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# Vincent Koch oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008

Vincent Koch (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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**Vincent Koch:** I got your information from the article that I read in the last division newspaper. Were you in that division?

**Michael Hirsh:** No, I was—I'm younger. I was in the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Vietnam.

VK: The 25<sup>th</sup>? Okay.

MH: Yes. Okay, I've got a recorder going. Why don't you give me your name and spell it for me, please?

VK: The name is Vincent Koch, K-o-c-h.

MH: And your address?

VK: ... What's the name and address for?

MH: Just so I have it so that when the book comes out, I can send you a copy. And the ... and your phone number, sir?

VK: ...

MH: And your date of birth?

VK: 5-25-25 [May 25, 1925].

MH: Okay. And the unit you were in?

VK: 63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division.

MH: Okay. So, if we could start a little bit at the beginning, where did you grow up?

VK: Where did I grow up? I grew up in New York, New York City. I entered the service actually the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, 1943.

MH: And they sent you to basic where?

VK: My basic was at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi. I was there for about a year or so.

MH: When did you join up with the 63<sup>rd</sup>?

VK: When did I what?

MH: When did you join the 63<sup>rd</sup>?

VK: I joined the 63<sup>rd</sup> just as I was drafted. I was drafted on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, 1943, and that was where they sent us. They sent us to Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi.

MH: Mississippi, okay. When did your unit go overseas?

VK: November 1944.

MH: And you went to where?

VK: We landed in Marseille, France.

MH: Then what happens?

VK: Then we worked our way north, and actually—let me see. We worked our way all the way up, and one of the stops that was very vivid in my memory and always will be was in Landsberg, Germany. That was in April of forty-five [1945].

MH: Okay. Were you in the Battle of the Bulge?

VK: Yes.

MH: And you came through that unscathed?

VK: Yes, luckily.

MH: Luckily. So, tell me about arriving in Landsberg.

VK: Well, we arrived in Landsberg. We were on the way—we were moving our way north to eventually get as far as Munich. One of the stops along the way was in Landsberg, where we lost a nice couple of people with the land mines, approaching the town at the time. And I was probably one of the first—I was a sergeant at the time, and I was head of a mortar platoon. And I was probably one of the first soldiers in my outfit that happened to enter the concentration camp in Landsberg.

MH: How did you happen to see the camp? Was it right along the road?

VK: Well, it was right off; it wasn't too far off the road. In fact, I had a pretty good idea of concentration camps, and I recognized it right away when I saw it. The Germans had left, I think, either the day or two days prior to that.

MH: When you say you had a pretty good idea of concentration camps, how did that come about?

VK: Well, you know, I was always aware of them; I always read about 'em. I mean, I come from a Jewish background, and that was something that we were always pretty well made aware of. And this one in particular came—I didn't even realize there was a concentration camp in Landsberg, and when I noticed that as I walked in there—I mean, it's quite a few years: I'm eighty-three years old today. So, when I walked in there, the gates were open. In other words, the Germans had, as I said, left maybe a day or two before that. And when I opened—I mean, all the victims, the Holocaust victims, were still in their wooden beds there.

MH: When you walked into the camp, you said the gates were open?

VK: The gates were open. In other words, they had just—that's why we figured that they had just left, being that nobody was there before. I don't know. I got a telephone call from somebody in Washington some years ago, also asking about the information in reference to the concentration camp: a colonel had called me, and he asked me questions about it. And then, there was an article in the *Blood and Fire*, the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division newspaper or what have you. And some of the—they wrote something about the Landsberg concentration camp, and some of the information, to my knowledge, was incorrect. I wrote back to the paper there to try to correct it, and the next thing I knew I got a telephone call from this colonel. [Fred] Clinton, I think his name was.

MH: When—if the gates were open, the inmates had stayed in the camp, or they were coming out?

VK: The inmates were in there. There wasn't that many in this particular part of it. And when you say—they couldn't have gotten out of there even if they wanted to, because they were just malnourished. They weren't strong enough to even get out of the wooden bunks that they were lying in.

MH: So, you walk in the camp. Just sort of take me on a tour of what you saw.

VK: Well, I walked in there, opened up the doors and I—you could tell immediately. I mean, the odor coming from there was absolutely unbelievable. And I walked in there and they picked their heads up, some of them; they were in a horrible state, as you can imagine. I started to approach—you know, they were like double-deckers [bunks]. Some were on the top, others were on the bottom. And I started to try to get some information:

in other words, I was able to speak German, so I spoke with them in German, thinking that it was pretty close to Yiddish. Sure enough, some of them picked up on the language. I just wanted to get some information, you know, how long and what happened.

MH: So, what did they tell you?

VK: They really couldn't do much talking, though. It so happens that, about three days before that, I received a huge package from home, which I would get on occasions, on rare occasions, and these were groceries. I went out and I—it was in the Jeep that I was—in our outfit, and I brought them groceries into the—sort of like where they were. And I opened up—I had never opened up the carton before because we were always on the run. And it was all good things, you know, that they would have recognized.

I opened it up, and I started to open some of the packages. And when I started opening some of the packages, those that were able to get out of their bunks, more or less, and they started to walk toward me and the package that I had on the floor there. And that was a big mistake, because they started to come, and they started to claw at each other trying to get to the food. And I didn't realize that that would happen. In other words, there was crackers, there was honey cake in there, there was all kinds of things that you know, they hadn't seen; naturally, they hadn't seen anything. So, in any event, that was an experience that was just—

MH: What did you do?

