this because I spoke to someone: that first time I spoke, a young man—a younger man than I—got up to speak. He had been a prisoner in that camp and had been marched out of that camp half an hour before we got there. And he said he had never been able to speak about it until he heard me talk about the camp, and that just opened the gates. They marched away all those able to move on their own feet, and those who were not were machine gunned and left to die. And they didn't just shoot to kill them. They shot waist high. They shot them and left them to die slowly.

Okay, what'd we see? There was a big pit inside that camp area. There's a great big iron framework, looked like a tremendous iron cot, except it was maybe 25 by 75 feet; this is what's in my memory. On, under, and around that frame, there were the remnants of burned logs, and when we got close enough to look, we saw remnants of burnt bodies. And it stank. When we were close enough, we could smell it. Burnt human flesh doesn't smell like burnt pork. It doesn't. It doesn't, particularly if there was no fat to burn on these. There was a shed. The stink that that rose and blew downwind, that could be smelled miles away, and when the wind blew toward Ohrdruf, the people in Ohrdruf could smell it.

There's a shed there, about the size of a garage long enough for two cars, end to end—you know, 10 by 10 by 10 high, by maybe 40 feet. Well, we figured this is where we're going to find all their goodies, so we opened the doors. There were bodies piled in there,

⁴Bernhard Storch, who was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00132.

and they were piled up—the Germans were very, very neat and very—you know, they weren't going to build a fire every time they had three or four bodies; they would collect enough to make it worthwhile. So, the bodies were stacked in there like cordwood—like cords of wood, literally—and neatly. One row was parallel to the wall, the next row, you know, and stacked up like cordwood. And the next row was turned 90 degrees so that it would be neat and easy to take them out when the time came.

MH: When you see this—I mean, this is daytime, right?

EH: Okay. As soon we hit the camp—

MH: It's daytime?

EH: Right. As soon as we hit the camp, I grabbed the camera. I was carrying the Speed Graphic, and I had a couple of packs of film; film packs were what, a dozen exposures? I had the camera loaded. I was shooting whatever I could to get pictures for the battalion history. I grabbed the camera and I took pictures. I went through two packs of film. I'm fortunate—when I look through the viewfinder of a camera, I see a picture. I do not see something that's alive. So, I shot two packs.

Let me get to it: “Ten by ten—oh, thirty foot long,” I said, “tightly packed with the bodies of dead prisoners which had not yet been burned. Despite their vaunted efficiency, a number of prisoners had avoided being marched out.” And we found them wandering near the camp. Every one of them was skin stretched over tendon and bone. Skin—

MH: When you open this shed that has these bodies in it—

EH: That's what we saw: skeletons with skin.

MH: You can make out faces?

EH: You've seen the photographs. If you could see—

MH: I'm trying to get—

EH: No, I saw the—we saw skulls.

MH: Did you see women?

EH: You saw skulls. Couldn't tell the difference.

MH: Okay.

EH: Couldn't tell the difference between a man—I don't if there were any women in that camp. It was a work camp; it was not a death camp. What we saw was skin, bone, sinew moving. Skulls on top of skeletons, eyes—you know, deep inside of pits. Very little we could do for the survivors. We had a medic with us, and they warned us, "Don't give them anything to eat or drink."

MH: The medic warned you?

EH: Yeah. "Give them a mouthful of water, give them a mouthful of water, give them a little bit of water to drink first. Afterwards, give them no more than one mouthful to eat." Some of them got their hands on food, stuffed themselves, and died.

MH: When did you get that advice?

EH: Almost immediately. There were a couple of medics with us. We came under fire more than once in our point.

MH: There's no resistance from the SS at this point?

EH: They're gone.

MH: They're gone.

EH: They've moved away; they're moving further east into Germany.

MH: Was the gate open or did you have to knock it down?

EH: You know, I don't remember.

MH: Okay.

EH: First vehicle may have driven through the gate. You know, the Nazis were so efficient they probably went out and locked the gate behind them. Well, 3rd Army got word immediately, and within hours officers from headquarters were flown in on liaison planes to observe.

Now, as I said, at that time I was carrying a large press-type camera. And here: "Only the fact that I put the viewfinder to my eyes as soon as we entered the camp and looked only through the camera for the first five or ten minutes kept me from becoming violently ill." When I finally—which I did when I finally looked directly at the sights with my bare eyes. And I was not the only guy who emptied his stomach. I cleared out everything up to my toenails.

One of Patton's captains came over; one of the staff captains came over. He saw the camera and he demanded my film. It showed up later, incidentally: prints from my negatives showed up marked U.S. Signal Corps outside of a newsreel theater just across the street from—oh, Radio City. There was a little side street newsreel theater, and there are these pictures—I knew they were the pictures I took because I saw my driver, and I knew I was the one who took those pictures.

MH: Did you ever get prints back?

EH: Never saw them again. You know, I told him, "Oh, no, these belong to my battalion. I don't give them to anybody." But, you know, if he had been an ordinary captain, I'd have told him to whistle up a tree and he wouldn't have been able to do anything about it. But there are captains and then there are captains, and a captain from Patton's headquarters is like an 800-pound gorilla. If he wants something for lunch, you give it to him.

MH: Right, because he also knew that Patton wanted to be the one that wanted to say, "I did this."

