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Karl O. Mann oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, October 7, 2008

Karl O. Mann (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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

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

Karl O. Mann: First name is Karl with a K, K-a-r-l; middle initial O, and that stands for Otto; last name Mann, M-a-n-n.

MH: And your date of birth?

KM: 3-5-25 [March 5, 1925].

MH: So you're eighty—

KM: Three.

MH: Eighty-three. Where were you born?

KM: I was born in Königsberg. Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia.

MH: How do you spell Königsberg?

KM: K-o umlaut-n-i-g-s-b-e-r-g. Today, it's Kaliningrad. The Russians took over East Prussia after World War II, so today if you look on a map, you'll find Kaliningrad, but it was Königsberg. I was born there, and then when I was about two years old, we moved to Cologne and lived in Cologne till I was eleven years old. Came to the United States, and that was 1936.

MH: Where did you come to?

KM: We came to—my father got a job at American University in Washington, D.C., and so we moved to Chevy Chase, Maryland. So, I went to school there, went to Woodrow Wilson High School in Washington, went to American University. And then, after finishing two years at American University, when I was eighteen, I was drafted and ended up in the Army.

MH: Were you a citizen then?

KM: No, I was not a citizen at the time, and because I was not a citizen, I could not enlist. Most of my friends in college, they enlisted so they could pick their service. I couldn't do that, because I wasn't a citizen, so I had to wait to be drafted. And then I went to basic training in Fort McClellan, Alabama, and that's where I became a citizen.

MH: So, you were a citizen before you went overseas.

KM: Correct.

MH: And you spoke German?

KM: Yes.

MH: Any other language?

KM: A tiny bit of French.

MH: Knowing that you spoke German, we're fighting a war in Europe, where did the Army send you?

KM: Oh, when they shipped me overseas?

MH: Yeah.

KM: I was in the infantry, and got on a troop transport. We stopped a couple days in Oran, North Africa, then we went north through the Mediterranean by Sicily up to Naples. We disembarked in Naples.

MH: What year was this?

KM: Forty-three [1943]. February forty-three [1943].

MH: And what unit were you in?

KM: Well, we were just replacements. We were—forty-three [1943], February. We ended up in Naples, disembarked, and then they put us on a smaller ship that took us up to Anzio. At Anzio, I joined the outfit I was to remain with for the rest of the war, which was the 45th [Infantry] Division, 157th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion. Originally, I was in M Company; that's heavy weapons. I started off being with the heavy machine guns—that's the water-cooled machine guns—and later on, I moved over to being with the mortars, 81mm mortars.

I'm kind of getting ahead of the story, maybe. But then from that, I ended up being the interpreter for my battalion commander, Colonel—

MH: That was Felix Sparks.

KM: —Felix Sparks. You've heard of Sparks? Since you've talked to some of these other people— (coughs) Excuse me.

MH: What was Sparks like?

KM: What was Sparks like? Sparks was—how can I simply describe him? He was an outstanding soldier. Very highly regarded, highly respected by all his men, always. And one of the thoughts that I always want to emphasize, because it may not be emphasized enough, is Sparks, when we liberated Dachau, at that time—now, this is, let's see, when I became his interpreter—yeah. Sparks, at the time, was twenty-seven years old.

MH: Really?

KM: And visualize this. Now, this—

MH: He's a lieutenant colonel?

KM: Yeah. It didn't occur to me until recent years how amazing this really is, because I would watch my son grow, and when my son was twenty-seven, he was a young fellow.

MH: He was a kid.

KM: Yeah. And Sparks was twenty-seven years old, battalion commander. He'd been in the war with the 45th, had survived Sicily and Italy, France, and Germany. And he was responsible as a battalion commander for hundreds of men. Had a lot of responsibility for someone who was twenty-seven. It's just amazing. And he really was an exceptional person. Highly intelligent, but also, you know, just a good, good—I should say an outstanding soldier.

MH: How did he happen to get you as interpreter? How do you know that you were there?

KM: By the way, for whatever it's worth, all of that will be in there, but that's okay, I can repeat it. I don't know what information you want.

We went from Italy—we stayed in Anzio until May, when we broke out of the Anzio beachhead. Rome was liberated. And D-Day was in June. At that time, in August 1944, fifteenth of August, we had the invasion of southern France. We landed in southern

France. I'd been in the hospital with a pilonidal cyst. You know what that is? It's a cyst at the end of your spine.

MH: On your tailbone. Yeah.

KM: So, I ended up in the hospital for a few days. When I came back, they were all getting ready to move on to southern France, so they gave me a bazooka, and I ended up landing in southern France with a bazooka. Every ten minutes—we were the fourth wave, landed at Sainte-Maxime, and then we went up the Rhône River Valley, went north.

As we moved north, somehow, I met a couple guys who were with the Counter Intelligence Corps—CIC, I guess it was called. I don't know where they came from or what they were doing. But in any case, I was talking to them, and they were telling me what they were doing. It sounded kind of interesting, especially with my German language capability. It seemed to me that this was something that I could be doing. I had two years of college. So, I applied for transfer to Counter Intelligence, went through channels.

A few weeks later, Sparks called me in and he said that my application for transfer had been turned down because nobody could be transferred out of the infantry. However, he said, he would like to have me as his interpreter, realizing that we'd be ending up in Germany. So, he said, "Would you like to be my interpreter? It would not be on the official organization chart, table of organization, so there wouldn't be any chance for a promotion." I was a PFC [private first class] at the time, and no chance for promotion, but that's okay. I said to myself, "This sounds good."

They had just moved me to be a radio operator for the mortars. I'd started off carrying ammunition; now I was a radio operator where I was up with the riflemen, carrying—it was a 300. That radio was called a 300. At any rate, it was pretty heavy.

MH: That's the big rectangular box thing with the long antenna.

KM: Yeah. You're acquainted with it.

MH: Makes you a perfect target.

KM: (laughs) Yeah, I know. I didn't really care for it. I said to myself that this is not something that I really was happy to be doing, so when I had the opportunity to become Sparks' interpreter, I said, "Fine."

MH: Good job.