VK: Well, what did I do? I didn't do anything. I walked out and I let the others in my outfit that were there—it was very small; it was just a platoon level that was there, I mean, it wasn't even a company size, it was a platoon size, even less than a platoon. And I just told them what I saw and so on and so forth. The captain came in with me and he advised, he said, "The smartest thing you can do is take that package out, because they're going to tear each other apart to get to it." So, what I did is we tried our best—he immediately got somebody on his phone somehow. He got advising them, because I noticed that it didn't take long—I think the following morning; this was late in the afternoon.

The following morning, ambulances started to arrive—I don't know where they came from—and they started to put them into ambulances. In fact, we were in that town maybe about four days, and on the beginning of the third day—General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower must have been somewhere in the area, and he appeared there, too. In fact, I was standing so close to him that I could actually see that, believe it or not, that sort of

tears were rolling down his cheek after he made the rounds to see what was doing there. Because right in the back, right in the back of where they were housed, there was a tremendous trench that they had dug, the Germans had dug. It must have been—I don't know. It could have been about maybe thirty yards long and about—I don't know, maybe about ten, twelve feet wide. And the place was just loaded with dead bodies that they had thrown in there, all nude, and they must have shot them or did something.

When he saw that, that's when I noticed that the expression on his face was absolutely unbelievable. I mean, it's so vivid that if you look at all the years now—what is it, sixty-some odd years? —I can still remember every single thing that took place that day.

MH: Did Eisenhower say anything?

VK: Pardon me?

MH: Did Eisenhower say anything to you?

VK: No, he didn't say anything, but he did mention something. He was with someone that could have been somebody in his particular, you know, area there. I don't know if it was—I think, if I remember correctly, it was a major. So, I don't know what significance it was, but he did mention something to him about the unbelievable horror that they were confronted [with] and they saw. And—

MH: It—go ahead, I'm sorry.

VK: Go ahead. I mean, whatever you want to ask me.

MH: No, it was just—it's unusual that you were there for that many days.

VK: Well, I mean the idea is that we were there. We got there, I don't remember the exact day; I know it was April of forty-five [1945]. We got there late in the day: it was almost—must have been late afternoon. And then we were there the following day; and then, at the end of the second day, is when the ambulances and help started to come in. And we stood there, we stood there that day and the following—it could have been three days. It was either three or four days.

MH: It probably was April 27.

VK: It's very possible.

MH: That's the day—it says that that's the day that Landsberg was—it said the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored, and the 63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry were there.

VK: You got that information?

MH: Yeah.

VK: Well, so it could have been the third day that we were there. Then we started to walk around, you know, around the area there. And the thing that we could never quite figure out, though, after a while, is that when we got into the town itself—this was before you got into the town of Landsberg. When we got into the town itself, we started to see the German people, civilians, in the town. And I started to discuss it with them, and every single one of them denied that they knew what was going on there, which was very hard, very hard to believe. In fact, it was so hard to believe because the stench in that area was so strong that they would have had to know something that was going on there.

We took some of the civilians there and we brought them in to show 'em this particular segment of the concentration camp, and we walked them into where these bodies were lying. There must have been about—oh, there could have been about thirty, forty bodies that were all nude, lying one on top of the other. They shot 'em first and then they threw them into the—they didn't even have enough time to cover up the trench that they had built up there. And we brought the civilians there to let 'em look at it. Naturally, they were horrified, too. Whether they put it on or not, it's very hard to say that; but anybody, anybody at all that would have seen it, would have been horrified at what they saw there at that time, though.

MH: Did you have to bring the civilians there at gunpoint, or did they—

VK: No, not at all, not at all. They were—the civilians never, never had to be taken anywhere at gunpoint. They were—you know, you couldn't figure out if they were fed up with the regime there, or whatever the story was. We never spent enough time with them to find out. But a lot of them came up there, and their reaction and their comments were horrified. I mean, as I said, I don't know—I'm pretty sure that, look, that those people—those civilians that lived in Landsberg, I'm sure not all of them were the kind of

Germans that could pacify the use of the Holocaust and what went on in Landsberg. Remember, that was the place where he wrote—Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* in that town. Were you aware of that?

MH: Yes.

VK: And he was in jail; he was jailed in there, and that's where he wrote his famous book, *Mein Kampf*.

MH: What other buildings inside the camp did you see?

VK: Well, there was also a complex of gas chambers. There was one building that—there were ovens there. In other words, that was probably the largest building that we saw there.

MH: The crematorium.

VK: The crematorium. Because the one particular place that I first witnessed what was going on there was as I got into town; it was right on the approach of getting into the town itself. And the idea was that at this particular spot, there had to be more. There had to be more of these, because the only—I don't think that they could have held more than about fifty or sixty people, inmates in that particular—it was a small set-up there.

MH: The camp you were in.

VK: Yes.

MH: There were—

VK: I'm sure there was more. There was many, many more. But we didn't get—we couldn't spend all that time, you know, just going to look over the place once they had called in the necessary people to take care of what was; that's when we left. In other words, that wasn't our—we weren't supposed to handle that. They had—I don't know what part of the service that they called in. But that particular group there that they called in, there was quite a few of them; they were coming in in these three-quarter ton trucks. I don't know where they came from. So, when they got in there, I'm sure a lot went on

after we started to pull out, which I think had to be, probably, the afternoon of the third day that we got in there.

MH: There were sub-camps. Landsberg was a sub-camp of Dachau.

