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Frederick "Fritz" Krenkler oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, March 18, 2008

Frederick Krenkler (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.]

Frederick Krenkler: Well, you ask the questions and I’ll see if I can answer, if I can remember them.

Michael Hirsh: First of all, would you give me your name and spell it, please?

FK: Yeah. Fred—Frederick—it’s Frederick Krenkler. And Frederick is F-r-e-d-e-r-i-c-k. Krenkler, K-r-e-n-k-l-e-r.

MH: And your date of birth.

FK: February 25, 1924.

MH: And I don’t need your service number.

FK: (laughs) And I’d gladly give it to you.

MH: Go ahead.

FK: 3393514.

MH: Some things you never forget.

FK: Yeah, 339365519 [*sic.*].

MH: So, start at the beginning: you were born where?

FK: In Germany.

MH: How did that happen? Well, I know how it happened, but—

FK: Let me explain about the birds and the bees. (laughs) I'll tell you how that happened. My father and mother had a tailor shop; my father was a master tailor. And after the First World War—well, I'll back up a little bit. My father was in the First World War. And it so happened that he fought in the same place where the Rainbow [42nd Infantry] Division fought in France in the First World War. Rainbow Division fought by the Ourcq River, but also in the Marne Valley, and my father was wounded in the Marne Valley in 1914—excuse me, 1917. He was wounded there, in the Marne Valley and I often wondered if it was against the Rainbow Division, although I never talked to him about it, and he never talked to me about it. Maybe he didn't know, I don't know; but he was like all the rest of us, he wanted to forget all that.

(footsteps in background)

FK: (to Mrs. Krenkler) Hey, hon!

Verna Krenkler: You were right there?

FK: Yeah, didn't you see me waving? I thought—

VK: No.

FK: I thought you were looking.

VK: (inaudible) when you come in from the outside, from the light.

FK: I thought I was—

VK: It's dark in here.

FK: I thought you were looking right at me. Did you go up already?

VK: No, I'm on my way up.

FK: All right, okay. Well, bring those—bring those books.

Pause in recording

FK: Sorry about that.

MH: That's your high school sweetheart?

FK: Yes. And that's another story. Who told you that?

MH: I read the—

FK: Oh, yeah—by the way, did you read the whole thing? You're going to give that back to me, yeah. Okay, that's fine. What did you think of that?

MH: I thought it was an interesting story, but I thought you skipped right over the things that were probably hard to remember, or hard to talk about.

FK: Well, it was more a story of my life for my family more than anything else, but I interwove it with some of my experiences during the war. But anyhow, getting back to the original thing—my father and mother decided to give up the business, and my father came to the United States. Because he would work all week, and if he didn't spend the

money he got for his tailoring in a matter of hours on Friday, it was worthless by evening. It was just impossible to live, so he came to the United States.

MH: This is after they had you?

FK: No, no, this was before. But my mother was pregnant, and she stayed over there. And when I was a year old, then she came over to my dad. But my father, in the meantime, had become a citizen, which gave me derivative citizenship. A lot of people don't understand or know what derivative citizenship was, but there was a period of time in the early twenties [1920s] where anyone born of an American citizen, which my father was, automatically was a citizen of the United States, regardless of where they were born. And this is called "derivative citizenship."

Now, the Army in the Second World War—I should say the services in the Second World War—knew about derivative citizenship, because you could not send an American into combat if he wasn't a citizen. You could take him into the Army, but he had to stay in the United States during the Second World War. But anyone who was a citizen could be sent over. So, I had dual citizenship. I was an American citizenship, but Germany still recognized that I was still a German citizen, which I had dual citizenship until 1973. After a number of experiences, trying to prove that I was a citizen, I decided enough's enough, I'm going to get my own papers.

MH: What city in Germany were you born in?

FK: I was born in a very small town along the Neckar River near Stuttgart. Stuttgart is in southern Germany in the state of Württemberg. Württemberg [Baden-Württemberg] was one of the original three "kingdoms" that made up the German Federal Republic. Actually, Bismarck reunited all these various states—Prussia was the largest kingdom, Bavaria was the second largest kingdom, Württemberg was the third, and Saxony, I think, was about the fourth.

MH: So, you were born in—

FK: Württemberg.

MH: Württemberg, and at the age of one, you come to the U.S.?

FK: Yes. But at the age of one, I came to the U.S. I actually learned to walk on the boat, I was told; I didn't know about this, obviously. But when we were here, my mother got homesick and she took me and went back. We went back to Germany. Now, just when that occurred, I never really found out. I never spoke to—my parents never really told me about when. In any case, we went back. But then my mother got homesick for her husband and she returned, but left me over there.

MH: Who'd she leave you with?

FK: We had a large family, a very large extended family. And it's tradition that in European, as a matter of fact, families, godparents step in and take care of children. Godparents. Now, my godfather, who was my uncle—my father's brother—I lived with him for a time, and I also lived with my godmother, who was my mother's sister. And that's where I lived for most of the time.

MH: So, you went to elementary school—and high school in Germany.

FK: Not high school. No, we didn't go to high school in those days. It was an intermediate school. High school I went to as soon as I came over here to the United States before the Second World War.

MH: So, how old were you when you came back to the United States?

FK: Fifteen.

MH: And why did you do that?

FK: I had to, because I was an American citizen.

MH: And did they tell you to get out?

FK: Oh, yes.

MH: Who told you?

FK: The German government. Said, “Out.” They did not keep American citizens over there.

MH: What year was this that they sent you back?