EH: Well, I don't know. That I don't know. I have a lot of respect for Georgie. I figure he's a hundred years out of his time; he should have been a general in the Civil War, because his attitude from what I've seen since, from what I've read since, was he should have been out there in front of everybody, riding in that fancy—there's a model of it in there behind you—riding in that fancy command car of his, waving his saber, standing up on that seat and waving his saber, because that was Patton's attitude.

Let me finish with the camp first and get back to Patton, whom I liked. Patton and Eisenhower came personally to see what we discovered; this, of course, is in the record. And Ike—

MH: That's later; that's April 12.

EH: This was several days later. Ike ordered every civilian in Ohrdruf—now, everybody in Ohrdruf knew what was going on. They had to. Prisoners were sent into the town to clean the streets, prisoners were sent to work on the farms around the town. They were seen, and they could be smelled. Ike ordered them in and then ordered them to bury the bodies.

MH: Let's stick with that first day, though, for a minute. How many days are you at Ohrdruf?

EH: It was just in and out.

MH: You were just in and out. Okay.

EH: We were on the move. From that point on, we were on the move. And as a matter fact, from that point on, I don't recall—now, what happened was units from the various divisions that were in the area were brought to the camp before they took the bodies away, before the bodies were buried. They brought them in to see that camp.

MH: Did you have physical contact with any of the surviving prisoners?

EH: Did I actually touch one?

MH: Did they come up to you?

EH: I gave water. I gave—

MH: Out of your canteen?

EH: Yeah. I don't think they had anything contagious, and frankly I wasn't thinking about it. No, out of my cup. I had some D ration bars, and I cut slivers off the bars and gave them to them.

MH: What are you seeing in their faces? What are they saying? Because you spoke so many languages—

EH: They were crying, most of them. A lot of them were Polish, which I didn't speak; a little bit of German. Well, what can you say to somebody like that?

MH: Were they Jews? Could you tell from what they had on their uniform?

EH: As far as I know, they weren't. This was a work camp; this wasn't a death camp. And, frankly, at that point I didn't know about the stars, so I didn't know what I was looking at. I'm sure that I saw lavender triangles. I'm sure I saw green triangles.

MH: What's the green triangle?

EH: Green was political. I may very well have seen yellow stars. Do I remember seeing them? No. I'm sure that if there were any Jews, they were among those who were killed. 'Cause they did use Jews; it wasn't only Schindler that made use of Jewish prisoners. They had Jewish engravers—

MH: Jews were digging tunnels and mountains; they were all sorts of things.

EH: They were making engraved plates for counterfeit money. They were making rifles for the Wehrmacht and the SS. They were making machine guns. They were building them in the camps, but they made sure there was no ammunition. And complete guns were not made in one area and assembled in one area. Yet, I suspect they still got their hands on some. They made uniforms. The concentration camps were the property of the

SS. The SS ran them for profit. They sold—they made uniforms and sold them to the army. This was business for them; this was a nation within the nation.

MH: Again, I don't—I really am trying to find out, you know, the one-on-one experience within the camp at that point. A prisoner comes up to you, you give him water—

EH: Give him water, give him a sliver of chocolate, because we knew it was dangerous. You could see their backbones through their bellies. I mean, these people were bones. These are the ones that weren't strong enough, still well enough to be marched out of the camp. So, what could you do? Didn't dare give them a can of C rations, didn't dare give them a can of K rations. Couldn't do it; it was not safe. Give a spoonful, give a spoonful, give a spoonful.

MH: Did you fight you to try and get more? Or did they have no strength to fight?

EH: No, no, it wasn't that. They—I think they were looking at us as angels of deliverance. Those could that were crying. And those of us were crying, too.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

MH: Did the larger picture ever come into your mind? I mean, this is—

EH: We weren't aware of it.

MH: These are human beings. You know, how could people do this to other human beings? Do you get philosophical in the middle of this, or only later?

EH: I was nineteen years old. Nineteen years old, you're not a philosopher, and at nineteen I had been at the receiving end of incoming fire and I'd been firing back. I wasn't thinking about why they were bad. This was just something horrible that I had never conceived of, never thought, never imagined could happen. And from that point on—well, we heard afterwards the mayor and his wife went home and hanged themselves in their garage.

MH: I've heard that story. I don't know—

EH: Well, nobody in that town was a Nazi, you know.

MH: Of course not.

EH: Of course not. But in order to be on the police force, in order to have any political job, in order to be in the post office, you had to be a member of the party. Now, whether or they were convinced members of the party or they joined the party so that they could hold a job, I don't know. I don't care. I did discover that tremendous numbers of Germans actually were armed, had pistol permits. It was not that difficult, apparently, to get a pistol permit in Germany.

MH: Civilians?

EH: Civilians. That's why so many of those civilian pistols were brought back. We didn't get them from the army, we found them in homes.

Anyway, that was the first camp that was open. Afterwards, my division—not me personally; I wasn't involved—liberated Flossenbürg, which was a concentration camp, not a death camp. And still later, on almost the last day before we met the Russians, I was with a small probing column. Again, we were—the German army was retreating as fast as they could from the Russians in Austria, running to surrender to the Americans so that they wouldn't surrender to the Russians. They knew what would happen if they went into Russian hands. So, we were moving as fast as we could to get as close to the Russians as possible until we made the link up. About a half a dozen jeeps and three-quarter tons weapons carriers—you know, the usual thing. Now, I was driving the first jeep.