VK: Yes, I know that.

MH: But there were—

VK: No, I didn't know that. In fact, I knew it. I knew it when in most recent years when I visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington. And Landsberg was never publicized, not much compared to Auschwitz and Dachau and Buchenwald, all of that. So, I was always—couldn't figure out how come there was no mention of it. Have you ever been to the—?

MH: I've been to Auschwitz.

VK: No, the museum, I mean.

MH: The museum I've been to, yes. In Washington.

VK: On one of the floors, there was a huge map, and the concentration camps were highlighted on that map. That was the first time that I saw Landsberg there.

MH: There were also camps called Kaufering, which were sub-camps of Landsberg.

VK: I didn't know that.

MH: It's possible, if you were in a small camp, that it was one of the Kaufering camps.

VK: Well, it's possible.

MH: Was there any indication that people did work at this camp, that it was a slave labor camp, or was it just a death camp?

VK: I really don't know. I couldn't answer that question if it was a slave labor or it was just a death camp. From what I saw there, I would almost think it was a death camp. I just couldn't see anything that was going on there, you know, where there was any work being done. But, as I said, I never got to the entire circumference of the whole area, because once we saw what was doing and we actually, you know, got help by getting people in there and medical aid, whatever they were able to do there, then that was as much time as we spent in that particular area.

MH: Did you and your men help evacuate those people?

VK: Well, they had enough of them. We certainly helped, yes. We did help, because we were—most of them could not walk out. Most of them had to be taken out on stretchers. And we helped to, you know, carry the stretchers or give them a hand with that, and to get it into the ambulance. They had medics there that did whatever they possibly could, or what they could have done on such short notice, because the condition that they were in was absolutely horrified. You were looking at skeletons.

MH: What's that do to you? I mean, they smell bad, they're near death, they look ghastly. How does that impact you?

VK: How does that impact you? If I could remember it from sixty-some years, then it must have impacted me pretty well, though. I mean, it was a terrible, terrible experience, especially if you were Jewish.

MH: Were other men in your unit Jewish?

VK: No. No. We were only three in the entire company in Mississippi, and two of them got killed. I was the only survivor of that. So, with that background and knowing what the story was, it was a devastating experience. It's an experience that, you know, you remember forever, as you can imagine.

MH: Were you able to talk about how it impacted you as a Jew to the other men in your unit?

VK: Not really, not really. I never brought that up, because to be very frank with you, I was always under the impression that there was a lot of anti-Semitism in the company that I was in. So, I never really got into that. We always had problems as far as—we were always put on KP [kitchen police]. We noticed that the four Jews always got the worst details. And we always detected from some of them—not all of them. I had some wonderful, wonderful friends there that I even maintained after I got out of the service. But there was—it doesn't take much. There was a nucleus of some that were really anti-Semitic.

MH: Did you ever run into anybody who said that, if it weren't for the Jews, we wouldn't be in the war?

VK: No, I don't think in those terms. But there was expressions, you know, about—I mean, there were so many incidents within the camp there, where they would just mention. Some of them never even saw it. Most of these fellows in my company there were from places like Kentucky and Tennessee, and there weren't very many from the New York area. I mean, it was a different category, and most of them never crossed paths with Jews before. But when they saw this—when they saw this, I can honestly say that it affected them, too. It wasn't a question of Jewish or not Jewish, it was a question of human beings; in other words, to see what they saw there. And most have come across the expression of these kinds of camps and were aware of it. It wasn't an entirely a foreign topic, you know.

MH: Right.

VK: Never. Nobody in my outfit ever saw that, was ever confronted with that before, though.

MH: What battalion were you in, do you remember?

VK: What battalion?

MH: Yeah.

VK: I was in the 255<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Company M.

MH: Company M. You got in there the first day, and you went out at night. Where did you stay at night?

VK: Where did we stay?

MH: Yeah.

VK: We had bedrolls on the ground.

MH: But outside the camp or inside the camp?

VK: We were in—well, the camp was interwoven with the town itself, you know. The entire camp was not fenced off. Some of it was areas that were on the outskirts. I'm sure they had plenty of German soldiers there, and civilians never bothered to get up in those areas, or even if they attempted to get there, they weren't allowed. That was a *verboden* area for civilians to go up there.

MH: Did you see signs that said "*Verboten*"?

VK: I did, yes. I saw signs that said "*Verboten*."

MH: Okay. So you were able to—you essentially set up camp outside the barbed wire.

VK: Yes, we set up camp outside. We picked a place where we—I mean, we were accustomed to sleeping on the ground. We spent 120 straight days sleeping on the ground there, so it wasn't anything new to us. And everybody had a bedroll, you know, and you got in a place—we didn't even bother. In some towns, we would try to get inside, you know, get into a house or something. But in certain areas, we just never bothered with it. We were so accustomed to being outside.

MH: You mentioned you'd been 120-some days on the march. How did those four months change you?

VK: How did the what?

MH: How did those four months change you, those four months in Europe?

VK: How did it change me?

MH: Right.

VK: Well, I don't know. You became hard, very, very hard. In fact, I mean, as you can almost imagine after going through—we were in combat for 120 days in a row there, which was quite a bit and this was—part of this time was in the coldest part of the winter. There was a lot of frostbite. When we got into Landsberg, we were not bothered with the weather as much. But when it was around four months prior to that—Landsberg was almost towards the end already, because—let me see. A couple of weeks after that, the war was over.

MH: Right, it was V-E Day.