FK: One month before the invasion of Poland.

MH: So, that’s thirty-nine [1939]?

FK: Thirty-nine [1939].

MH: And they literally—I mean, a knock on the door. “Leave.”

FK: Yeah. Yes. Exactly right. And had I not left, I probably could have caused the rest of our family a lot of trouble. But I was young. I didn’t really, really know what was happening. At fifteen, you know, you think more about girls than you do anything else.

MH: And you came back to the U.S. at fifteen. And you spoke only German?

FK: Yes.

MH: How long did it take you to learn English?

FK: Very quickly. Very quickly, and this is one of the things that upsets me so terribly today, in the fact that we stand on our heads to have people use their own language for things that are really American. Nobody offered me to take my driver’s test in German. I had to learn English. And of course one of the things that—it was a good bit of animosity, obviously, against the Germans, and I had problems in high school. Here in the United States, I had some real problems. Matter of fact, I had even decided to take German as a second language because I figured that would be easy; but unfortunately, the teacher was a Netherlander, and she—who was teaching German. And, of course, her country had been invaded and been occupied, and she didn’t like me, so I darn near flunked out of German, believe it or not.

MH: You're the only native-born German that I've met who doesn't speak English with a German accent.

FK: Well, when you're in the Army, you learn to talk English, quickly. When you're just an ordinary person that lives on the street, I can understand it. But if you were to ask any one of the men that served with me—unfortunately, there's nobody here from my squad or my company—they'll tell you I had quite an accent. Quite an accent. But that disappeared very, very quickly. Very quickly. And then of course I also went to college. I went to engineering school in Philadelphia at DIT, Drexel Institute of Technology; today it's Drexel University. And there again, when you start reading and writing English, you learn it very quickly. But if you just start—

(to Mrs. Krenkler) Oh, thank you, honey. Did you bring all of them? Just the one?

VK: Oh, just the one?

FK: Oh, that's all right.

MH: You went to college after the war?

FK: Oh, yes, yes.

MH: Okay, so you come back here and you're fifteen years old, you're in high school. Now the war is coming—

FK: Well, I had started in engineering. I was in a program to become a master tool and die maker. Along with that, I had to have schooling. Now they offered schooling at the local level in local college, community college; but I felt if I'm going to spend time in school, I might as well go to a school that's accredited, that is a little bit further advanced, that would offer me more, so I decided to go to Drexel. So, I became a master mechanic. In later life, I had my own business. I think that is in the memoirs, I think I wrote that in there. And this is probably why my accent is not there. As a matter of fact, I've probably got more a Philadelphia accent than anything else.

MH: How did you end up in the Army?

FK: Well, I didn't end up in the Army. I was working as a tool and die maker—well, an apprentice tool and die maker. I hadn't finished my time yet. And I was very, very patriotic. I thought this was a wonderful country and I felt it was worth fighting for, even if it meant going to Europe and fighting against my own—actually, my own people. And possibly even my own family, because I'm sure out of all the cousins that I had—I had something like thirty-two cousins—I thought, you know—I still felt it was my duty. The country had been good to me up to that time, very, very good.

I decided that I would enlist in the Navy. So, I enlisted in the Navy. On the way to boot camp in Bay Bridge, Maryland, the SP [Security Police] stopped the bus that we were on and they pulled me out, and I was told that my enlistment was canceled, that at the moment they needed material, they had sufficient personnel, they did not—the services did not need additional personnel, they had sufficient. What they were interested in was the buildup of material for the war. So, they sent me back to work.

But later, maybe possibly a year later, this would have been in forty-two [1942], about a year later in forty-three [1943] when they started plans, evidently—not that I was aware of these plans, but as they started the plans for the invasion of Fortress Europe, they required people in the Army again. Now they needed to build the Army up. They wanted—I forget how many divisions in the United States they planned to field—which they never achieved, by the way—in the Second World War. They never achieved the number of divisions. I think it was approximately two thirds of the number of divisions they had planned on that they were able to put together.

In any case, what they used to do with draftees was always put someone that was working as a truck driver became a cook (laughs) in the service. Well, this was not the case with me. They put me in Army ordinance, and I was assigned to Aberdeen, Maryland, and I spent my time in Aberdeen, Maryland in Army ordinance. And I have my MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] numbers; I have a number of MOS numbers, so I took ordinance basic, worked in Army ordinance for the better part of a year. And then, they decided that they needed German-speakers, as many as they could get. So they went—evidently, they looked through all the records, found German-speakers.

In my case, I was told, “You are now in the infantry,” and they sent me to Camp Gordon, Georgia, outside of Augusta, and I got ten weeks of basic training. My orders were cut. I was to join the Rainbow Division and be sent over. And this is what I was. I joined—now, I did not—I was not involved in the initial fighting that the Rainbow did in the part of France where it was committed. Now, the Rainbow Division was committed in Alsace-Lorraine in the Hagenau-Strasbourg area; which, by the way, in 1971 [*sic*] became German territory.¹ So, that part of France speaks a lot of German; as a matter of

¹ FK means 1871, when Alsace-Lorraine was ceded to Germany after the Franco-Prussian War. The territory was incorporated into France after World War I.

fact, if you look at the map, you will see that the names of the towns are all very German names.