MH: What day is this?

EH: Fifth. Fifth of May, maybe.

MH: May 5. Okay.

EH: I don't think it was the sixth; might have been the fourth or fifth. We're maybe ten kilometers south of Linz, in Austria—you know, Hitler's hometown. And we hit the KZL, *Konzentrationslager*, one of four. It's a work camp; it's about ten kilometers, maybe ten miles south of Linz, very small camp.

We hit the barbed wire and we can see the barracks, so we swing the column around to find the gate. As we drove along the side towards the gates, we saw the prisoners were lined up—it was an *Appel*, looked like—watching as the guards prepared to execute half a dozen or so of the inmates. Again, these weren't in as bad shape as we'd seen in our first camp, because these were people who had been working in the local farms, or working in local manufactories, small.

What this place was, it was outside of a—I think it was a mile long, like a garden apartment development. These were six family—you know, two apartments on three levels—and a big archway. There would be two of those together, then a big archway to get in through, and then two more six-units and so on for about a mile. And we discovered afterwards, these were families of SS who were living there. Well, we saw these guys lined up in their Allgemeine-SS, in the black uniforms, with what we call Schmeissers—which weren't. They've got the guns, and they—

MH: When you say Schmeissers, which weren't?

EH: Pardon? They weren't Schmeissers. Schmeisser was—

MH: Schmeisser was the—

EH: Was the World War I gun, yeah. No, these were the MP40s, probably, MP30s, MP40s. They were not Schmeissers. The Schmeisser was the gun that—I'm into guns a little bit. It doesn't matter.

MH: Go ahead.

EH: Anyway, we see them lined up with their German-style Tommy guns. We weren't going to let them start shooting. So, the lieutenant is sitting next to me. He stands up. We're 3rd Army, the wind shields are down, and there's a pintle mount on the dashboard, only instead of a .30 I had a .50 on my truck. I always had a .50. I like firepower. He stands up and he yells, "*Hände hoch*, hands up." One of the SS guards turns to see who's shouting. He's holding the gun, he's facing that way, and as he starts to turn toward us and the barrel starts—the muzzle starts coming into sight—the lieutenant hits the butterflies and the whole firing squad went into pieces. .50 caliber bullets, you know, they're about the size—damn near the size of your thumb.

MH: Yeah.

EH: Well, no, but they're certainly half the size of my little finger. Half a dozen of those going through a body and you got chop meat. He just blew the whole damn firing squad away. Well, the guy could have held his hands up.

MH: (laughs) Yeah.

EH: Well, we learned later, from the prisoners in the camp that the guards knew we were almost there, and apparently they had half a dozen Jews in the camp that were working. For some reason they were there, they weren't sent someplace to be dead, so they were going to execute them. Okay. Now, what I tell the kids—if you don't know of it, over the entrance of every concentration camp was the sign in German, "*Arbeit macht frei.*" "Work will make you free." Uh-uh [no]. *Arbeit macht tot.* [Work will make you dead.]

We took the prisoners and we took over one of those apartment houses. The six that were being shot, now, they were wearing just the pants. They didn't even have shoes on, just those pajama pants. There were half a dozen of them, just skin and bones. We loaded them into the back of the three-quarters, and we took them over—

MH: So, the Jews were in worse physical shape than the other people in the camp?

EH: Yeah, they were. There were some that were that bad, but these, these were the ones that we actually looked at. The others were wearing the shirts, anyway.

MH: Did you tell them you were Jewish?

EH: Not at that point. So, we took them back to one of those apartment houses, which was quite close. We chased everybody out of the house. They had—I don't know how come—they still had the ability to make hot water; they had the little hot water heater in each bathroom. And these people, they were lousy, even shaved of everything. And they were dirty. So we got them in to take some nice hot baths, and when we got them into the tubs, we discovered that one of the prisoners—we hadn't been able to tell by looking at them stripped to the waist—one of them was a woman. That's how you couldn't—why we didn't know. Couldn't even see a trace of breasts.

For me, the war turned out to be over a day or so later, maybe hours later. We met the Russians about twenty-five kilometers west of Vienna. And afterwards, I went to Mauthausen, which had been liberated by someone else, and that was the first time I saw a death camp.

Interesting sideline—uh, side bar: I was in contact with Russians now. We were handling the repatriation of Russian and Polish DPs [displaced persons]. We were sending them back to the Russians, unfortunately, and the Russians in turn were sending us Western Europeans, those that wanted to repatriate—they wanted to repatriate, or were willing to repatriate. So, we're handling, and therefore on several occasions I rode with a convoy into the Russian side of the contact.

I met a Russian *podpolkovnik*, lieutenant colonel. He was—what were they at that time, NKVD, NVD? He was a commissar, a lieutenant colonel in a field artillery outfit. And I thought he looked an awful like my uncle Aaron, my father's youngest brother, and he thought I looked like his younger brother. And he had German, and I had enough German by now; I've lost it since. And he wanted to know what my name was, so I told him it was Hermon. "Oh? What was your father's name?" Well, Europeans knew what we Jews did when we came to this country.

I says, "It was Hermon."

"Your grandfather?"