VK: And I don't even think we reached Munich proper there. We remained where we were and we stood there, and then we worked our way back and we got orders to come back. And then, I spent—I mean, they took us back. I don't know if you ever heard of it, but at that particular point, it was a question. Naturally, everybody was anxious for the time to come when they can get out of the army and get back home. And we were sent to—we were sent, finally, when we got back to Germany, we were sent to France, to Le Havre, and we were in Le Havre. This is after that already.

When we ended up in Le Havre, we were scheduled to go—the war in the Pacific was still going on. So, we were scheduled to get on ships and go directly to the Pacific. And another incident that you remember forever: while we were on the ship and we still were in port—we didn't get out of port yet—somebody mentioned the fact to us that there was a bomb dropped, and it wiped out a whole city. So, we thought there was something wrong, that he snapped or something. But what that was is when the atomic bomb was dropped.

Now, if we had left Le Havre, if we were on—if we'd left the port, anybody that was on the seas heading for the Pacific was directed back to the United States. However, the fact that the ship did not leave and we were still there, they took us off and they sent us back to be part of the army of the occupation, and we spent another year and a half in Germany.

MH: I can imagine getting that news.

VK: You want to know? At that point, nothing bothered you anymore. I mean, you could expect anything, anything. So, we finally ended up back in Germany for a year and a half, and then they brought us in so we spent time in—what they did is we spent time working some of the other troops on the way home. You know, we were part of the cadre that worked them on the way home; that's why they put us back in Antwerp, Belgium, eventually. They had a system: you had points. In other words, everybody—I don't know if you heard about the point system.

MH: Yes.

VK: You did. Now, I didn't have enough points at the time, so I wasn't eligible to go home yet.

MH: You needed a Purple Heart. That would have helped you.

VK: The Purple Heart? Yes. I got the—I received the Purple Heart and I also received the Bronze Star, so that did help.

MH: You got the Purple Heart for where, the Bulge?

VK: I got the Purple Heart for the Bulge.

MH: Okay. How badly were you hit?

VK: I just got shrapnel in my knee and my shoulder and my arm.

MH: Is it still there?

VK: Well, you can see it; you can see the marks there. I'm lucky. I'm lucky, very fortunate. That's the way things go.

MH: Well, when you had occupation duty in Germany, having seen what Germans did to the Jews, how did you relate to the German civilians?

VK: I did not—you could not tell by the German civilians, that's how. They were unbelievably—first of all, they were frightened. They didn't know what we would be doing to them. But after a while, they knew. I mean, you know the American forces. Americans are unbelievable people. What they would do is they would give chocolate, part of their rations, to the German children. So, they were extremely warm, and after a while, they showed an awful lot of decency. So, there was never much of a conversation in reference to Jews there.

MH: Did you ever tell them you were Jewish?

VK: Yes, I certainly did.

MH: How'd that go?

VK: How did that go? Absolutely no comment whatsoever, so there was no way of knowing what the story is. You see, I spoke some German, so one of the lieutenants in my company during the combat mission—whenever we took prisoners, they would call on me to converse with the Germans to get some information that they thought was important, you understand? So, I would—I mean, I wasn't fluent, but I certainly knew enough to get something across and get some information from them. And you want to know something? The way I spoke German must have had a taint of Yiddish as well, because some of the officers that we took prisoner, they knew pretty well. I could tell by their facial expressions that they knew I was Jewish.

MH: I don't know quite how I would respond in a situation like that.

VK: Well—

MH: I mean, I'm Jewish. And I—

VK: I know you're Jewish, Michael. The name gives you away.

MH: Oh, okay.

VK: But there wasn't very many of us in the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division, I'll tell you that. There was—I mean, a company is a thousand, and out of a thousand there were four of us.

MH: No, a company is about 160. The regiment might be a thousand.

VK: No, wait a while. The company is—

MH: A platoon's about forty or forty-five; a company—

VK: Wait a while, a platoon—right. You're right, you're right. In other words, a thousand is the regiment, exactly. 255<sup>th</sup> Regiment.

MH: So out of the regiment, there were four Jews.

VK: I don't know about the others. I'm only going by the company. There were four Jews in the company. I don't know about the—you know, we didn't know everybody in the regiment, though.

MH: You didn't get to any of the other camps, after Landsberg?

VK: You mean concentration camps?

MH: Yes.

VK: No. That was the only one, Landsberg.

MH: How—we're talking about this sixty-three years later, and I can tell that as you talk about it, you can see it in your head.

VK: I can see what?

MH: As you talk about it, you can see it.

VK: Yeah, I can see it very, very vividly. I'm still—even at eighty-three, I still have my senses, and I can certainly remember a lot of things, and nothing do I remember more than that situation in Landsberg.

MH: Did it adversely affect your life when you came back? Did you have nightmares?

VK: Yes, still do. Still do. They tell me that I—my kids used to tell me that I used to get up screaming in the middle of the night, even to this day. Not as much now as it was years ago, but I still—I don't know, call it nightmares or whatever, though. A lot of it was more than just the concentration camp.

MH: Right. What did you do as a career when you came home?

VK: As a career? I ended up in the shoe business. I ended up—actually, when I first got out, I ended up working in a shoe store, and I ended up as a salesman for a major shoe company. And I spent about thirty-eight years—I retired at the age of sixty-five.

MH: Did the nightmares get worse after you retired?

VK: After what?

MH: After you retired, did the nightmares get worse?

VK: No.