Some of the places where the division got hit hard, and this is another thing—I have to give you a little bit of history even though I did not participate in this part of the campaign, because I did not join them until the division had gotten to the Rhine, and that’s when I caught up with them. But places like Hatten and Schweighouse [Schweighouse-sur-Moder], these were all German. As a matter of fact, I had been in some French homes where on the mantel, the sons—the pictures of the sons in the service, some were in German uniforms, some were in French uniforms. So, they served and those people were divided, and to this day they do speak German there along with French. But I caught up with the division, and then—

MH: What month and year was this?

FK: This was in March of forty-five [1945]. And I joined them and I was with them in the campaign from Wertheim [Wertheim am Main], Würzburg, Schweinfurt, Fürth, Nuremberg, and then when we got to the Lech River.

MH: That’s L-e-k?

FK: L-e-c-h.

MH: L-e-c-h, okay.

FK: The city of Rain, R-a-i-n, the lieutenant came to me and said, “Get yourself a driver, get two POWs, get yourself two POWs, some German prisoners, you get into Dachau.”

MH: Why did he want you to take two POWs?

FK: To show us the way in, the best way in, so that we could avoid any firefights. They wanted us in Dachau as quickly as possible.

MH: This was what day?

FK: This was about the twenty-eighth of April. We made it into Dachau by the twenty-ninth of April. On the twenty-ninth. Now, I personally did not get into the camp, because we were stopped outside of the camp.

MH: Tell me about the Jeep.

FK: Oh, the Jeep. I had two prisoners and a driver, and we took off down the road and they directed us the route to go, which was least occupied by German troops that were resisting. Even though we did come under fire once, when we got fired on, but we disregarded it and kept going, and outside of the camp—now, just far outside of the camp, and I have gone back with men from the squad to find this particular space, and I'm trying to think. In 2001, we retraced our steps. I went over and we took 'em, and we retraced our steps. We could not find the place where all this occurred. But it had to be within a thousand yards of the camp. The Germans had set up a captured German tank—

MH: American tank?

FK: American tank. Set up a captured American Sherman tank. That was the heavy tank that we had. And it was not running because the treads were off of it, but they had it on the road with barrels sited down the road, and we came under fire from that tank. We had to wait until anti-tank came along and destroyed it, too, so that we could continue on.

MH: Now, when they told you to go to Dachau, did they tell you what it was? Did you know what to expect?

FK: I was one of the few men in the outfit that knew what Dachau was.

MH: How did you know?

FK: Because as kids we were threatened: if you didn't behave, you're going to get sent to Dachau. Now, Dachau—I want to explain something about Dachau. Dachau in itself was not an extermination camp like Treblinka, Auschwitz; what it was was a labor pool. It was started—it was the first concentration camp in Germany, which was started in 1933. And it housed what the National Socialists felt were undesirables. Now, number one, they did have criminals there: it was for criminals, murderers and so forth. Homosexuals, even though there were homosexuals like crazy in the SA [Sturmabteilung]. And it also housed people that were against the regime. Matter of fact,

there was one rather well-known Lutheran theologian that died in that camp, was murdered in that camp because of his resistance to the regime.

MH: That's Neuberg [*sic*]?²

FK: Yeah. So, what it was was a labor source. It supplied a whole number of sub-camps around Dachau in a radius of about 200 miles, so that they would send people out to these sub-camps, and companies that required workers would get these people from these camps. Now, what happened was—it was not an extermination camp in the sense that they would mass-kill people. What happened was—they'd work them to death is what it was. It was a gradual—they just gave them sufficient food to stay alive, but when they died they had to get rid of the bodies, so they had the crematorium there, and they got rid of them. Now, later on, as the Russians came, advanced through Poland and Czechoslovakia and Hungary, they emptied these camps. And this is where all the bodies in the boxcars came from. They were emptying those camps to try to hide what had happened there, and they brought it to Dachau because they knew they could get rid of the bodies there. Now, there were—

MH: You learned this at what point in your life?

FK: While it was happening in 1945.

MH: You knew they were coming from other camps. How did you find that out?

FK: Well, I talked with the SS men, I talked with German prisoners: this was my job. And it was my job to find out who were guards and who weren't; but I did not get into—in other words, I was not one who unlocked the gates.

MH: That's okay. But let's talk more about the interviews you did, because you were in Intelligence & Reconnaissance.

FK: Yes.

MH: So, tell me, do you remember conversations with German prisoners?

² MH means Martin Niemöller.

FK: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely.

MH: Tell me about those. See, I've never heard this part of the story, ever.

FK: As a matter of fact, as a matter of fact, in this particular courtyard where we were stopped—we were in this huge courtyard. I had my prisoners—it's a matter of fact, it's all in the film there in that courtyard. And there was an SS officer, and I talked with him. And one of the things—he was an arrogant SOB.

MH: Start this story from the beginning. You're in a courtyard outside of Dachau?

FK: Outside of Dachau.

MH: And what happens? How do you come across these—?

FK: Well, he was one of the guys that tried to get out of there. And they all tried to get away, one way or another. They knew what was coming and he actually surrendered to us. Matter of fact, I have his pistol—or had his pistol—and I had his dress bayonet.

MH: But he's outside of the camp?

FK: Yeah, he's outside the camp.

MH: How far away from the camp were you at this point?

FK: Well, I can't honestly tell you how far we were, because I can't remember. You could smell the camp from five miles away. And so it was one heck of a—and I knew it was there, and, like everybody else, thought—well, we'd seen plenty of dead animals and smelled the dead animals, and to this day, I can tell you where a dead dog is laying because I know the smell. And it's a terrible smell; it's one you never forget. But they all thought it was animals, my buddies. And I knew darn right well what it was, that it was a concentration camp.