"Was Hermon." See, my father's father's line—now, my mother's parents came from Sołok, Sołoki [Salakas], which is, I understand, up near Vilna [Vilnius]. It's on the border—it was Russia then, but it was on the border of Lithuania and Poland. And they came over; my grandfather was in Philadelphia in during the blizzard of eighty-eight [1888]. My grandmother followed him. So, that's my mother's side.

My father's mother, grandmother and his two aunts in 1885 walked away from a pogrom in, as I remember it, Elisavetgrad [Kirovohrad] in the Ukraine, about 100 miles west of Odessa. They walked to Hamburg, four women, took ship and landed in Boston. One of Grandma's sisters married and settled down, I think in Brookline, outside of Boston. Rosie married Uncle Jake and settled in East New York, or Brownsville. And Grandma met my grandfather up there; he was up in—he was in Lester at that time, I think. But they met and she married him, and he was a Yankee, a cock-eyed Yankee. He was a fifth generation American.

MH: Before we get away too far, let me take you back to this camp.

EH: Concentration camp.

MH: It was just a number; it didn't have a name?

EH: They didn't have names; most of them didn't have names.

MH: There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds—I've heard over 5,000 camps.

EH: This is 104, KZ 104.

MH: Okay. And this is near the town or city of?

EH: It was about—it was between ten miles, ten kilometers, away from Linz.

MH: Linz, Austria?

EH: Linz, Austria. But this street that ran right near the camp was called—I can still remember it was called *Zeppelinstrasse*. And this was a fairly large community, now. They had to—I didn't move around in that area that much. When I had a chance, I picked up a German motorcycle and I did a lot of touring. Every time I got into trouble, I got into trouble on a motorcycle in the Army, every time I got hurt. But what community there was in that area I don't know. Obviously there was a community.

MH: Right. What did the apartments look like when you got inside them?

EH: Oh, they were very nice little middle-class apartments, very European. There were little heaters in the room; there were no central heating. But there'd be these great big massive combination armoire; there'd be an armoire on one side, maybe with shelves, glass shelves, but this real heavy, what I always think of as heavy Germanic furniture. Some of this stuff was that heavily carved Black Forest kind of thing that we see some of it. I didn't see much Bauhaus. Hitler didn't like Bauhaus, so naturally the SS didn't like Bauhaus. But what was it? I took over one room; it had that piece of furniture and it had a daybed.

MH: Okay. And you stayed there overnight?

EH: Oh, we came back. We took over afterwards, because we were handling repatriation. We took over this 104 camp.

MH: Oh.

EH: And we were using it as a transport camp. Polish prisoners, Polish DPs inside the camp, ran the camp. We processed—effectively, we processed DPs that were moving from—

MH: East to west?

EH: From Western Europe. We moved them through our hands. What happens is they would take them into the camp. If they hadn't done it already, and most of them hadn't, they would totally be de-loused. The engineers set up a shower point and a laundry point. Everything they had that could be laundered—it didn't matter whether it would shrink or not—went through steam laundries. They went through a shower point, and before they went through the shower point they were given clippers. They had to clip every trace of hair off their heads and bodies. The women were allowed to keep their hair, though most of them cut it shorter anyway. But bodily hair had to be removed, and then they ran them through the shower point. They de-loused their cloths, they loaded them with DDT, and then they got their stuff back. They would stay—usually they stayed overnight in the camp in order to get this done. When that was finished—

MH: In the barracks in the camp? Where—

EH: Yeah, they just took over that camp. The food that got—

MH: It was the board beds?

EH: I didn't go into the camp at all. To be honest, I didn't want to go in there. I stayed out of the camp; the Poles ran it. But what would happen was that we had a mountain of K rations, and whenever they came through—we were getting them by trucks, truckloads, and before we sent the trucks on to the Russian side of the line, one of us would look up

and yell up—I can still remember it. I learned, “*Skol’ko chelovek v mashina?*” “How many people in the truck?” And they tell me, “*Dvadtsat’ dva, dvadtsat’ tri.*” “Twenty-two, twenty-three.” Throw them twenty-two, twenty-three rations. Didn’t matter what they were, breakfast, lunch, dinner; that’s what they got.

Except that a couple of the guys started opening—I think it was the dinner rations had the D-bars in them, the D ration bars, which were chocolate and cereal. They were either using them for trading, or I remember one of the guys was making booze out of it. (laughs) There’s always a GI who’s going to make booze. But there was plenty of wine around, anyway, so it didn’t matter. But they would go through our hands; we would give them one ration and then send them on to the Russians. If you ever do a book about how the Russians handled these DPs, ask me. I have some stories there.

But I met this lieutenant colonel. So I wrote home to my dad—

MH: American?

EH: No, no, he was a Russian.

MH: Russian, okay.

EH: *Podpolkovnik* NVD artilleryman. And I wrote home to my dad to find out what he knew about my grandmother’s side. And my grandmother’s name, her maiden name, was Proskurowski. So, I went to *Podpolkovnik* Proskurowski, and I told him my grandmother was and who my great-grandmother was, and he said, “Your grandmother is my first cousin.”