MH: No?

VK: No.

MH: Some people have that.

VK: They were more from the beginning. In fact, as years went by, it got—at one time I never even bothered to talk about this at all. There was never any conversation in my family, to my children. I never got into a conversation. It's only recently; I would say maybe within the last five years. My children and my grandchildren never asked me questions. This always was remarkable to me. Never asked questions. Maybe they felt that it was something that it was—you know, that it was hurtful or whatever.

However, we were together at a family function about four, five years ago, and my granddaughter was taking the Holocaust up in school, in the history. And my daughter-in-law mentioned to her, “You know, if you want some of these questions, why don't you ask Grandpa?” So right there, she started to ask me questions. And that was the first time that I remember really getting into a discussion about it. Up until then, I never got into any conversation with that.

MH: Do you think it was because people sensed you didn't want to talk about it, or they were afraid to ask?

VK: Well, maybe it was a—I didn't want to talk about it, that was for sure. I just didn't want to talk about it. It brought back too many memories that I didn't want to revive, because when I talk about it even now, it brings back some of those vivid memories and they're all real, all very real. And that's the remarkable part of it: that even at this stage of my life, they're still very, very real memories.

MH: Did you ever go to military reunions?

VK: I don't hear you, Michael.

MH: Did you ever go to reunions of the 63<sup>rd</sup>?

VK: Michael?

MH: Yes?

VK: Do you hear me?

MH: Yes, I hear you fine.

VK: I don't hear you very well. Is it your phone or mine?

MH: I don't know. Do you hear me any better?

VK: Now I hear you a little better.

MH: Okay. Did you—

VK: Now I hear you a lot better.

MH: Okay. Did you ever go to reunions of the 63<sup>rd</sup>?

VK: I did. I went to only a few of them. I went to one that took place; both of them—one was in New York and one was in New Jersey.

MH: And how were those experiences for you?

VK: Well, by the time I went, you know, I never met anybody at those reunions that were in my outfit; in other words, in my company or my battalion even. So, actually—when you said a thousand, I'm thinking now, Michael. I think the battalion is a thousand, not the regiment.

MH: The battalion is a thousand.

VK: Right.

MH: Yes.

VK: We forgot about the battalion, because the battalion is five platoons.

MH: Five companies.

VK: Five companies, right.

MH: When your granddaughter first started asking you questions about it, what was it like talking to her?

VK: You want to know? It was not difficult at all. It wasn't difficult.

MH: How old was she at the time?

VK: She must have been about—I would say maybe somewhere around fourteen, thirteen or fourteen.

MH: So she was in high school.

VK: Yes. And then the others chimed in. This was a family function. They never knew. They never knew the outfit that I was in, they never knew very much about my whole, you know, career, or what you want to call it, in the service. And then, when she started to ask questions, then the others chimed in. Then the others started to ask. And I was a little surprised. In fact, I was always surprised why they never really asked questions. You know, you would think that—and I never really brought it on, either, so maybe it was a combination of both, that they didn't ask and I didn't talk about it.

MH: You didn't offer. How long did—

VK: Today, they don't do a lot of questioning about it. But I don't find it difficult to talk about it today, though.

MH: How long did that first conversation go on?

VK: Pardon me?

MH: For how long did that first conversation go on?

VK: Went on for the whole afternoon, maybe about three hours. In fact, I was very, very surprised on all the questions that they asked, and I was more surprised with the idea that they never asked it before. But I suppose that while they took it up in school and it all kind of went together, they were a little amazed at the fact that I was there and I could tell them about what went on in the concentration camp, you know, and things like that. Listen, I got a lot to show for it. Besides shrapnel, I also have frostbitten ears and toes and the whole thing. But that's getting off easy compared to what could have—

MH: What could have been. Right.

VK: I was—somebody called me, I don't know, maybe about a year ago, that the Veterans Administration wanted to have stories told, if they knew of any of the veterans from the Second World War that they could possibly interview, and they gave them a whole line of questioning if they had someone. So, one of them called me, and I did some—she interviewed me, and then she sent me a copy of the interview that I was very disappointed with. It bothered me the way she interpreted the answers I gave her, you understand?

MH: Yeah. What did she do?

VK: It really bothered me. And the interview took quite some time; it took hours. And as far as I was concerned, she missed the—maybe it's the way I gave it to her, or the way it was interpreted. I never wanted to get involved. And as far as with you, the key was the fact that you mentioned Landsberg. That's what—I mean, if you didn't mention Landsberg and the concentration camp, I probably wouldn't have followed up.

Can you hear me, Michael?

MH: I hear you fine.

VK: Okay.

MH: I hear you fine.

VK: So, I don't know what I could offer. I could tell you—I can take you back before that, but it wouldn't revolve around the concentration camp and Landsberg. I don't think you're interested in that, though.

MH: Not unless it ties into this, yes.

VK: It doesn't, no. These are all—

MH: Were you a religious person before you went in the Army?

VK: Yes.

MH: Were you a religious person—

VK: Well, I wasn't Orthodox or anything, but I had come from a family where you know it was tradition. I wasn't somebody that was kosher or Orthodox to any sense. I was more or less—you know, I knew I was a Jew, and my family was brought up that way, and that's the extent of it.

MH: Were you bar mitzvahed?

VK: Yes.

MH: And the harder question is, did you believe in God?

VK: Absolutely, very, very much so. Very, very much so.

MH: How did your experiences in the war affect that, if they did?