MH: Now you're in the Jeep.

FK: Yes.

MH: You're coming down the road.

FK: Yes.

MH: You've already had the tank fire at you.

FK: Yes.

MH: Now, how do you see this officer?

FK: Well, because it was a whole group that were—you have to recognize that at that point in the war, just about everybody knew that things were coming to an end. The Germans knew it, they knew it, we knew it. And it was an extremely fluid situation, very fluid situation. You had men that were trying to get away on the German side, not be recognized as SS. And this was one of my jobs. And the way I would always get—whenever there was a prisoner or a questionable prisoner—I would ask him to lift his left arm. “Bare your left arm and raise it.” Because the mark was in here, they were all tattooed right here.

MH: With the lightning bolt?

FK: Well, their numbers.

MH: The numbers?

FK: Yes. And what they used to do to try to hide that, they would burn that out with cigarettes. So, if you caught one with a scar right here, you knew darn right well he was some sort of SS man, and the scar in itself told you he was hiding something. He needed to hide something. He was worried about whatever it was. And these were the things I worked with. And anyhow, at that time, the prisoners, the German prisoners that we collected, they were a total conglomerate of just about everything. You had German Air Corps people, you had army people; you even had women anti-aircraft personnel. We were interested in SS. There's a little bit of a side note. Our division is the one that

captured Herman Göring, found Herman Göing. I wasn't involved in that, but our division did; he was one of the personalities that our division caught. So, I myself only got into Dachau later.

MH: Let's stick with this officer.

FK: Oh, okay. Well, he—

MH: There's a Jeep coming down the road.

FK: Yeah.

MH: And now what do you see?

FK: Well, first of all, we get shot at.

MH: Okay, you get shot at and then you wait for the anti-tank guys—

FK: To wipe the tank out. That's right.

MH: They wipe out the tank. Now what?

FK: Now we're there, and there's a stream of Germans coming towards us. We take 'em, keep 'em in the courtyard. I had maybe 150 of them that I sat down in the courtyard.

MH: These are Germans in uniform.

FK: Yes, mostly.

MH: Your weapon is?

FK: My weapon is just a rifle. I only carried a rifle.

MH: An M1?

FK: Yeah, an M1. My friend, my buddy Larry Hancock, was our BAR man, which was a Browning Automatic [Rifle]; he had that. And I think you might have remembered from the film: this German officer, this SS officer—he was SS, there was no question about it. He had his whole SS uniform on, immaculate, and it just so angered me to see this guy well fed, angered me because he was well fed, well dressed, and arrogant.

MH: How did he express the arrogance?

FK: He told me, he said—he looked, and they did not like to talk to non-coms [non-commissioned officers]. They would only really talk with officers.

MH: You were a corporal?

FK: I was a corporal. So he said to me, “I want to be treated under the Geneva Convention.”

MH: He says this in German.

FK: Yes.

MH: How do you say it in German?

FK: (speaks German) And I said “Like hell you will.” That really annoyed me, when he said, “(German),” I said, “(German) No, no, no. You stand at attention over there.” Those boots, I had to get ’em full of crap.

MH: Tell me about the boots.

FK: They were highly polished. You could see yourself in ’em. I often thought you could actually see yourself good enough to shave in these highly polished boots.

Unidentified Woman: Good morning.

FK: (to woman) Good morning, how are you?

So, I made him stand at attention up there, and then I started questioning him.

MH: You said it was on a manure pile?

FK: Yes. I made him stand at attention up on a manure pile. And then, of course, I took his weapons off of him. But then he clammed up. Wasn't going to—he saw how annoyed I was. Then I told Larry, I said, “Do me a favor: take him behind the shed there, take your BAR and run it off and come back out alone.” Well, Larry didn't get a chance, because evidently there were—oh—

Unidentified Man: Good morning, gentlemen.

FK: (to man) Good morning.

There were guys there from an outfit—an American outfit—that took him. Now whatever happened to him after that, I don't know. My guess is that they eliminated him.

MH: Your personal decision to have him eliminated—

FK: I didn't want him eliminated. I just wanted Hancock to run the BAR back there so everybody hears, and then come out alone.

MH: But you were telling him to kill him?

FK: Yeah.

MH: You were pissed off.

FK: Yeah. Oh, sure. Absolutely, really pissed. But I didn't want him killed, because I wanted him to talk. And I figured this would make him talk, if I scared the hell out of him, and it would make the other guys and the other ones that we had talk. But then we were shot at. In that compound, we were shot at by a kid that was hiding in the barn. And instead of hitting any of us, he hit one of my prisoners in the ankle, an older man in an army uniform, German army uniform, and it shattered his ankle. I felt so bad for him. When I told the SS officer to stand at attention on the manure pile, I told all my prisoners to sit down, sit down. And they all clapped when the SS man went up on the manure pile. But what happened to him—I'm trying to think of the name of the—ah, you guys had 'em, too. Special troops.

MH: Rangers?

FK: Rangers, that's it. The Rangers took him. And whatever happened to him, I don't know. Of course, I didn't care, either. I figured, whatever happened to him, he deserved it.

MH: Did you ever question any prisoners who told you about what was going on inside of Dachau?

FK: No, no, I did not. I didn't get a chance to. Because I was sent on immediately; as a matter of fact I didn't get into the camp to see what went on for a couple days.

MH: Where were those railroad cars?

FK: In the camp.

MH: Inside the wall?

FK: Yeah.

MH: They weren't outside the wall?

FK: No, no—they had a siding that went in.