KM: And Sparks, of course, was always on the front lines. It wasn't that we were sitting back, but he was always up there. So, from the fall of forty-four [1944] until the end of the war, I went along with Sparks, pretty much wherever he went. Sparks had basically three people on his little staff: he had a Jeep driver, and he had a runner, and I was then the third one, the interpreter. And the three of us would go with him.

MH: In his Jeep.

KM: Yeah. Well, in his Jeep as far as we could go, but a lot of times, of course, then we'd get out of the Jeep and be walking. But a good part, we'd go by Jeep, and then we would—after we got out of the Jeep, we would walk.

At first, it was not too particularly exciting in France, because we were chasing the Germans up the Rhône River Valley and east into Alsace-Lorraine. But then we got into Alsace-Lorraine, and things began to develop. Have you heard about Reipertswiller, where our battalion got—

MH: Chewed up?

KM: Chewed up, yeah. Captured.

MH: When you were in Alsace-Lorraine, did you ever come to a place called Natzweiler?

KM: Natzweiler?

MH: Natzweiler. N-a-t-z-w-e-i-l-e-r.

KM: Not that I remember, no.

MH: Natzweiler-Struthof.

KM: No. Why?

MH: It turns out it was the only German death camp in France.

KM: Oh, really?

MH: Yeah.

KM: It doesn't ring a bell at all.

MH: It was in Alsace. So, what happened with you at Reipertswiller?

KM: What happened to—?

MH: To you, at Reipertswiller.

KM: Oh, at Reipertswiller. Well, that was quite a few days there. We were in this little village, Reipertswiller, as we had been in other villages in Alsace-Lorraine. The battalion was told to move up on some—I'm never sure what you call those, whether you call them mountains or hills. I guess they're mountains. Not comparable to the Alps, obviously. Have you been there, Alsace-Lorraine? It's a nice area. I like it.

Anyway, the battalion was ordered to take certain positions up in these mountains. In the morning—it was this one particular morning—we were in the Jeep driving ahead to the positions where Sparks wanted to go, up this valley. And as we drove down the road, and there was a little bit of snow on the ground. It was January forty-five [1945]; there was snow on the ground, maybe an inch. All of a sudden, boom! The Jeep exploded. I guess you hadn't heard that part.

MH: No.

KM: What happened was that the Germans, the night before, had put down anti-tank—

MH: (coughs) Excuse me.

KM: Can I get you something to drink?

MH: Some water would be great. Thank you very much.

KM: How about a Diet Coke?

MH: A Diet Coke I'd love.

Pause in recording

MH: Hang on one second. Okay, we're back on tape.

KM: We were driving down this road. The Germans had put some anti-tank mines on the road, like a "W" kind of. I don't know; it went like this, so that it was impossible to miss them. But we couldn't see them. [Albert] Turk, who was the Jeep driver, was driving, and he couldn't see those anti-tank mines because of the snow on the ground, and they were about yea-big around, maybe—I don't know, a foot across or something.

So, our front wheel ran across one of those, and, boom, blew up the front of the Jeep. Sparks and Turk were sitting up front; [Carlton] Johnson and I, we were sitting in the back on top of all the duffel bags that we had in the back seat. The back wheel of the Jeep was about a tiny bit like this away from the detonation cap of another one. The Jeep had moved when it blew up, it slid, and the back wheel was sitting right on top of another anti-tank mine there. Missed its detonation cap by—

MH: When did you find that out?

KM: Right there. We went out and looked around. (laughs)

MH: You went out and looked around, okay.

KM: What happened was, it knocked—Sparks flew out of the Jeep quite a ways. We didn't; we were in the back seat. And, yeah, it was—it made quite a noise and was quite something. So, we looked around, found out that we were still okay. In the meantime, the battalion was coming up on the other side of the valley; let's say fifty yards on the other side of the valley. They were coming up that side of the valley.

So, we went over there, and I remember what I found personally interesting—it may not be too interesting to other people—was that when the Jeep blew up, I could tell it affected my hearing, my ears. I said, “Oh, boy, I hope I have a busted eardrum; then I would be able to get back home again, get discharged.” Well, no such luck. (laughs) But anyway—

MH: Did the Jeep still drive?

KM: No. Oh, no.

MH: It was blown up.

KM: We got a new Jeep then, yeah. These anti-tank mines, they're pretty powerful. And so, yeah, as the battalion came by—of course when the guys from M Company came by, a bunch of them we knew. I was standing there, smiling, yeah—because the sound in this valley was so loud, they could hear it for miles, I suppose, when we blew up.

Okay, the battalion went up on top of the mountains, took positions, and later on, a few hours later in the day, Sparks and we went up there where the battalion was. He wanted to check out—he tended to do this sort of thing, check where the troops were and talk with the company commanders. And so, we were up there in that area where the battalion dug in, and then we came back down again at the bottom of the mountain.

And then, what happened in the days that followed was that the Germans surrounded our battalion. Actually, when I say “our battalion,” there were some other companies from other battalions in the regiment as well, so it wasn't just the 3rd Battalion but a few other companies as well. But in any case, the Germans surrounded and we were told to stay put and stay in this—as far as I know. That was my understanding, that we were told to stay there in the mountains and keep the Germans occupied. This was right after the Battle of the Bulge, and the Germans were trying to accomplish something down there in Alsace-Lorraine when the Battle of the Bulge didn't succeed.

Anyway, the troops stayed up there for I don't know how long: a number of days, a week or so. Then, by the time they were told to fight their way back, the battalion couldn't fight its way back and make it. Out of the entire battalion, two guys made it back; the rest of them were captured and killed, wounded, and so on. So, there was a battalion—again, Sparks was twenty-seven years old, and his whole battalion—and the reason the battalion was captured was because—I mean, the battalion did what it was supposed to do. But he was told that they were supposed to stay there. So, it wasn't his fault that the battalion was captured.