When my grandfather—my great-grandfather and his partner, his brother-in-law, when the pogrom started, they were furriers. They lived on a house that—my grandfather lived in a house that had their shop down on the lower level. They processed furs into skins. They’d take the skins and turn them into furs and turn them into garments. And his brother-in-law and he did this. This drunken—the way my grandmother told my father, a drunken soldier broke in, and one of the two men figured, with the women upstairs, there was going to be rape. He picked up the fleshing block and—do you know anything about the fur business?

MH: No.

EH: You flesh. You have a heavy block that sits on the bench, maybe it's fastened to the bench, and it's got a razor sharp blade. You take the skins and you run them—the backs of them—over it, and you clean off the any fat or any flesh that's still attached to them. Maybe you pare the skin down a little bit. My uncle is—my father's brother is a flesher, and the tips of his thumbs were all wrinkled up. I looked at them one time; he said that he kept cutting the ends off his thumbs and putting them back on with tape so they would grow back, working and slipping on the fleshing block. He said that every flesher had the same thing.

So, one of the two of them picked up the block and hit the guy in the head with it and killed him. Now what's going to happen? You're Jews and they're out killing Jews anyway. They buried him in the backyard. But Great-Grandpa's brother-in-law went and told his wife, "Take the kids, put them in the wagon, go," and he sent them to a village about a hundred miles further away. My great-grandfather told his wife, "Take the girls, take whatever you can carry, take your jewelry"—they were quite comfortable—"take whatever you can carry, take whatever money you have, go to America." That's why they walked across and came to America.

But his brother-in-law's family, after things quieted down, came back, and they found out what had happened. And when the communists took over, my great-grandfather's nephew became a party member as fast as he could be a party member, went through. He was a big shot in the area. His sons were sent to the Komsomol schools and so on.

But they knew—this *podpolkovnik* knew that he was not going to go back to a normal life, because the Russian officers who were in contact with the Western Europeans were not being sent back into western Russia, they were sent into the Siberian areas. They did not—he did not want that. As a matter of fact, what he did, he ran into one of the women—who was, incidentally, a Jew. He didn't think of himself as a Jew, but he said the Russians did. She was a Jewish prisoner in the death camp. After they fattened her up a little bit she was quite an attractive women, and he fell in love. They wouldn't let him marry her, anyway.

So, one day after I came back, I got a letter. He came across the line in civilian clothing an American—uh, yeah. You know the priests, an American—

MH: Chaplain?

EH: Chaplain. See what happens when you get to be eighty-two? An American chaplain married them. They made their way down through Italy, and into Israel—into Palestine—

and I understand that during the war of liberation he was a captain in an infantry company. But it turned out that *Podpolkovnik* Proskurowski was—and that's how I found out what had happened to the family in Russia.

MH: Okay, I want—

EH: Okay, let's go back now.

MH: I want to take you back.

EH: Let's go back.

MH: You're taking these prisoners into these SS apartments?

EH: Yeah.

MH: Are you talking to them about what they've been through?

EH: They didn't speak very well, they didn't speak very much. It was very, very difficult for them to talk. Most of what was going on, they were crying just to be liberated, just to be alive. They had literally stepped out—you can see I read a lot. So, they had literally stepped out of the jaws of death. The teeth were coming down on them when we saved their lives. They lived because we rescued them, and most of what we got from them was incoherence. And on top of that, you know, a lot of those prisoners when they got that far into the stages of starvation, I understand, found it very, very difficult to speak: physically, it was difficult to speak.

I don't recall what happened to them. We must have called in medics, but I'm sure that we would not—I did find out they were Jews. When I knew that, and I had found out that the other prisoners were Poles, Poles and Russians, and I knew that Jews and Poles and Russians didn't mix all that well. They weren't allowed to mix all that well. We didn't want to put back inside the camp. Besides, we didn't know how the camp prisoners were going to be fed. So, we called in the medics and they took them. I don't know where they took them. I do understand that the Army set up hospitalization programs of some kind to take care of them.

But again, this was—I was an infantryman. As an infantryman, I was aware of a few hundred yards around me. As an artilleryman, yeah, I knew what was going on sometimes within a mile ahead of me. I'm calling fire down. At one point we hit a training school for the SS officers. This was a castle; it was a medieval castle and it was one of those where they had built the walls—they were double stone walls with I don't know how much dirt in between. They were packed with earth. Well, a wall like that will withstand artillery fire pretty well, because it has give.

And at one point, now, I was calling fire on them. I was one of the observers calling fire in. I actually watched Air Force fighters skip bombing and slamming bombs into those walls. I called down—at one point, I called fire from, I think, two .40s, Long Toms. At one point, I think there were—they must have had twenty-five, thirty battalions firing there. And when it was over and they finally decided to surrender because they were surrounded and couldn't resist any longer, the SS came up out of the cellars, most of them—a lot of them were deafened, but uninjured. The walls—oh, they were chopped up, glazed over from heat, but the walls were still standing. We went through Neumarkt and Regensburg. I saw them drive tanks through the walls, but those were houses.

But we didn't know. We didn't know. These prisoners in the camps, as soon as we liberated them, they were out of our hands. Again, and because the Army was very concerned with typhus—in fact, I believe we had typhoid shots, but I don't recall whether we got the typhus shots until—before we went overseas or until we actually made contact with the released prisoners. At that point, I know I had had typhus shots, and our clothing and our sleeping bags, our blankets, were constantly being doused with DDT. They were very, very concerned. They didn't want us coming into close contact with the prisoners.