MH: So you're back in your jeep and you go up to the gate?

FK: Yeah. Well, I didn't go up to the gate, no. I was then assigned to do something else, and we headed into Munich. So, I was constantly assigned to something different.

MH: In Munich, did you ever see people who had escaped from the camp?

FK: No, I never saw any; they tried to keep all the inmates in the camp. Number one, they needed medical attention, they needed food. And the United States Army tried to keep them in the camp. As a matter of fact, they even sent me to the city of Linz later on to keep the DP workers that were in Linz in the ironworks, the Herman Göring ironworks. I was sent up there to help sort them out. Who was—because the guards tended to hide among the concentration camp prisoners. And one of the sad things was I did find out later that quite a few of the guards were not Germans. The worst ones were Ukrainians, who were in a Ukrainian SS outfit that had joined the Germans in the fight against the Bolsheviks. And they were brutal, they were brutal.

MH: You eventually did get into the camp.

FK: Yes, I did.

MH: Tell me, when did that happen?

FK: Oh, God, I guess that was—to really go in and look was weeks afterwards. It was after the end of the war that I got back in to look at it, 'cause I was stationed in that part of the country.

MH: The first time you got into the camp was weeks later?

FK: Oh, yes.

MH: Tell me about that. Why did you want to go?

FK: Well, I wanted to see it. I wanted to see it like everybody else. I wanted to see what was to see, but the bodies were gone by then. The facility, obviously, was still there. We

saw the crematorium and saw the cells. And we went into the barracks to see how they were forced to live, we saw that. But evidence of what all had happened, meaning bodies, that was taken care of right away. But—and of course, Eisenhower wanted everybody in there to see, the populace even. I didn't personally see this, but I understand that the townspeople of Dachau were forced to go in and see what had occurred there, because they had denied it.

As a matter of fact, I'm an avid listener to talk show hosts like Limbaugh, Hannity, but also, Mike Savage. I like to listen to Mike Savage. And I was listenening to Savage the other day, and he had a guy on that really made me mad, and made Savage mad, too. This guy denied that the Holocaust ever happened, and I told my wife, I said, "Call Savage, because damn it, I gotta say that this guy is so full of crap. I was there, and I saw what had been done." And I saw the horror of the—but I got back in. I did get to see a couple of cars that still had some bodies in it. That was about it.

MH: A couple of railroad cars?

FK: Yes.

MH: What was—?

FK: Bodies, of inmates that they had brought from the east.

MH: The Americans were still working on getting—

FK: Oh, yeah. They were still—well, the Americans didn't do that; they got the townspeople out to do that. Now, just where they buried them and what they did with them, I have no idea. But I know some of our guys—most of the I&R guys did not get—right, the I&R. In other words, the—

MH: That's Intelligence and—

FK: The I&R, the Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon of headquarters company, 222nd Infantry Regiment. Even though the regiment was the one that hit the camp first, we were stopped and we did not get in it. In other words, we didn't unlock the gates, our group. But we saw enough on the way in; that was bad enough.

MH: What did you see? I really need you to describe it and talk about it, 'cause there aren't a lot of guys left who saw it.

FK: Well, I saw bodies on the way in, along the canal that ran along the side of the camp. I saw bodies that were—I really don't even know how to describe it. You could see every bone with the skin stretched over it like a piece of leather. And these bodies didn't even have a smell anymore, they were just—there was nothing there, that's how badly they were emaciated. But the odor from the boxcar full of ones had permeated the whole countryside, and we had smelled that well outside of the camp. Yeah, I saw them, saw plenty of—it wasn't a pretty sight.

MH: When you see this, what do you say—what do you and your buddies talk about? Do you talk about it or do you just go silent?

FK: Well, most of us said, “How the hell could they do this? How could they do this? How could you do this?” We had fought, we had fought, the Germans shot at me—I came close to getting killed a couple of times. That was war. They were soldiers. You saw a dead soldier, you saw a dead German; it wasn't a body, it was a human being. These bodies were not human beings. When you looked at 'em, they—the bodies that I saw had these sunken eyes, staring eyes, skin stretched over bones, and you almost thought they weren't human.

MH: Did you cry?

FK: I don't think any of us could. I don't think any of us could. We were so overwhelmed with what we saw there. And after that, unfortunately, we got pretty damn nasty and rough with the populace; we didn't take much of anything.

MH: When you say “pretty damn nasty”—you're pissed off.

FK: Well, it took me—yes, it took us—I guess in occupation duty, it took us until about Christmas 1945 before we felt any compassion, even for the kids. We threw a Christmas party in Vienna, Austria, for the kids there. And the arrogance was there from the populace, and it wasn't just the Germans, it was the Austrians. The Austrians were just as fanatical. And they—unfortunately, I understood what they talked when I'd hear them speaking. I understood what they were talking about, and it wasn't nice, what they were saying about us.

MH: What were they saying?

FK: Oh, that we were uncouth, uncivilized.

MH: They did this to humanity, and you're uncivilized?

FK: Yeah, we were uncivilized, uncouth, dirty. Undisciplined and everything else, they called us, and made fun of us. They made fun of us. I remember sitting in Vienna in a soccer stadium and was having a beer out of a can; we had beer in cans by that time. And I was drinking a can of beer, and I heard somebody behind me say, "You goddamn Americans. I wonder if they have babies in cans, too." These are the kind of remarks we had to listen to. And you met that all the time, even a year after the end of the war.

MH: When did you come back to the States?