VK: Well, I had a tremendous, tremendous amount of belief that whatever happens, happens, so on and so forth. I mean, I used to attend services in the morning before I got into the service. You asked, were you religious? That doesn't make me religious if I attended services. But you do know what tefillin is, don't you?

MH: Of course. Yes.

VK: I brought them with me into the service. I felt that they—that was something that was—I don't know, I just wanted to have it. In fact, I remember my father telling me at the time, "You know, you're taking a chance, because if you ever end up as a prisoner of the Germans, they know what this is," and so on and so forth. And I remember answering him, "That's all right, I'll take my chances." And I brought them along with me, and I brought them home.

MH: Did you put them on over there?

VK: That answers your question about it.

MH: Did you put tefillin on over there?

VK: Pardon me?

MH: Did you ever use them over there?

VK: I sure did. I used them. I used them in the barracks, to be frank with you. They thought I was taking my blood pressure.

MH: (laughs) I'm sorry.

VK: There's one guy I remember vividly. His name was Clint, he was from Kentucky, and he slept in the bed next to me. And one day, he—one morning he—I used to get up—everybody got up at six [AM]. I used to get up at five to make sure that I put them on and took them off. But he happened to see it, and he got me on the side—and I was very friendly with him; he was really a deep Southerner. And he says, "Are you okay? Is your health all right?" I says, "Why do you ask?" He says, "Because the guys here are trying to figure out why you take your blood pressure every morning."

MH: (laughs)

VK: I explained to him that it was a religious thing, and he kind of understood it, to a certain point. I don't think he ever saw a Jew before, no less tefillin.

MH: I'm sure that's the case. So, as somebody who davened every morning and put on tefillin—

VK: Pardon me?

MH: You're somebody—you know, you daven in the morning, you put on tefillin. You go to a place and you're in a place like Landsberg. How do you square that with your belief in God?

VK: Let me tell you something: that is something that never, never changed my mind, no matter what the story was. My belief in where I came from and God never changed my thinking, though, never.

MH: You didn't question God?

VK: Never. Never did.

MH: Why? Or why not?

VK: Why didn't I?

MH: Yeah.

VK: Well, I just never. I never do today, ever. I hear plenty of comments today, too, where people—you get into company, social situations, and people are questioning God and what's happening in different situations around the world. And I never, I never question. That's God's will. And I was certainly brought up with the tradition. I have one brother, and he's pretty much the same way as I am: never questioned the idea that you'd question God. Maybe it's a good thing that kind of brought you through; the strong will brought you through in times when it might have been pretty difficult to get through them.

MH: Did any of the inmates in the camp, did you ever—

VK: I can hardly hear you.

MH: Any of the inmates in the camp, in Landsberg, was there any communication in terms of “I’m Jewish, you’re Jewish”?

VK: No.

MH: No.

VK: No, I never got into that at all. But some of the things that were in the huge package that I opened there, some of them might have been able to see by what was in there that I might have been Jewish. They had—

MH: It was April; was there matzo in it?

VK: There was not matzo, but there was gefilte fish in there. And there was honey cake, and there was, you know, things that gentiles certainly didn’t understand. That didn’t make you Jewish or what have you, though. It was a terrible thing, Michael, for the simple reason that I could not communicate with them. I was so anxious to be able to do whatever I could for them, you understand? I would have done anything for them. I felt so bad, so sorry for what they went through. And there wasn’t a thing in the world that I could do.

I mean, they weren’t even—they weren’t even there, to be frank with you. I think their mind was somewhere else. They were out of it, almost, that’s how emaciated, and strictly bones. And their facial expressions, cheekbones, and—it was just a horrible, horrible thing. I don’t know if I was the first soldier in there or not, because some think that maybe the 25<sup>th</sup> Division might have passed through first. But I really don’t think so, because why, if anybody was there first, by the time we got through maybe a day or two—the 25<sup>th</sup> Division—

MH: No, it wouldn’t be the 25<sup>th</sup>.

VK: No?

MH: The 25<sup>th</sup> was in the Pacific. The 103<sup>rd</sup> was around there, the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored was there.

VK: All right, so it's very possible that somebody also was familiar with it. Have you spoken—have you got any calls about your note about Landsberg?

MH: Yes, I've gotten a couple.

VK: You have a couple. Okay. Now the idea would be—these were, naturally, from the 63<sup>rd</sup>?

MH: Yes.

VK: Okay. So, the idea is that as far as—

MH: And also—I was going to say from the 103<sup>rd</sup>, but go ahead.

VK: All right. If somebody was there before I was, you would think that the inmates would have been taken care of. The fact that they weren't and that they were still there, that tells me that nobody was there before. In fact, there was nobody in that squad that I was in—you know, that reached there first—nobody even recognized it. They would have passed it up. They wouldn't have even stopped. But I—immediately, it dawned upon me that this looks like part of a concentration camp.

MH: It was—

VK: I had no information before that there was a concentration camp in Landsberg. Especially that the gate was open. And when the Germans left, they just left the gates open, that's all.

MH: It was right along the main road?

VK: When I walked in, there was no question about it, when I first saw what it was all about. There was probably a lot more to tell you about it. But after I saw the trench, the

trench in the back, which was even more horrifying than the forty or fifty that were in the—I don't know what to call it. It wasn't a building, it was like—you've probably seen pictures of it in the past, though. It was something that was just put up there and beds put in there.

MH: Did it have walls?

VK: Pardon me?

MH: Was it enclosed? Did it have walls?