MH: How long after that did you get back to the States?

EH: I was in Lucky Strike on the fourteenth of July. I was on my way as a member of what was supposed to be the first artillery battalion completely equipped with rockets, to make the invasion of Japan. I was going to be commissioned a second lieutenant of field artillery and communications officer of the battalion. Only we landed sometime around the fourteenth or fifteenth of August of forty-five [1945], the day—

MH: You landed where?

EH: I landed in New York. I went out—I don't remember where I went the first time; it was either out of Charleston—is Charleston a port? Yeah.

MH: Yeah.

EH: It was either Charleston or Savannah. But when I went the second time, that I do remember very clearly because I sailed, as I say, on the *Monticello*, and I sailed out of Camp Shanks, and when we came back, we came back to Camp Shanks. So, while at Shanks, I got the chance to go home for one night to see my folks before I went overseas. I put my arm around what I thought of as my girlfriend, who wasn't really.

MH: So, you came back?

EH: I came back, landed around the fourteenth or fifteenth—what I can recall was the day I landed, I picked up the *New York Daily Mirror*, and the headline was something about “Atom bomb dropped.” Now, I don't know whether that was Nagasaki or whether that was Hiroshima. But that, I can recall, as the day we landed. So, I was at home on what was supposed to be thirty days R&R [rest and relaxation] before we were going to reassemble at—where? At [Fort] Dix, everybody from First, Second and I forget what other Service Command, core area, and we were going to head across to—God almighty, my mind is gone. Uh, Fort Sill, to train on the new weapons because we were towing artillery, we were going to be trained on the new weapons. We were supposed to take those—I think there were 4½ inch rockets, mounted in banks on Sherman tanks, and that is what we were going to use for the invasion.

But I was at home the day that the war ended, that the Japanese surrendered. When I went back, I went into a casual detachment. I didn't want to get out of the Army immediately. I managed to goof off and stay in a little bit longer, and I stayed in until the IG told me it was time to go home. That was in May of forty-six [1946]. I took the summer off, swore I'd never wear a uniform again.

MH: Okay.

EH: Right. Ten days later, I had gone down to the armory. I couldn't buy a suit, so I'm still wearing my uniform with the ruptured duck, and I go down to the armory to see if any of the guys who had left there from back in 1943 or forty-four [1944] when I had paid a visit, and I reenlisted in the State Guard. (laughs) I would have enlisted in the National Guard, but they weren't there yet. So, I was commissioned in the State Guard. The National Guard came back; I was commissioned to the National Guard. But I found out that the IG never let me go, so they kept moving me around from unit to unit. I just didn't change my name anymore. They wouldn't allow me to do that; they said it was too dangerous.

MH: What did you—you finished college?

EH: I came back to City College, graduated in fifty [1950]. I started as an engineer but I ended up trying to figure out why I was crazy or if I was or not, switched to psychology, took my degree in fifty [1950]. Worked as a supervisor in children's home, didn't like what I was doing there. Became a salesman for six months and then ended up going back into engineering. And I worked in one branch or another of engineering, and retired as an electrical engineer in sixty [1960]—not sixty-five [1965], when I was sixty-five. Nineteen ninety, I retired.

But I went back to school around 1970. I went to the local community college. My wife said, "You know, you spend all your time—you come home from work and you sit and read. You want to read, college around the corner. Go to the college." So, I went to the college. It was so much fun I ended up—I spent a year there. I had some credits that I didn't need at City, so I used them. I spent a year there and did the—what do you call it, the associate's degree. Went over to Fairleigh Dickinson [University], spent another year there and managed to, in those two years, complete a baccalaureate in history, a B.A. in history. And they liked me enough that I got a fellowship for my master's in the history department, so I went back. But I never taught history.

MH: You got your master's in history?

EH: Yeah.

MH: At what age?

EH: Oh, seventy-one [1971], seventy-two [1972]. How old was I? Twenty-five [1925] to seventy-five [1975] would have been fifty, twenty-five [1925] to seventy-five [1975]. So, I wasn't fifty years old, but I was damn close to fifty. I just went back for the fun of it. I enjoyed it.

MH: Did your experiences seeing what you saw in the camps ever come back to you?

EH: I had nightmares for a long, long, long time.

MH: About war in general?

EH: No, about the camps.

MH: Starting when?

EH: Starting the night that I went into the first camp.

MH: Really?

EH: No, that didn't go out of my mind. It's never gone out completely. Every once in a while I get a flashback: I wake up I'm soaking wet. No, I don't pee in bed, but I must sweat up a storm. It still comes back. This probably will never leave me.

MH: What's the image you see?

EH: I just see the bodies. Sometime I see them walking—the dead, not the ones that were alive. Shortly after we opened the camp, we stopped at a place called—what the hell was the name of the town? It was the town [Eisenach] where Johann Sebastian Bach was born. It's a resort town, and I was sergeant of the guard. One of my men asked me if I could stand his post for half an hour while he took care of some of his nature's needs, and I must have dozed off standing there. I'm standing there with a Thompson across my chest, and I think I must have dozed off because I saw some of the bodies of the camp coming at me. (laughs) I told everybody that I woke up when I fired the Thompson. I woke them up. I woke me up, too.

MH: You fired the Thompson?