FK: In forty-seven [1947]. I stayed over there. I met an Austrian girl in Vienna who was from a family that had resisted the Nazis. As a matter of fact, my father-in-law before the war was a battalion commander of the fire department district in Vienna. And he wouldn't join the Party; he told them no, he's not going to join the Party. Which was required of any civil servant of any standing; in other words, like a battalion commander of the fire department. So they broke him back down to fireman, and he spent the war as an ordinary fireman. But after the war, he went up very rapidly, and my father-in-law became Fire Commissioner of the city of Vienna. And he told me a lot of things about the attitudes and what happened. He also suffered under the Russians. And I saw what the Russians did, that's another thing. People think the Russians, oh, they were great. They were anything but.

MH: In the course of your military action—I'll get to when you were a civilian in a minute. But did you see any other—any of the sub-camps? Did you ever run into escaped prisoners? Did you ever run into any other evidence of the Holocaust?

FK: Not during combat, no. No.

MH: And after combat, did you run into any other Holocaust evidence?

FK: Not really, not really, because we were intent on catching the criminal element of the National Socialists, meaning SS men who were wanted. We had our records, we had the books, and we tried to find any of them that were wanted. This was our job afterwards. And I did not—I was sent to places like the Inn Valley, Schwatz, Wörgl. They sent me down to Schliersee, Tegernsee. I had to work in Salzburg, outside of Salzburg, and Anif. I worked in Linz, Linz, Austria. This was all in conjunction with trying to find—and this continued for years after the war, trying to find war criminals. Of course we were involved more with the lesser ones, not the really big ones. But still, we still did it.

And every German that came up from Italy over the passes, we screened 'em, because a lot of the SS would put on army uniforms and try to pass as German army men. They tried all kinds of tricks. Matter of fact, I was told—I did not see it, but I was told that in the camp, they tried to be inmates. They dressed like the inmates to try to get away. Now, this officer that came out of there, he evidently didn't come right out of the camp, because there was Dachau, Dachau, Dachau. There was Dachau, the town of Dachau; Dachau, the concentration camp; and there was Dachau, the SS training camp, which was right next to the concentration camp. So, you know, even much later afterwards—well, we were in Dachau. Yeah, sure there were a lot of people at Dachau. But which one?

MH: Did you run into civilians who said, “We had no idea”?

FK: Yes, that I did. And my answer was, “Well, I saw different. You can't tell me any different. You knew about it, because I knew about it. I knew about it before the war. You knew about it before the war. You knew about it during the war. Don't give me that crap that you didn't know. You knew.” And unfortunately, the populace was so—I don't know, brainwashed, I guess, about everything, they believed everything that was said. And if they were told that this didn't happen, they believe it.

MH: They didn't believe their noses?

FK: That's right.

MH: You could smell the camp. When the crematoria was running, you could smell the camp.

FK: That's right. You could see the smoke.

MH: And they could deny it.

FK: Yeah.

MH: When you came back to the United States, did you talk about what you had seen?

FK: No.

MH: Why?

FK: I wanted to forget it. I wanted to forget it. I had a wife, I had three kids. I wasn't going to tell the kids that kind of horror stuff. I don't think—I think most of us, most of us in the Rainbow, didn't talk about it until the eighties [1980s]; in my case, the nineties [1990s].

MH: That's forty years later.

FK: Yeah.

MH: But you're walking around with this in your heart.

FK: We all came back different. Now, you fellas came back from Vietnam, we also came back. But what we came back with, we didn't talk about it. We didn't let—we concentrated on our families that we had, and we didn't want to talk about it. I had three children. Not a one of them ever asked me, "What did you do in the war?" I have a granddaughter who now is so interested; as a matter of fact she is going to be at the banquet on Saturday here. And she is the one who's really, really interested in what her grandfather saw and did. And I documented it all. But my memoirs I did not want to make strictly a war experience thing, it was a life experience thing. The war would—

MH: Did you have nightmares?

FK: Oh, God, yeah. Yeah.

MH: When did they start?

FK: Well, that is—when I think about it, it didn't start until well after the war back in the States. It didn't occur over there right after I saw it.

MH: What were the nightmares?

FK: Rehashing it all. People getting killed, killing people. Senselessness of it. What we saw, proud of what we did to stop it but no, I often woke up with cold sweats.

MH: Did your wife ask you what was going on?

FK: Well, not really. Because I'm afraid I was a different person when I came back than when I went over. I had an anger in me that I didn't understand. As a matter of fact, I didn't understand that anger until ten years ago, when I got a little psychiatric help. That anger expressed itself in many ways.

MH: How?

FK: Anybody did anything, anything that offended me, I'd go into a rage. Went into a rage.

MH: And that started shortly after the war or ten years after?

FK: Quite a few years after the war. As a matter of fact, as a matter of fact, I spent about five years recovering in military hospital for what—I was not wounded, but I had the medical condition in my back that required surgery, severe surgery. I was offered a disability, but I was just too proud to take disability. I figured that's my payment, to be treated and taken care of. And I was in and out of that hospital for about three years, and to this day I still have problems with it. But the rage in me and the anger in me can be attested to by quite a few in my family. I got to be pretty nasty, probably never really realized why.

MH: When did you figure it out?

FK: Like I said, it was within the last ten years.

MH: What got you to a therapist?

FK: A very severe blow up, very severe blow up. Anger, anger like you wouldn't believe.

MH: The anger goes from A to Z in a second.

FK: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

MH: So, you had classic post-traumatic-stress disorder.