While the battalion was up there, Sparks—at the bottom of this mountain, there was a path leading up the mountain. We had a tank—there was a tank or two, maybe two tanks. They were told to try to get up there, but it was muddy and they couldn't make it up there. At one point, Sparks got into one of the tanks and went up there with them. I don't know if you heard this part of the story. Sparks got into the tank. They went up as far as they could go toward the battalion, but they didn't get very far. I don't know if they got 100 yards or whatever, and when they got up maybe a certain distance, that's as far as they could go. And there were some American soldiers there, and they were wounded.

Sparks got out of the tank and put these American soldiers on top of the tank to bring them back down, in full sight of the Germans. The Germans saw him, and he brought them back down. Afterwards, Sparks was recommended for the Distinguished Service Cross for doing that, but they only gave him the Silver Star for it. So, anyway, that was Reipertswiller, which was a pretty tough time.

MH: Were you wounded at all?

KM: Well, I was wounded being blown up by the—

MH: In the Jeep?

KM: In the Jeep, in the tank mine. Afterwards, somebody, maybe—I don't know if all the other three or just two of the three had applied for a Purple Heart. When I heard about this, people were thinking in terms of the end of the war and coming back; if you had a certain number of points, you could get back. A Purple Heart was worth five points. I thought, "Gee, I'll apply for a Purple Heart." This was a few weeks later, I guess. I applied for a Purple Heart. I went to the first aid station, talked to the battalion doctor, and he said, "If I had been in that Jeep, I'd want a Purple Heart, too," so he recommended me for a Purple Heart. I ended up with a Purple Heart. So, at any rate—yeah. But otherwise, I wasn't.

MH: At what point did you know anything about the concentration camps or death camps? When did you first know about it?

KM: I suppose I had been one of the few people in the battalion who had heard of concentration camps and so on, because of my family background. Most American GIs over there, especially in our outfit, they came from Colorado and Oklahoma, you know; they probably couldn't pinpoint Munich on a map. So, this was all just very foreign to them. I had heard of concentration camps, but didn't know very much beyond that.

MH: Did Sparks ever say anything about them?

KM: No, he didn't say anything—to me, no. In fact, Sparks generally did not talk to us too much. He may have talked to the other officers, but being a lowly PFC, I was not privy to a lot of stuff that he may have said. I picked up certain information here and there, but what he knew about concentration camps, I really don't know.

MH: When did you first find out about Dachau?

KM: We were coming down—we were in Germany now, heading south toward Munich, and we found—I don't know when we found out that we were gonna be in Dachau. At that point, I knew about the Dachau concentration camp. I had heard that; it was pretty famous. But I thought we stayed in the town of Dachau. I thought that's where we stayed the night before. But in any case, that's when we found out that, you know, we were gonna go over there and liberate this concentration camp. We found out—in other words, we knew about this maybe a day or so in advance, that we were gonna head from Dachau to this concentration camp.

MH: The battalion had been decimated, though, at Reipertswiller. When did they reinforce you and get new replacements in and that sort of thing?

KM: The replacements—well, right after that, we went to some other town in Alsace-Lorraine, and got replacements. I forget how long this was; maybe two or three weeks. We got replacements, and then we went back on the line and fought our way to the Maginot Line, the Siegfried Line, over to Germany.

MH: How did the veterans treat the replacements?

KM: I honestly don't know, because first of all, I was with the battalion staff. And the battalion staff, we were not the ones who were captured, so we weren't replaced. We survived this. When you say the "veterans," there weren't many veterans.

MH: Guys who'd been there at least since Anzio.

KM: Almost everybody was a replacement.

MH: But you had started, at least, in Anzio.

KM: Yeah.

MH: And now you get to Reipertswiller and the place gets decimated, and they bring in all new guys.

KM: Yeah. The new guys, some of them were from, I think the 106th—it's in there, someplace. 106th Division or something, from another division, and some may have been from the States. But as far as our guys were concerned, almost none of those had been with the outfit before Reipertswiller.

MH: Okay. So, to get to Dachau, about a day before you get there, you find out you're going to go to this place?

KM: Yeah.

MH: What are you told?

KM: What were we told? The one thing that I remember being told was that there was—and this I haven't read too much in the literature. Well, it's not clear as to exactly what happened and so on, but I vaguely remember that a rumor went around that there was a little river—which is true; there is a little river—and there's a bridge, and the Germans had a machine gun at the bridge and were preventing us from crossing the bridge. Next day, we went across a little bridge; there was no machine gun there. So, I don't know whether this rumor had been true or not.

But, basically, we knew very little. We always heard very little as to what was going to happen. We knew then, that morning—the next morning—that we were going to head toward the concentration camp. And to the concentration camp went—basically it was I Company, of the entire battalion. Let's see, the company commander was Bill—oh, what's his name? I think I put it in there. Do you know the company commander?

MH: It doesn't come to me now.

KM: Anyway, the company commander of—(coughs) excuse me—I Company, and a few other people besides I Company. So, Sparks decided to go with I Company; since I went with Sparks, we went with him.

MH: You're carrying an M1 rifle?

KM: No. Not then, no. We carried a carbine. Sparks carried a pistol. Turk, the Jeep driver, and the Jeep stayed behind. We walked across this little bridge and then headed toward the concentration camp. I guess you want me to tell you now what happened?

MH: Yes.

KM: Okay.

MH: I Company was ahead of you?

KM: No, we were walking together.

MH: Okay.

KM: We were walking together. On the way to the concentration camp, we met one German. It was very interesting. All of a sudden, I noticed some commotion ahead of us, and it turned out that here was this German in an SS uniform, the black SS uniform. I think he had a Red Cross armband. He was getting pushed along by the GIs. All of a sudden, he seemed to be running off to the side, and as he started running off to the side, I

heard a bunch of shots. They shot him, and that took care of him. So, that was the first introduction.

Then we went down some—that's when, a little later, we saw the—I think this came a little later in the sequence of things. We saw this train, the train that carried all those dead bodies. You heard about that?

MH: From Buchenwald. Thirty-nine boxcars or open cars.

KM: Yeah, we could see them. It was—I don't know, maybe as far away from where we were as that house is across the street. So, it was at a distance; we could see those. I guess somebody from I Company went over there to look at them, and so word would spread a little bit as to what was going on.