EH: Yeah, I was shooting at them. I wasn't going to let them come and take me away. Of course that woke me up, woke everyone—I claimed that I had seen skulkers. I didn't want to tell them I fell asleep on guard; I was the sergeant of the guard.

MH: Falling asleep on guard, not something—

EH: Not too smart to do.

MH: Not a good thing, yeah.

EH: But we hadn't had much sleep. We were there—I know when we were there because we were there in this building. It was a resort hotel. We were there and we got the word that Roosevelt was dead, had died.

MH: At Oberammergau?

EH: Pardon?

MH: Oberammergau?

(lawn mower noise in background)

EH: No, no, we weren't in Oberammergau. I'm trying to remember where I was; it'll come back to me. Wait a minute, maybe I have it. Maybe I have it. All I remember is that even the Republicans were walking around as if, you know, somebody in the family had died. I don't think—no, I don't tell the kids about that.

MH: What about later on in life?

EH: I didn't talk about it. Military didn't bother me. Of course, I went back into the military. I'm one of those who finds the military as something that I enjoyed. Being in the military was something that I enjoyed very much. On top of that, I was a reservist. So, I wasn't constantly on active duty, but I learned very, very early on—

(referring to background noise) Is that interfering?

MH: I can hear you okay. It's annoying, but—

EH: I can close this.

MH: If you could.

EH: (closes window) Good enough?

MH: One more. That's better, thank you.

EH: Okay. Where were we? I learned how to make the system work for me. A lot of guys fought it. I went in expecting to have a good life in the military, to do well in the military. I grew up on the stories of my father's World War I experiences; his regimental history is there someplace. I grew up on some of the stories about my grandfather, who only made it as far as Florida before he came down with one of those fevers, and my dad said he complained till he died that he hadn't been able to go to war with the rest of his friends. I had the stories about Great-Grandpa and his brothers, and his father and my grandfather's two older brothers, who served during the Civil War. Grandpa wasn't allowed to become a drummer boy when he was old enough and ran away from home.

But, I mean, I had the stories, the family stories about the military. This was something that we did. This is something that my family does. My son's—no, the line stopped there, for the moment at least. My youngest grandson says he wants to go to West Point.

MH: How many children do you have?

EH: I have two sons and a daughter. I have four grandchildren, and—this is strictly extraneous—Saturday, my granddaughter is graduating with a degree in special ed. In July, her mother is graduating with her master's degree in special ed. Kind of proud of them. My oldest grandson has just finished or is just in the process of finishing his first year of pre-med. My daughter's son is about to—I'm not what school he's going to. He's going for accounting, but that's okay, because his older cousin and he are going to open up a chain of nursing homes, and the best one in this area, they're going to put a penthouse on top for Nanny and me to live in.

MH: When, if ever, did you tell your children about your experiences with the camps?

EH: Oh, that's how it all came about. My youngest son was, I guess, about sixteen and they were studying the—there's a fly there. The youngest son was sixteen, and he came home. He had an assignment from his history teacher to interview a concentration camp survivor. Now, it just happened that we knew a great many, because my daughter married the son of someone who had been in a camp, and we knew many of their friends. So I said, "Would your teacher—would it be enough for your teacher if you interviewed one

of the soldiers who liberated the camps?” He said, “Oh, do we know somebody?” I said, “Yeah, that was me.” That’s the first time I talked about it. So, he went to school and the teacher said it would be enough if I just came and spoke to the class. So, I went to the class, I went to the school—

MH: This is the first time you’ve done that?

EH: This is the first time I had done that. This is at the senior high school, (inaudible) Senior High School. I spoke to his class, and one smart-assed little girl gets up. “Where were we any different? We sent the Japanese to concentration camps, too.” I didn’t know that we sent Italians and Germans as well. But I told her the difference was that we sent people to camps where we ran schools, where they were properly fed, where they weren’t sent to die or to work themselves to death. That was the difference. I learned afterwards that there were Italian camps like that. My experience with Italians had been Italian POWs, and hell, they used to—they used to put on their—they had army uniforms dyed green, with Italian side caps. And they would go into town on pass, on the weekends. Hey, they were accepted. They were the nicest of the prisoners.

MH: Those were the POWs we brought back?

EH: Those were POWs, yeah.

MH: Those were not American citizens like the Japanese, then.

EH: No, no, no. American citizens in uniforms were American citizens. As a matter of fact, down in Shelby they trained, I think, the 442nd [Regimental Combat Team]; the 100th [Infantry Battalion] trained down there. And I don’t know what problems they faced. I didn’t come into contact with any of them; I wasn’t there long enough. But I don’t know about problems that the Nisei and Sansei faced. I know the black troops in American military faced prejudice, because I saw that down at Camp Gordon.

MH: Come back to the talking to the high school class.

EH: Oh, I spoke to the class and I told them what it had been like, and I think that that was—that kind of healed some of the wounds in me. Because after that, I could speak about it, I could remember it. It was not a tremendous problem. Not only that, but another teacher knew I was going to be there and asked if I would stay and speak to her class as well. So, I spoke to the second class.

And after that, I got invites to speak, and I was able to do it. As a matter of fact, I'm now associated with the Center of Holocaust Studies, which is how you come to know about me, I believe, and I'm one of their speakers on a regular basis. That's why I put together a folder: because my memory is going, I have to have an aide-memoire in front of me at all times. But I want to report what I remember, not what somebody else remembered and I remember hearing them talk about it. I try not to—

MH: That's a difficult thing in what I'm doing.