FK: Yes.

MH: But they didn't know that.

FK: No, I think in the first war they called it "shell shock." But I didn't know it. I never realized what was happening to me. I could have enjoyable weeks on end and have one, two, three days where my wife would want to just plain get rid of me. And I'd bury myself in work, bury myself—everything in work.

MH: It affected your relationship with your kids?

FK: Yeah. I have two of them to this day that won't have anything to do with me. Makes me very sad because it's a big hurt. And my oldest girl has cancer, and that makes me sad. I carried a package. But we all carried a package. I was not alone, that's the big thing. I was even not as bad as some of them. A lot of our men went into religion.

MH: I was just about to ask you about that.

FK: A lot of our men went into religion. I personally had a very good—I know Ray Willemson went into—he became a minister. Bob Weiss became a priest. Sidney Bercoin became a priest. Norman Fordy became an Episcopalian priest. A lot of them, lot of them, went into religion.

MH: Were you religious as a kid, before the war?

FK: Yes.

MH: Lutheran?

FK: Yes.

MH: And after the war?

FK: Sad to say, I slipped away from it. It's only been in the last ten years that I've gotten back to my beliefs.

MH: Did you ever question God while the war was going on? Or there's no time for that?

FK: Well, as I wrote in my memoirs, the traditional thing is you see your life pass before your eyes. My life did not pass before my eyes. I did not ask God to save me; I didn't do any of that. I just did my darndest to get my butt out of there in one piece. And after that was over, then it hits you. After the one ambush I was in where I was laying out in the middle of the road, and they had me zeroed in with a machine gun and the bullets were going about two inches over my body, and I was getting down as low as I possibly could, and the guys were back in the woods. They said, "They got Fritz, they got Fritz," but I wasn't dead. And I'm trying to get 'em to give me cover fire to get the heck out of there, but they said, "They got Fritz." And I can still remember I was so damn mad at that, because it was my own fault. I should have known better. I would have never went into that ambush, I was a lead Jeep. I was going into town, and the German inhabitants had the white flags hanging out of their windows signifying that the town was clear of Germans, which it wasn't.

But I didn't realize that they sometimes were also under the gun, because the army would make them put the—and then set up a roadblock and then they'd nail us, which is what happened that particular time. Well, I got—that I remember as being my first rage. I almost killed the mayor there when I got into that town. I almost killed the mayor. And I was in a huge rage. But afterwards, it hit me so hard that my tongue swelled up; I couldn't talk. I can still remember that. My mouth went so dry, my tongue swelled up to

the point where I could not talk. I can still remember that. And from that day on, anything that looked like the enemy was shot at.

MH: This is before the twenty-ninth of April.

FK: Yes. Yes.

MH: When you came back to the States, did you ever see or confront anti-Semitism? Did you hear people talking about Jews?

FK: Well, let me say this. I had never been anti-Semitic. Never, never. Never once. And when I went in the service, now, I had a very dear friend—also a German, born in Germany—I have a very dear friend who also went in the service. He was a paratrooper in the Pacific. Well, they gave him such a difficult time. Americans gave him such a difficult time—they called him Hun and everything else—that he changed his name from Reinholt to Hank. Just to get away from it. I went into the I&R, and three of my best friends were Jewish. Sid Schafner, to this day, I give him a hug and he gives me a hug. Herb Herman, him and I, and then Marowitz. It was Fritz and Marowitz. We carried a piece of chalk, each one of us. And what we did with that chalk at the end of the day: if we were in combat, we'd find a house, we'd get in there, see if there was beds that we could slip into, because the I&R was very, very mobile, and we were lucky in that respect. And we would write on the end of the bed, "Fritz and Maury." That was it.

MH: Marowitz's first name was what?

FK: Richard, Rich.

MH: He's the magician.

FK: Yes. My sister-in-law—my brother married a Jewish girl. My nephew married a Jewish—and these people were wonderful people, I couldn't understand what the problem was. Look, just because the Jewish—and I'm comfortable in the temple, the Reformed Jewish temple. I'm comfortable in there. You know? Hey, Jesus was a rabbi. You know. So, what's there to say? People used to—whenever I'd hear, "Oh, Jews, Jesus killers," you know, that just burns my butt. And I—

MH: Did it set you off?

FK: Oh, yes. Yes. I'm afraid I came down very hard on some people in my life who said the wrong thing at the wrong time to me, and this was one of 'em. These were one of the things. Because this is something I wouldn't tolerate. I did not tolerate it.

MH: Do you remember George Lincoln Rockwell?

FK: Yes.

MH: You remember thinking any particular thoughts about him? Because that was all in the fifties [1950s].

FK: Yes, I know. No, I tried not to listen to it. I totally disagreed with all these what I called "fringe philosophies." I couldn't handle it. If I got involved, even today, my wife will say, "You're on your soapbox again. Hey, hon, you're on your soapbox. Get off of it." Because I work myself up so bad, and it's not good for me.

MH: How did the therapist help you?

FK: He let me rant and rave. He let me rant and rave.

MH: Was this a private guy or a VA?

FK: No, no, this was private. This was private.

MH: He let you rant and rave.

FK: Yes, let it out. And this was the thing that was bottled up much, much too long.

MH: This is like opening up a tap and it comes flowing out.

FK: Yes, absolutely. It's unbelievable. Right now when I think about it, I'm ready to—

MH: So now, when you hear the President of Iran say, “This never happened.”