VK: Yes. Yes, it was enclosed. It was enclosed. It had—I remember there was a door leading into it, and the fence might have been about ten, twelve yards beyond the door.

MH: Okay. And there was only one building like that in that camp?

VK: Well, I didn't really look further. There could have been some. I would think that there had to be more than this one, unless they brought them into Landsberg and they used that for gas chambers and then whatever they did with them and kept bringing more in them. That, I'll never know. You know, I never found out too much other than the experience that I had there.

MH: And that camp was literally right along the main road through Landsberg, through the city?

VK: It wasn't a main road, it was a road. It was a dirt road, I remember. We never went along the main roads if we could avoid them. Remember, we were infantry. So, we would always try to remember to try to move up in areas where you were hidden from artillery fire, or whatever it was. So, this was a dirt road that went up. In fact, I remember vividly that the town—this had to be somewhere around Easter Sunday sometime, if I remember correctly; is that possible?

MH: Yes, of course. I mean, I don't know what—

VK: You wouldn't know. But you do know the date was around the 27<sup>th</sup>?

MH: It was around the 27<sup>th</sup>.

VK: Okay. I know it was April of forty-five [1945], that I'm positive. But it had to be, yes, because Roosevelt died the 13<sup>th</sup> of April.

MH: He died on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

VK: 12<sup>th</sup>, okay. Listen, I'm close.

MH: You're very close.

VK: I'm eighty-three, and you're probably thirty-four.

MH: No, I'm sixty-five. I was born on April 13, 1943.

VK: Were you?

MH: Yes.

VK: Oh, just as I was leaving, you were born, in 1943.

MH: Just about, yes.

VK: So, actually, you know, this whole situation is—I mean, there was other things that took place along the way, but nothing was more vivid than the experience in Landsberg. I mean, my group of guys were the first ones into Heidelberg, we were the first American soldiers into Heidelberg. This was all on our trek going from literally Marseille crossing the Rhine [River] with the ultimate to get into Munich; that would have been the end of our set-up there. And all the experiences that went on there—I could write a book with you, Michael.

MH: Okay. Hang on, I'm still trying to find out what day Easter was.

VK: Pardon me?

MH: I'm still trying to find out what day Easter was, but it's not coming up.

VK: I'm losing you again.

MH: I said I was still trying to find out what day Easter was, but it's not coming up.

VK: What day?

MH: What day in 1945, in April, was Easter?

VK: You're talking about Landsberg?

MH: Yeah. You had said it was right around Easter.

VK: I think it was around Easter, I think so. I don't have it in front of me, but I probably have the date. I did keep—one of the guys in the outfit, he kept a very accurate log, and he gave us all a copy when we left the service. So, I probably have the date written. I do know it was in April. I do know it was after Roosevelt died, that was for sure. So, you could be pretty correct, around the 27<sup>th</sup>.

MH: Actually, I'll tell you in one second. Nineteen forty-five, it was April 1<sup>st</sup>.

VK: This was April 1<sup>st</sup>?

MH: Easter was April 1<sup>st</sup>.

VK: Oh, Easter was April 1<sup>st</sup>. So, it couldn't have been Easter. This was after. This was after, because April 1<sup>st</sup>, Easter Sunday, we lost about eight or nine of our company with landmines. As we moved up, they exploded. This was probably—I think the date is probably pretty accurate, though.

MH: Was there any combat after Landsberg for you?

VK: Any—?

MH: Actual combat operation? After Landsberg?

VK: I would say that after Landsberg, it was just a question of moving as fast as we could move, and they were running faster yet. The whole German army at that point, they were running, and not only in April. They started to run even before April. Most of the combat experiences that I had, actual combat, were before the Landsberg situation. They were before that. It started, actually in France, in Bliesbruck, France. I just remembered now I mentioned the fact that I got the Bronze Star in the Bulge. No, I got the Bronze Star in Bliesbruck in France, on February 4<sup>th</sup>. That had to be 1945.

MH: What happened that you got the Bronze Star?

VK: That was the first real skirmish that we had. We moved into—they lined us up. There was a German—I don't know whether it was a regiment or whatever. They put us together with a division: it was our regiment and there was a regiment from one of the others—could have been 106<sup>th</sup>—in other words, to try. They couldn't move up because of the fighting that was taking in front of us. So, it was our job to get through that particular area, which was Bliesbruck, in France. And it was a tremendous week that we were bogged down there. We had a tremendous amount of casualties.

And actually, at that time already—what the Germans did to try to keep us from advancing at any great speed, they saturated the area with foot mines. Now, foot mines are something, you don't even see them, especially—these skirmishes took place at night; most everything took place in the middle of the night. Nothing took place during the daylight hours. And we were moving through that area, and we must have—I don't even remember how many we lost, but we lost a hell of a lot in there.

I was together with a guy that was—I was in the mortar outfit, and he was in the machine gun outfit. And he was absolutely unbelievable. In other words, there was one particular spot there where they were dug in so badly, and after we started to lose people from land mines, he absolutely went berserk, actually, and he started to fire the machine gun. He took it off the tripod; he was holding it and firing. I was with him, in fact, and he was responsible for breaking through.

And when we finally got up there and we saw the age of the German soldiers there, we were absolutely amazed. They were fourteen and fifteen years old. And that's how tenacious they were, and that's how they were fighting in that area. And you want to know something? When they finally—when we finally got them out of where they were dug up, they spit on us. I remember that vividly. That's the caliber of who we were up against. Anyway, this guy that was on the machine gun, he won the Silver Star, and I got the Bronze Star, for that particular situation in Bliesbruck, Germany—er, France.