MH: Did Sparks go over to look at them?

KM: No. No, Sparks didn't go, not that I recall. I don't know who went over there. It may have been just someone from I Company. So, we kept going, and we got to this gate, and I think Sparks and others have said we went over the wall. I don't recall going over a wall. Maybe the gate; there was a gate there that we went through. But, in any case, we got into the concentration camp itself. As it turned out, we didn't realize this, that this was the back door rather than the front door. And we got into the concentration camp.

MH: No shooting at that point, except for that one man.

KM: At that point, no shooting. Well, we were a little bit behind. Then we could—I remember hearing the roar from the prisoners in the concentration camp.

MH: What did it sound like?

KM: I don't know. It sounded like a roar, a lot of people just shouting, you know.

MH: Like a football game?

KM: Maybe so, yeah.

MH: When they're scoring a touchdown?

KM: Maybe. (laughs) It wouldn't be a bad comparison, I suppose.

MH: Could you see them?

KM: At that point, we couldn't. That's the first indication we had.

MH: Why couldn't you see them?

KM: Huh?

MH: Why couldn't you see them?

KM: We were farther behind. There were guys from the—I Company were ahead of us, and they were already there. So, we followed along, and I guess I Company must've divided up various platoons and squads in different directions, I don't know. Let's see. So, we went along, and at first did not go to the prison enclosure itself. We didn't go there.

There were several things that happened that you probably are well acquainted with, and I, like a lot of people, can't remember exactly the sequence of things. But one of the things that happened then was the famous shooting in the coal yard that I'm sure you know about. I think that happened before we were—when I say “we,” Sparks and Johnson and I—before we went to the prison enclosure where the prisoners were.

MH: Where were you when that shooting broke out?

KM: I was right there. Let me summarize that for you as best I can. Once again, I've tried to put it all down there. I remember standing there, and I Company had a bunch of prisoners. When they saw people, they would round them up and take them prisoner. I remember that a lot of them were—well, some of these prisoners were from the hospital. There was a hospital on the grounds, so these people were working, I guess, in the hospital. I guess there were even some women there, nurses or something like that.

MH: Were they working or were they patients? I've heard one story that they were—

KM: No, no, they were working there.

MH: It wasn't Waffen-SS patients?

KM: No, not that I know of.

MH: Okay.

KM: No, the impression was that these were people who worked there, but in what capacity and who they were, I didn't know. I just saw a bunch of people walking down, and some of them were—I don't even know if they had a Red Cross armband. So, we ended up over there at this so-called coal yard, and there were a bunch of these prisoners. And I Company had them against the far wall. You've seen the pictures, so you've seen all that.

MH: These are German prisoners. These are not inmates from the camp.

KM: Correct. The German prisoners, on the far wall; lined them up there. And in this kind of a situation, things are always a little bit chaotic, as you can well imagine. I remember Sparks was doing something; he was talking to some other people, and he disappeared around the corner. And I Company officers and some of the I Company men were there, and the I Company officers decided that they were going to shoot these Germans. So—

MH: You think it was a decision? It wasn't triggered by the Germans sort of moving toward them?

KM: At this point, it was a decision. No, no. This was a decision. I Company—

MH: Is there a Lieutenant [Jack] Bushyhead there?

KM: Yeah. I didn't know Lieutenant Bushyhead. I've read about him, but Rogers, William Rogers, is the company commander. That's it, I think. The guy used to be from Philadelphia. He was there. Anyway, yeah. The officers from I Company decided, or some of the officers—I don't even know who, since I didn't know the I Company people that well. They decided they were going to shoot the German prisoners on the far wall.

So, they called this one soldier. The poor guy was told to set up his machine gun, you know, and so he set it up. In my ignorance at the time, I thought it was a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle], but it wasn't; it was a light machine gun. So, he set up the machine gun, and he was told to fire. So, he started to fire, which—you know, left to right and right to left, several times. It probably wasn't as long as it seemed. When I was first asked, "How long did it last," I thought it lasted longer than it actually—was it twenty seconds? Ten? I don't know.

In the meantime, Sparks, who had been around the corner and wasn't privy to this, he heard the shooting. He came back, and to get everybody's attention, he fired his pistol in the air. You've seen that picture.

MH: I've seen the sequence of four pictures.

KM: Yeah. And he fired and stopped the firing.

MH: I was also told he kicked the machine gunner off the machine gun.

KM: That I don't remember. I don't remember, no. So, he stopped it. But he had to think so terribly quick. You've got to remember, he came around the corner to see what's going on, and in a matter of seconds, he had noticed what was going on and had to take action. And he did the only thing he could've and should've done: stop the firing.

The Germans—when the firing started, it was kind of interesting. I don't know how many Germans were over there, whether there were fifty or what. It's hard to say. You can count them on the picture. What I found interesting is as soon as the firing started, the Germans would fall down. They flopped down as we would—flop down as soon as there was any firing going on. So, they hit the ground, except for four guys. They decided they were going to stay, and if they were gonna get killed, they were going to get killed, so they remained upright. In the pictures, you notice those. The rest of them were all on the ground. The ones that were on the ground, how many of them were wounded or killed, I don't know. I had no idea as to how many were wounded or killed. All kinds of stories, but I can't be more specific, you know, as to what happened then.

MH: The number ranges from 17 to 400.

KM: Really?

MH: Yes.

KM: I would imagine that 400 is completely off base, because there weren't 400, and you can look at the pictures and count and see there weren't anywhere near 400. As I said, it seemed to me more like—oh, I don't know, fifty; maybe a little bit more than that. And most of them, I suspect, were not killed. But I don't remember. You know, usually when people get wounded, they may cry out. I don't remember anything of that sort. But, again, the situation being as chaotic as it was, that doesn't mean that people didn't cry out when they were wounded in the process. So, that was the end of that.

MH: What do you do at that point? You stay with Sparks.

KM: I'm still with Sparks, and we went on. Sparks gave certain orders to certain people—I suspect mostly to Bill Rogers, the company commander of I Company—and so on, and told them what to do. And we went on.