EH: I've seen all the pictures, I've read the books, I know what other people have said and what they think. I'm trying to separate what I know and what I remember. I just remember that it was impossible for me to speak about it until that day. I had spoken about being in the military; that was not a problem.

MH: What year was that, that you gave the first talk?

EH: Oh, Lord, let's see. Michael was sixteen. Fifty-four [1954], fifty-eight [1958], sixty-eight [1968]—about 1974. I had already taken my history degrees, (laughs) big shot. I put on my greens and I went in and I spoke to the class, and I've been doing it ever since. And after that I spoke for that program, and that really opened the gates for me. The memories will come back to a certain extent. The problem I have now is that the memory is failing me, when I'm trying to achieve memory. What happens, of course, is that I do remember but it has to come back later. Sometimes—the other morning I woke up, I couldn't remember my cousins' names.

MH: What about the nightmares?

EH: I haven't had one for a couple of months now. Yes, I have, but not very often.

MH: You a religious person?

EH: Am I religious? Am I fully observant? No. Am I very, very conscious of the fact that I am a Jew? Yes, I am. I helped build the Monsey Jewish Center, the original Monsey Jewish Center. I was active. I was president of the men's club. I attended services every Friday and Saturday morning when I wasn't working on Saturdays. It was a Conservative congregation.

MH: Right.

EH: I'm a Jew, and I know I'm a Jew. As a matter of fact, the way I start when I speak to the kids, I tell them, "My name is Eliot Hermon. I am one of six members of my generation, one of the six cousins of my generation who served in the armed forces during World War II and the Korean conflict. I'm seventh generation to serve in the armed forces of the United States. I'm an American and I'm a Jew. And I'm one of six million, one of—what is it, 6 percent of American Jews, of all of American Jews who served in the United States Army, one of the one million American Jews."

(phone rings) This is mine. I hope it's not another disk problem. Okay. So, what else?

MH: I know you acknowledge being an American Jew, or Jewish American—

EH: No, I'm an American and I'm a Jew. I was asked as an officer—there was a time—I believe it was after the bombing of the *Liberty*—whether I would have problems in serving if I was one of the American troops that was sent to fight in Israel. And it took a lot of soul searching, but what it came down to was that I took an oath, and if the orders I receive are legal and proper, it was my responsibility to follow those orders. If I had to, I would do it. I didn't want to do it; it was not something I wanted to do.

MH: How, if at all, how did what you saw during World War II affect your belief in God?

EH: I was very young and very smart, so I knew that, yeah, if there's a God it's actually what we call our souls. It's that thing inside each of us that makes us behave a certain way, properly. Do I believe in God now? Well, what did the camps do to me? I've never really asked that question that some people ask, that is, if there is a God, why does he allow such things happen? Because my belief is that, yes, there is a God. What form that God is or takes, I have no idea. Hopefully, I will one day find out. I don't want to find out about his opponent, or his purported opponent. I have ideas about that, too. Remember, history is written by the winners, by the victors. The Bible was written by those who were opposed to Lucifer, who is, after all, an angel, or was.

Belief—I've had more than one opportunity, if I wanted to, to convert from Judaism, might have made life much easier on occasion. Eh, why should I? I am what I am. I am what my ancestry has made me. I am what I've been raised to believe. As what I consider what I consider to be a rational human being, how do I—what's the word?—bring

together my belief, my rational beliefs and my beliefs in my religion. I accept the Bible, quite frankly, as having been written down as, I believe, as three or four separate pieces of writing. They've done this Elohist, Jahwistic, the priestly writings—I think that's it, those three. God made Man and gave him free will, that's my belief; and if this is so, then anything that Man has done about God has really been there because God has permitted it. Otherwise he'd have taken away free will.

So, is there a God? Yeah, I think so. Did God make the world 5800 years ago in six days? I think that's just how somebody interpreted what he was inspired to say. Do I believe that the geologic information we have, the evidence that we have, is correct? Yeah, as far as we're able to interpret it. It's probably right; maybe it's even older than we think. I don't know; I'm not an expert in that field. But take a look at something like a human hand. As an engineer, I take a look at what that is capable of doing, and I've seen what engineers do, and they're pretty good. But man, it takes a lot more inspiration than pure chance just to engineer a job like that. I mean, there had to be inspiration there. And I don't believe it was human inspiration that designed the human body.

MH: But basically, the question is still open as to why or how God could let the Holocaust happen?

EH: And it will remain open for all of me, because I don't know. And I won't accept some of the things that the rabbinical scholars will present, because they tell me that, no, a day in the Bible is twenty-four hours as we measure it today. How do you know? Were you there? So, I have to arrive at my own beliefs. I think most of us do. I am not a knee-jerk Jew. I am certainly not a member of the ultra-ultra-Orthodox sects; look around at what I read and you can see I'm not. But I'm a Jew, and I want to be a Jew, and have raised my children to be Jews. And they're pretty good at it.

MH: Okay. Anything else?

EH: No, just that I'm awfully proud that you consider me somebody you wanted to interview. I hope you can use what I give you.

MH: Quite a bit. Thank you.

End of interview