MH: Okay. Anything else that I should have asked you that I didn't?

VK: No, I can't think of anything, Michael.

MH: Do you have an e-mail address?

VK: Do I have an e-mail address? Yes. It's—hold on one second. I don't remember everything. ...

MH: Okay. I thank you very, very much for your time.

VK: Look, you've got the phone number if there's anything along the way that you—you know. We're in Florida, actually. We spend about five, six months down there. I usually get down there somewhere around the middle of October or beginning of October.

MH: Do you have a separate phone number in Florida?

VK: Yes, I do. ...

MH: Okay. All right.

VK: So, if there's anything else that you think of—

MH: The only thing I'm thinking of is, do you have a picture of yourself from World War II?

VK: Yeah, I have plenty of them. You would like to have some?

MH: I would like to have one good one.

VK: One good one.

MH: Which I'll scan and send back to you. What I'd like is a picture from World War II and then one from, you know, recent.

VK: I don't know if I've got the recent one, but I have them from World War II. I have plenty of them.

MH: If you could find one—I'm gonna send you an e-mail with the address and everything, and if you have some time, if you could pick one out and send it to me.

VK: All right. Now, I don't have your address.

MH: I'll e-mail you the address.

VK: Okay. All I have is Punta Gorda, Florida.

MH: Right. I'll e-mail you the whole thing.

VK: Okay. So, you can e-mail it, and I'll pick out some. You want pictures that are what? A picture that—

MH: A combat kind of picture.

VK: Okay. I certainly have that.

MH: Okay. Terrific. Thank you very, very much. I sure appreciate your time.

VK: Do good. I'm anxious to read it.

MH: I'll do better than the other person did.

VK: Well, I will, because I'll tell you, I was terribly disappointed with the others. It just—in fact, after I finished with those, I said I'll never get into an interview on that anymore. It was—they just interpreted it entirely wrong, you understand?

MH: Yeah.

VK: What they said was—but I feel you have the experience. And hopefully, you know, it'll come out.

MH: I'll do my best not to screw it up. And let me tell you, taking your blood pressure with tefillin, it's the best laugh I've had in a long time.

VK: The best what?

MH: The best laugh I've had in a long time. All right?

VK: All right, Michael.

MH: Take care, Vincent. Thank you very much.

VK: Bye-bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

***Part 1 ends; part 2 begins***

VK: In the service, I was Vincent K-u-c-h-a-r-s-k-y. And they gave us an opportunity, that if anybody wanted to change their name, there wasn't any charge for it. And I don't

know, for some reason or other, the majority of my family was Koch at that time. So, I took it upon myself to change it to Koch, just in case my kids weren't good in spelling.

MH: I've actually interviewed a couple of veterans who changed their name—one in particular, I remember the details. He was applying—he had been in Berga. He had been captured, a POW, and sent to this—he was in a Stalag, and they pulled all the Jews out and sent them to Berga, the slave labor camp, to work them to death. By the time he got out, seventy GIs had died there. He was about seventy-eight pounds when he got out. And he came back to the U.S. and he was rehabilitated and everything else; he lived in upstate New York, I believe. And he was applying for college and he had a very Jewish sounding name and was getting no responses. And somebody said, "Try a different name." And he tried—he changed the name. I forgot what his original name was, but he changed it to Brooks, and he began getting responses immediately.<sup>1</sup>

VK: Is that right?

MH: So, I mean, here's a guy who, because he was Jewish—he served in the Army and was nearly murdered by the Nazis, and had to come back to the U.S. and face anti-Semitism so that he changed his name to get into school.

VK: I want to tell you something: The anti-Semitism that was there was very, very vivid. You know, we were in a division; this will be the second [thing] I'll tell you about as far as anti-Semitism is concerned. I had a first sergeant that was quite anti-Semitic. And what they were doing, they were taking certain amounts of troops out of divisions to fill up some of the voids in Europe. They were taking them out of the troops that were in the United States. And we used to fear that, because we felt—we know we're going overseas, but at least we wanted to go over as a unit. At least you made friends, I mean; you got close with some of the other guys that were in your outfit.

Every time they sent the list down to my first sergeant, my name was always the first one on the list. And I had a lieutenant, a first lieutenant from South Carolina. I remember his name vividly: he was Lieutenant Chambliss. And he had the authority to analyze the list and he could make any changes that he wanted, and he always took my name off. And I asked him one day. I said, "Lieutenant, isn't it kind of surprising that every time you got a list—I'm under the impression—you know I'm Jewish?" So, he didn't acknowledge that statement at all. I says, "I'm beginning to think that O'Brien is putting me on that list because I am a Jew." He didn't say anything whatsoever. He says, "Look, I take you off that list because you're a hell of a good soldier, and I want guys like you with me." That was his answer.

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<sup>1</sup> The DOI for Morton Brooks' interview is C65-00013.

Okay. By the way—

MH: Yes?

VK: (to wife) What did you say, Sunny, as far as what?

**Mrs. Koch:** I need to know what his e-mail is so that I don't reject it.

VK: She wants to make sure—she's mostly on the computer. She wants to make sure she doesn't reject it. What is your e-mail?

MH: It'll be....

VK: Got it.

MH: Okay. Thank you very much, sir.

VK: Okay. Bye.

MH: Take care.

VK: Bye-bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

***End of interview***