MH: What did you see when you went on?

KM: I'm sorry?

MH: What did you see when you went on?

KM: When we went on? I really don't remember too much, except that next we ended up at the prison enclosure. And there were a lot of GIs there.

MH: The prisoners were still locked up.

KM: Yeah, yeah.

MH: Were there any outside in between the internal enclosure and the outer wall? Were there any prisoners walking around where you were walking around?

KM: Yes. I think it happened—and this is something that I remember but others do not recall, and it makes a difference to my story, always. After we'd gotten to the prison enclosure, all of a sudden, I noticed somebody in prison garb. I used to call those "pajamas" because they reminded me of pajamas. And I saw him standing outside the prison enclosure, so I went over there to check him out. And as I talked to him—he'd been a prisoner, and I got the impression that he had been trusted, or something of that sort. I don't know what he was, but he obviously had been permitted to go outside the enclosure for whatever reason. And I said, "Hey, this guy can be helpful to us in helping us"—and by us, I mean Sparks—"tell us what's what around there," because here we were in a completely strange environment. So, I checked with Sparks and said, "Can we take him along? He can explain things to us." Sparks approved of that, and so that's what we did.

When we first went to the prison enclosure, one thing that was kind of interesting was that American GIs are always generous. They were throwing cigarettes and candy bars across the barbed wire fence to the prisoners, till somebody said, "Hey, stop doing that. They're going to kill each other to get hold of candy bars and cigarettes." That made sense to me, so we stopped that and told everybody to stop doing it. So, okay, then the next thing I remember is that Sparks decided to take a little tour of the concentration camp. I mean, we didn't have a map of the camp, so we took this guy along, and we wandered around looking at different buildings. He would be able to explain a few things.

We got to one place; this one I remember. For the most part, where we went, there were no people. There were no Germans, there were no Americans. It was kind of empty, just a bunch of buildings here and there. We got to this one building, and that's where they had a large room which apparently had—it looked like a shower. In the ceiling, it had what looked like a built-in showerhead. Anyway, it may have been that this was where people might've been—

(another person murmurs something) Time to wait? Okay. (laughs)

Where people were gassed, you know, or something. We didn't know. There were no corpses there; there were no people there. It was completely empty, but it seemed like this might have been a place where people were gassed. And the part that I remember is outside this building, there were these—there were a lot of little flowerpots, or like flowerpots. What are they made of? This red clay. What kind of flowerpots am I talking about? Do you know?

MH: I know what you mean.

KM: Made out of red clay. Well, we saw these, and I asked about them, and this guy told us that after people were incinerated, the ashes would be put into these little flowerpots, or what looked sort of like flowerpots, and then sent to the families of the people involved. Whether this was true or not, I don't know. This guy was telling us stories, and we couldn't say this was or was not true.

MH: Did you know what nationality this guy was?

KM: I would image he—my guess would've been that he was German. Yeah. And he was—but he had been a prisoner. Of course he spoke German, so he could not have been, let's say, a Russian or Polish prisoner.

MH: Wearing a Jewish star or not?

KM: I'm sorry?

MH: Wearing a Jewish star?

KM: I didn't notice that. I didn't notice it.

MH: Where else did he take you?

KM: We just wandered around. We didn't see an awful lot. There were some business offices and so on that we wandered around. And then we came back. After we made our little tour, we came back to the enclosure. And when we got to the enclosure, here was General [Henning] Linden from the 42nd Division. You know that part.

MH: Tell me what you saw happen.

KM: Yeah. Well, first, from my perspective—you know, I saw things that others didn't; they may not have been as important. But the first thing was Linden saw us, and he

noticed this guy in the prison garb—our guide, so to speak—and he said, “What’s he doing out here? He’s got to go back into the enclosure.” So, he gave an order, and the guy was pushed back behind the enclosure. He didn’t want to go back behind the enclosure, obviously, so there we lost our guide. And, once again, things are always chaotic. You’re talking to somebody, and something’s going on over here.

All of a sudden, outside the—it was this gate. At the time, we didn’t know the name of the gate, that main gate.

MH: The Jourhaus Gate?

KM: Yeah. That’s where we were. There was a short distance and then came a little canal, and across the little canal was a little bridge. All of a sudden, Sparks and Linden got into this big argument that you’ve heard about.

MH: Did you hear the argument?

KM: I probably heard more than—I remember nothing about the argument itself. I don’t remember anything of that sort. I know they had this huge argument. I think I was more intrigued by watching these two people. Linden was a somewhat short guy, stocky, heavysset, chubby. And he was trying to tell Sparks what to do. Sparks argued with him, and I’ve never seen Sparks so angry and mad as he was that time. Apparently, the argument basically had to do with the fact that Linden wanted certain things to be done, and Sparks had certain orders. Sparks was going to do what he was supposed to do. But always, when I think back to these things, I think, here’s this twenty-seven-year-old guy, what a huge responsibility he had, and it’s really something. Yeah.

So, I don’t remember too much. I don’t remember that Linden had too many people with him, but—

MH: Linden was carrying a cane, or a wooden stick?

KM: Yeah, sort of a—he had this—what do you call it, a riding—

MH: Riding crop?

KM: Crop. Looked more like that.

Unknown Man: Swagger stick?

KM: I'm sorry?

Unknown Man: Swagger stick?

KM: Yeah, but I think it looked more like a riding crop. And that's the one he—he was walking around with this, you know, tried to look tough, and made a terrible impression.

MH: Did you see him—

KM: Hit the guy on the helmet?

MH: The guy was a man named Russel Weiskircher?¹

KM: Oh, is that who it was?

MH: That's who says it was. You know Russ?

KM: I did, yeah. The name—but I don't remember where Russel Weiskircher or whatever his name is, where he was in all that.

MH: Did you see Linden hit somebody on the helmet?

KM: I actually don't remember. I may have seen it, but I don't actually—if somebody had not told me this is what happened, I would have never—

MH: Did you see a woman there?

¹ Russel Weiskircher was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00145.

KM: The reporter from the *New York Herald Tribune* [Marguerite Higgins]?

MH: Right.