FK: I would like to go over there and grab him by the balls and pull his tongue out. I don’t care if it’s the President of Iran or some yahoo from here in this country, calling in to a talk show host and tell him, like on the way here. This happened on the way here, and I’m still mad about it. That SOB that called in telling Mike Savage it never happened. “Well, Mike Savage, you are a dumbest son of a bitch.” I don’t know how he got away with calling him everything on the air like he did, and I’m there. “Give it to him.” When I get the number, I got to call Savage and let him know that I was there, to refute what these—I don’t know where these people get this idea.

And the other thing, the other thing—I’m very passionate about what’s happening now. And if people think for one minute that this war on terror is just a bunch of nuts, it isn’t. It is Islam wants the Judeo-Christian society at an end. They want us dead. And these idiots do not understand it out there. They do not understand this. They are still fighting the Crusades, is what it really amounts to. This is how I feel about it. And I just—in my prayers every day, I thank God for the men that are over protecting us, over there, keeping them away from our shores. Not knocking the President—I talked with a Marine this morning at 5:30 down in the lunchroom, who was in uniform, and I thanked him for his service. I said I wished him well, and I asked him how is the morale of the service at this point in time. He said, “It’s real good, but we’re all very, very afraid about this election.” Because—and I have said it also—it could be chaos. It could be the end of our military as we know it. We’re going to be back into the Carter days, and it scares me. We’re going to get hit harder. I know it’s going to happen. It’s gonna happen.

MH: You think fighting in Iraq is protecting us?

FK: Yes.

MH: See, I don’t.

FK: Yes. It’s keeping the fight there, on their turf.

MH: I don’t believe that. Because Al Qaeda doesn’t work that way. Al Qaeda doesn’t have “turf,” that’s the problem. They’re in Pakistan.

FK: They have turf in the sense that throughout the world, their message is throughout the world. We've got to hit them, we've got to hit them throughout the world; we can't wait until they come here. My greatest fear is that they're going to set off a dirty bomb in San Francisco, and it's going to drift east and it's going to kill millions of people. And we have got to recognize—if you look like a duck, you walk like a duck, and you quack like a duck, you're a damn duck. And I'm all in favor of profiling.

MH: Let me ask you one other question off of that subject, 'cause we could sit over beers and disagree on this. Did you ever talk to any of the other guys and tell him how therapy helped you?

FK: No, no. This has been very private, as far as—as a matter of fact, you're one of the first strangers I've mentioned it to.

MH: That's 'cause I pushed you.

FK: Whether you did or not, it's because I wanted to answer.

MH: That's true, too. So, thank you very much. Anything else you want to tell me?

FK: No, you ask the questions, and I'll give you the answers.

MH: As I'm writing, some other things may come up and I'll give you a call, especially the spelling of names or places in Germany.

FK: Sure. Well, like I said, I've led an interesting life with a lot of regrets. And a lot of pride, though. Proud of this country, very proud of this country. It offered me a lot, gave me an opportunity to be a lot, gave me the opportunity to do all the things I wanted to do.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

MH: So, I'm talking to Fritz Krenkler.

FK: That's right.

MH: Again, so the question I asked you was: you're German, you're of German origin. You were naturalized American. But how did it make you feel about the German people?

FK: Uh, first of all, I want to say right off the bat that I'm very disappointed that this happened to a people that I felt, and still feel, had a lot to contribute to humanity prior to all this happening. As a matter of fact, my father, during the war, had Jewish men in the German Army that fought the Americans, believe it or not. I've been to German military cemeteries and I've seen the Jewish—the Star of David on the graves. So, I feel real, real bad about what some of our people did. I feel real bad about some, the other ones who didn't do anything but also didn't speak up. I know they feared for their lives. I know they—they had a choice. They didn't make the hard choice, and this disturbs me more than anything else, that they didn't make the hard choice, because the German people as a race have contributed much. As a matter of fact, one of the—

Hi Bill!

Bill: Hi!

FK: One of the more famous men that comes from my part of Germany was Albert Einstein. He came from Ulm, which was only a few miles from where I grew up, and I've admired Albert with his thinking and the depth of his thinking. We had many, many German Jews that were really, really great contributors, as were reg—just Germans of long German backgrounds. But it has made me sad that they have done this. Mainly, it was more a case of commission, but of omission. And this is what bothers me, that they did not speak up, because this could have been prevented.

MH: They closed their eyes, too. I mean the people who weren't the Nazis: you know, "Oh, I don't know anything about it, I never saw it."

FK: Well, this was a normal—this is a normal thing for the human being to do, is to deny, even though they felt and knew that it was all wrong. In my family, I have to—I'm proud of the fact that none of my family had anything to do with them. We were all of us staunchly against it, but the family did not speak up. I was, unfortunately, in a position without too much concern about my own wellbeing, because I—I really knew that they just couldn't do anything to me because of my dual citizenship, my American citizenship. So, that's all I can say. I feel sorry. They—I've been on German television, spoken my piece there; all my relatives are proud of me. I helped them regain their lives after the war. I made sure that clothing and food was available to all the deserving ones, and there were very, very few people that I knew that weren't deserving of it.

And that's basically how I felt about it. It was a dual feeling. It was not—I was sad for what they didn't do. I'm very, very sad for what they did do, the ones that did do it. I could honestly—I can still honestly say that I'm proud of my heritage, because it goes back to the 800s AD, family history, and I have personal records back to the fifteenth century when the church burned down; the records prior to that were destroyed. So, I do have a huge and long background of being German. But today, as always since I've been here, I have felt American.

End of interview