KM: I don't remember her. I don't remember seeing her. I may have seen—

MH: There's a story that she went to the inside gate and was trying to open it up. She wanted to be able to say she freed the prisoners. There's also another story that she and her driver, who was a sergeant named Peter Furst, went and captured seventeen or eighteen SS guys coming out of one of the towers, that they captured them, which some people find absurd.

KM: No. That, I find difficult to believe. On the towers, all that I remember is along this canal, there were some towers. Here was this one tower, and I remember seeing these big, big dogs, guard dogs, that the Germans had there, and they had been shot, and they were lying there. And then I also remember—and this may have come from our guide—that the Germans—most of the Germans had left, and that the Germans—I mean, the guards they left behind—were Hungarians, rather than Germans.

American GIs always referred to the Germans—they tended to refer to them as “SS.” Except for that guy initially that I mentioned to you, I didn't—I don't remember anything about them that would indicate that they were SS. I don't know how the American GIs could tell that they were. They were wearing what we would call army fatigues or something of that sort, but they weren't wearing any SS uniforms or identification. But the Americans had the tendency to refer to them as SS. I found out later on, after the war, that apparently even some Hungarians who were allied with the Germans were in the SS. To me, this all becomes very, very confusing.

MH: But you didn't see anything with the woman reporter.

KM: No.

MH: You didn't see her being picked up and carried back to the Jeep?

KM: No, no.

MH: How long does this confrontation between Sparks and Linden go on?

KM: Oh, I suspect their confrontation was maybe five or ten minutes. I would guess, again.

MH: That's a long time—

KM: Yeah, they were at it quite a while.

MH: —for a lieutenant colonel to be arguing with a one-star.

KM: Yeah.

MH: Or he was a two-star at that time? Linden?

KM: Linden? I don't know. One question I've thought of in recent years that I can't answer is what do you do if you are told to do something—if you're an officer, and your superior tells you you should do something, and some other officer who outranks you comes and tells you to do something different, do you do what you've been told to do, or do you obey the other officer? I don't know.

MH: Sparks made his choice; he did what he was told to do.

KM: Exactly. Yeah. And he took on the responsibility for the camp. He was told to take over the camp and secure it, and that's what he tried to do. So, I often thought afterwards, gee, I should've had a notebook and written down all these things.

MH: It would have helped.

KM: (laughs) A lot of people. I was amazed. I didn't even see the photographers there. I didn't know there were photographers there at the coal yard, you know. And many, many decades later, all of a sudden, people send me pictures of the shooting that went on in the coal yard, and I said, "I didn't see any photographers there." That shows you (laughs) how observant I was, I guess.

MH: How long did you stay at Dachau?

KM: We stayed—well, we then went back into the town where we were staying overnight. We were there maybe another—we were, all told, two or three days in Dachau. I remember that Sparks then escorted a couple of people through the camp. One was [Robert T.] Frederick, the commanding general of the 45th Division. He came by, and Sparks gave him a tour and we tagged along. And the other was Colonel [Walter P.] O'Brien, the regimental commander. He came by.

MH: His name was what?

KM: O'Brien.

MH: O'Brien, okay.

KM: So, Sparks showed them, you know, what's what.

MH: They went into the prisoner enclosure?

KM: No, never. We were told not to. I hear some GIs from I Company went into the prisoner enclosure, including—I think Bill Rogers says he was there. I didn't see anybody back there. I just remember these huge numbers of people. And, of course, they were for the most part along the fence, so I couldn't see beyond that much.

MH: Are the people saying anything? Are they screaming? Are they cheering?

KM: Oh, yeah. Yeah. They were—there was a lot of sound, but I can't remember exactly what caused it, whether they were—at that point, what the sound was, except it was—just, you know, a lot of people. It was a huge number of people, and they were just along the fence and—

MH: What did you think the camp was?

KM: What did I think?

MH: Yeah. What did you think it was? You're confronted with this sight, thousands of people in striped pajamas. What's going through your mind?

KM: What went through my mind? What went through my mind was, I guess, that I'm viewing a prison enclosure with a lot of the prisoners. I didn't know who they were, and rumor had it at one point that there was an American in the group. But we didn't have time to check all that out. Our job was to prevent them from coming out, because we were told that they might have—they couldn't be just let out. We couldn't just open up the gates and let them run loose, because they might have diseases and spread diseases. So, they'd have to be checked out by the Red Cross or somebody, by medical people.

I viewed the situation as one where I was just—I didn't know what went on behind the enclosure. I just knew these people were there, and obviously these people were extremely happy to see the Americans. But what went on behind there, I couldn't—I don't even remember seeing any of the buildings in back. I may have seen a little glimpse of a building, but if I did, it didn't leave any impression. So, I didn't know what was going on behind the enclosure and behind the barbed wire.

MH: How long did you stay there?

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

KM: We stayed at the Jourhaus—I don't know, the first time we stayed there was maybe less than the second time. It's a matter of maybe half an hour one time and maybe a half an hour, hour, the second time.

MH: When was the second time?

KM: When Linden was there.

MH: Oh, okay.

KM: See, we came with Sparks to the Jourhaus twice. First time was when they—and the reason I remember this is because of this guide, this trustee or whoever he was. It turns out that in my own mind, that's the one thing I can latch onto to give me some kind of a

handle on what went first, second and third. We first came there to the Jourhaus, got the guide, made the tour and then came back. Second time we came back is when Linden was there, and when Linden was there, he put this guy back behind the barbed wire. And that sequence I remember.

MH: How long after the confrontation with Linden did you stay before you left?

KM: We didn't stay much longer then, because then we went back. Outside the concentration camp—it may have been outside the gate or near the gate—there was our Jeep and there was Turk, and we got in the Jeep and went. But we were probably there most of the day, from—again, when did these things happen? I don't know. Let's say we left in the morning and came back in—we came back in the afternoon, and I Company then just remained behind.

MH: I Company remained behind, but the rest of the battalion went on to Munich?

KM: No, no, the rest of the battalion wasn't even there. The rest of the battalion we didn't see; they were doing other things. We only saw I Company there, and a few other people may have been there that I didn't recognize. So, when I say we left with Sparks, we went with Sparks and left and left I Company behind. And Sparks, I'm sure, gave Bill Rodgers orders as to what he wanted him to do.

MH: Did Sparks ever say anything to you about Linden?

KM: No.

MH: Didn't talk about it.

KM: No. He wouldn't, to me. That's the sort of thing he would not say. In other words, Sparks—there was this dividing line between officers and men, and Sparks wouldn't say anything to us about Linden or anything else. He wouldn't say, "I just followed orders," or, "This is what I was told to do," or anything, none of that. So, we just followed along. He'd say, "Okay, let's go on," and we went on and just followed. He might give me an order: he'd say, "Would you do this?" or, "Would you do that?" and then, okay, I would. But he did not say anything to me that was of any importance.

MH: Where did you go from Dachau? Did you go on to Munich?

KM: From Dachau, we went on to Munich, yeah.

MH: Where were you at the end of the war, on May 8?

KM: In Munich. There was something else I was going to mention about Dachau. Well, we ended up in Munich, in one of the suburbs of Munich in an apartment house, and that's where the war ended. What's interesting is that we'd been there only—let's say a week or so—and I got to go and have a vacation at the [French] Riviera. So, I got on the train and took a train ride (laughs) with some other GIs, you know.

MH: They sent you on R&R [rest and relaxation]?

KM: Yeah. They picked certain people, and I was a lucky one. I got to go all the way to Nice and spend—I don't know how many days; let's say five days or something like that—in Nice, and came back. Yeah, it wasn't—then when I came back, that's when Sparks got the orders to report—the reason I mention that is that they had an investigation by some officer. He may have been—

MH: There was an IG [Inspector General] investigation.

KM: Yeah, yeah, and they interviewed a bunch of guys. That must've happened when I was down in Nice, so they never talked to me, and so you won't see my name there. But they talked to Johnson, Sparks' runner—by the way, as a footnote, he didn't live much past World War II. He came from Binghamton, New York. In 1947, I was at a wedding in Binghamton, and I called him and talked to his parents and found out he had died.

MH: In the war?

KM: No, after the war. So, you know, he disappears from the picture completely then.

Yeah, so, then I went along with Sparks when he went to France. And his memory wasn't completely accurate either, as I noticed in the stuff he's written. He indicates that we went with him and went on to Paris. We didn't. Where we went, there was a Jeep driver—it wasn't Turk, his regular Jeep driver. It was another guy who drove the Jeep; and I; and Johnson, his runner; and Sparks, the four of us; and we drove to some headquarters. I

vaguely recall it was in the woods some place in Alsace-Lorraine. I don't know where we were. And Sparks reported; we stayed outside and he went inside to report. Then he and Johnson stayed there, and the Jeep driver and I returned to Munich.

MH: When did you come back to the States?

KM: Uh—what was it, October?

MH: Of forty-five [1945].

KM: Forty-five [1945], yeah.

MH: What did you do when you came home?

KM: I slept. (laughs) And—

MH: And ate good food.

KM: Yeah. But then I went back to school, went back to American University and finished my last two years of college.

MH: What did you get your degree in?

KM: Technically, social sciences.

MH: What have you done for the rest of your life?

KM: What have I done since?

MH: Yes.

KM: In a nutshell—that won't be in there [MH's notes]. Okay, I graduated from college in 1947. Forty-seven [1947], forty-eight [1948], I worked in Baltimore, trying to get experience in industry. I worked for a while for Black & Decker. Forty-eight [1948], forty-nine [1949], I went to the University of Wisconsin, got my masters in economics in Madison, University of Wisconsin. Forty-nine [1949], fifty [1950], I was back at American University. I had a job involving all kinds of titles. I was college registrar and assistant to the dean and instructor and so on. I was pinch-hitting for somebody who was on leave of absence, so I spent a year there. The following year, I went to Cornell and started Ph.D. work and did my coursework in the next year and a half in industrial and labor relations. Then I worked for the U.S. Department of Labor in Washington and Puerto Rico.

MH: You got your Ph.D.?

KM: And then I came back to Cornell, wrote my dissertation and got my Ph.D.

MH: In what?

KM: Industrial and labor relations. And then I started teaching. I taught at Duquesne in Pittsburgh for three years. I went to the University of Toledo and taught there nine years. By that time, I was a tenured full professor. Then I surprised everybody and came back here and took a job with Rider—what used to be Rider College; it's now Rider University—which is between here and Princeton, and stayed there twenty-seven years. And then I retired in 1994.

MH: How many children?

KM: Two.

MH: Grandchildren?

KM: Three boys. I have a daughter and a son. My father was a college professor, as I mentioned; he came over to the American University. My son is a college professor. This is all kind of odd. He's, I guess, the only third-degree black belt who teaches religion. (laughs) He's a religion professor with a third-degree black belt.

MH: You will believe in God or I'll throw you through the wall.

KM: (laughs) Yes. He's right now in Tokyo. He's spending his sabbatical teaching, so he and his family are over in Tokyo.

MH: We're now sixty-five years past Dachau. Does it come up in your memories?

KM: Yeah, some things come up. Certain things come up that—one of the things that has come up more recently, as I mentioned to you, is the fact that Sparks was twenty-seven years old and all these things happened. This is really, you know, amazing. Since then, I saw him a few times at reunions. And since then, what comes back—yeah, one of the things that really has crossed my mind an awful lot is that, you know, who gets credit for liberating Dachau?

MH: Does it matter? Besides the Americans?

KM: The Americans, yeah. To the others, it doesn't, I suppose. It isn't important to them. But I think to the GIs, it undoubtedly does matter.

MH: The 45th and the 42nd are still fighting about it.

KM: I know.

MH: They hate each other.

KM: Well, I think the disagreement between the 42nd and the 45th isn't as severe as the fact that others claim credit, and a good example is the 20th Armored. My daughter—

MH: That's the only thing the 42nd and 45th agree on, is that the 20th Armored wasn't there.

KM: (laughs) Yeah. Yeah, my daughter goes over there, on vacation, a trip, and she goes to Dachau and comes to the gate.

MH: There's a plaque.

KM: There's a plaque for the 42nd, the 20th, but nothing about the 45th Division, you know. "Hey, Dad, what goes on?" It's not that—I think the American GI doesn't really—GIs didn't really want a lot of credit for it, it's just that others would go around and try to get credit and so on. I think it really bothered a lot of people, and it's something—it's a shame. There must have been some kind of politics behind the scenes, something that went on.

MH: As I understand it, the 20th Armored drove by.

KM: Yeah, but not within a mile or so.

MH: Right.

KM: They didn't even see the camp. And then there was other stories. You hear of people who wanted credit for being there.

MH: There's an all-black unit.

KM: Well, there was this one black fellow. I think he was—

MH: Leon Bass?

KM: I have the story upstairs that the *Boston Globe* carried. I gather the story—but, yeah, he went around and claimed to have been there and so on. And then I think the Japanese outfit—

MH: Yeah, one of them.

KM: They all wanted credit for it.

MH: In Linden's book, Linden's son's book—²

² *Surrender of the Dachau Concentration Camp, 29 April 1945: The True Account*, by John H. Linden, published by Sycamore Press in 1996.

KM: Yes, I have that.

MH: I got the revisions when I was in Washington, and there's a statement there that says that it was only a coincidence that the 42nd Division accepted the surrender, while the 45th Division was actually fighting its way in through, I think, what was the SS non-com [non-commissioned officers] school. He said it was only a coincidence that we took the surrender and they didn't; it could've easily been the other way around. And, to me, that sort of answers the whole question.

KM: Well, the way I look at it, based on the information that I have read since then, roughly at the same time—and nobody seems to have an exact idea as to what the time was. Roughly at the same time, Linden and his party came in the front door—

MH: And you came in the back door.

KM: We came in the back door. We came in with somewhat more men and took care of the enclosure. Linden and his party, they accepted the surrender by this German second lieutenant or something, or whoever he was. And if that was, in all probability, what happened, let's just say so and that's it. That's my attitude. And say that in all probability, this is how things happened and give the 45th the credit. But, apparently, it's always—the 45th apparently had an opportunity that the 45th Division turned down, so it's the 157th that ended up fighting to get recognition.

MH: I've gotten into this discussion. I've gotten in the middle of arguments, actually. I went to a reunion of the 42nd in Mobile, Alabama. People said, "What do you believe?" and I said, "What I believe is that every American soldier who set foot on European soil was a liberator." There were almost no camps that they had to fight their way into. Most of the concentration camps, the Germans had left. It was really discovering them, not liberating them. I said, "How can you claim to be a liberator more than the guy who's lying dead in the surf at Omaha Beach?"

KM: Absolutely. I think you're right. But once you start talking about liberators of the concentration camp, when you use that phrase, once you use that expression, then you are really saying there are such certain people who are classified as that. I agree. I don't deserve a bit of credit for being a liberator of Dachau. I just happened to be there. We just happened to be there.

MH: But had not you happened to be there, along with 3.5 million other American men and women, there would've been no liberation.

KM: Yeah. Yeah.

MH: In the large sense. I guess maybe it's Liberation with a large L, liberation with a small l.

KM: Yeah. I think that we did not consider ourselves and say, "Hey, we're the liberators of Dachau." At that time, you know—we had liberated the concentration camp, whatever that meant, but at the time, we didn't view ourselves as being anything particularly special. But then we found out that all these—it would've been nice to just have a plaque there and say, "This is what happened."

MH: So, if we get you a plaque, you'll be happy.

KM: (laughs) Well, I think that what is needed is really a plaque that spells out exactly what happened, that here in April—what was it, twenty-seventh?

MH: Twenty-ninth.

KM: April 29, 1945, the following happened, you know. You're going to take my picture?

MH: I am. You can tell? (laughs)

KM: (laughs)

MH: If a man's a university professor, he can figure it out immediately! (laughs)

KM: It takes a Ph.D. to figure that out. (laughs)

MH: Yes, it does. I actually want to take some in some other places. I don't have a—anything else you want to tell me, before I turn this off?

KM: No, not really. I think one of the things that people don't appreciate is the American GI didn't consider himself to be a hero coming back. And I think people didn't want to be viewed as heroes simply because they happened to be at Dachau when the camp was liberated. The camp was liberated. It was liberated in the sense that the Allied troops took over, but it's a matter of the word "liberation," how you interpret it. But yeah, it's a shame that it got to be a big argument as to who deserves credit and so on.

MH: Did the war change you?

KM: Did the war change me? I'm sure it did. I'm sure it changed me in a lot of ways. But how? I wish I could pinpoint it. I don't know.

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

KM: Probably. Yeah, before I went in the Army, I was religious, typically like probably the average American was religious.

MH: What denomination?

KM: Lutheran.

MH: Lutheran.

KM: And after the war, probably pretty much the same. So, I don't think—

MH: You didn't say, "I used to believe in God; now I don't believe in God."

KM: Correct. There was no major change in that respect, no. I don't know. I think that, obviously, a wartime experience leaves an impression and affects you, but how? It's kind of hard to say. When you look at that, you might see something, read between the lines and see something, but keep in mind that that's really written—the primary purpose was to let my kids know what happened, for their information. But it's kind of handy.

MH: Is there anything that happened to you in the war that you didn't want your kids to know?

KM: No. No, no.

MH: (to other man) Do you have any questions?

Unknown Man: Did you see the crematoriums, or did you see—did you see the crematoriums, or anything that would tell you about the horror of what Dachau was all about?

KM: The only thing that we saw was when we had that little tour that I mentioned. We went to this one place where apparently they would take prisoners and they'd ask them to take a shower. But, again, this was based on hearsay. It looked like an unusual room, a large room with this opening up in the ceiling.

MH: Did you see bodies lying around?

KM: No. The only bodies that—

MH: (coughs) Excuse me.

KM: The only bodies we saw were in that train, and I didn't go over there. I didn't even go over there.

MH: Okay. Well, thank you.

End of interview