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Joel S. Waltzer oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008

Joel S. Waltzer (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.]

Joel Waltzer: By the way, I have an address for everyone in the whole company, if I can find it. I think you'd want that.

Michael Hirsh: Okay. First of all, give me your name and spell it for me, please?

JW: Joel, J-o-e-l, S. Waltzer, W-a-l-t-z-e-r.

MH: And your date of birth?

JW: 10-27-25 [October 27, 1925].

MH: And you were with—

JW: A Company. 3rd Platoon, A Company, 255th Infantry [Regiment].

MH: In the 63rd Infantry Division.

JW: 63rd Infantry Division.

MH: Okay. When did you go over to Europe?

JW: We went over in November of—that would be forty-four [1944].

MH: Forty-four [1944]. Okay, and you—

JW: And we landed in Marseille, and we were camped in Aix-en-Provence for about a week or so, and then we went up in 40 and 8s up Alsace-Lorraine and we joined the 7th Army. I know I was in the hospital in Nancy. I know I was in a town called Achen. I don't remember the names of the towns.

MH: Why were you in the hospital?

JW: I had frozen feet, and dysentery. I lost seventy pounds.

Anyway, one night, we were doing road patrols when we first got up to the line, and they booted us around from one town to the next; sometimes we were in foxholes, sometimes we were in towns. And we were doing road patrols, really not too much combat. And one night, very, very late—probably one o'clock in the morning—they dropped us off in a town, beautiful town, in Alsace-Lorraine. I don't know the name. And they told us, "There's a big building over there. You can see the fires by the building. They're putting fires in these big drums, you know. You guys sleep there."

So, we walked over, and there was a giant of a building, and the Germans had used it as a stable. And we had fires going in the big drums, and when I took a careful look at the—there was a cement floor and it had hay, and you could smell the horse manure. And they were burning this wood, and I looked at the wood, and the wood were the chairs or benches from a church or a synagogue. Turned out it was a synagogue. How do I know? The ark was ripped out in the middle of the front of the building, and there were pages all over the floor from the prayer books, from the siddurs. And I just went nuts. I started to collect the papers they were using to start the fires, and I was pulling them out of the guys' hands, and I said, "I gotta bury these, I gotta bury these." I don't know if you know

MH: Yes.

JW: In the Jewish religion, you bury an old Torah and siddurs and stuff like that. They're buried. And I had tears in my eyes, and I was crazy. Anyway, they pulled us out before sunup. I don't even know the name of the town. It was a gorgeous town, beautiful houses, and this one big building became a—the Germans had used it, as I said, as a barn, and they had horses in there. And I guess I was in combat maybe about another month or two when I had frozen feet and dysentery, and I lost seventy pounds in the hospital in Dijon. Then from there, when I got better, they sent me to Paris. I became an MP [military police]. I was doing office work, because they said my feet were too bad for me to walk on.

MH: So, this would've been—this was what, early in the winter of forty-four [1944]?

JW: I'm really not sure of the dates.

MH: Was it before the Bulge or after the Bulge?

JW: It was—I think it was about the same time as the Bulge, because we had that Bulge, too, in the 7th Army, and we had the French Army right next to us. They were next to us. I had two years of high school French, and with the little Yiddish I know, I became the interpreter. And that was it.

MH: Had you been drafted or did you volunteer?

JW: No, I volunteered. I graduated high school. I was seventeen.

MH: Where'd you grow up?

JW: In New York, in Far Rockaway, New York. You know New York?

MH: Just a little bit. I mean, my kids live up there and work in the city, but they live in New Jersey.

JW: Oh, okay. My parents wanted me to go away to college, and I said, "Mom, I'm gonna be in the Army in less than a year. I want to stay home," and I went to NYU. I got a year

and a half of—I went to summer school, and I had a year and a half of credits, and I volunteered. They called it ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program].

MH: Right. I've talked to a lot of guys who were in ASTP.

JW: I volunteered for the ASTP, and I went into the Army in the beginning of forty-five [1945] [*sic*].

(phone rings)

MH: Could I ask you to hold on for one second?

JW: Yeah, sure.

MH: Thank you. Hang on just one minute.

(on other phone) Michael Hirsh. Hi. Let me call you back in about five minutes, I'm sorry. Okay, bye.

Hi, I'm sorry.

JW: After the war, we had a lot of meetings; we got together, the whole company, because so many of the fellows were from New York and New Jersey. I got that list of addresses someplace. I've got the whole company.

MH: Were these guys—any of these guys that you know got to any of the camps?

JW: I don't know. I really don't know. I never remember anybody saying that. I know that my guys ended up in—oh, what's the college town in Germany? On the river, on the Rhine, what's the famous old college?

MH: I'm not sure.

JW: I know the guy I shared a foxhole with was killed there. But—

MH: Some of the people from the 63rd, I believe, got to a place called Thekla.

JW: That I don't know. I don't know Thekla at all. As I said, I was just fighting a few months from the time we landed till February or March, and the reason for that was that I had such bad dysentery that I was, like, out of it. I lost seventy pounds. I wish I could lose seventy pounds now.

(phone rings)

MH: I know that feeling.

JW: (laughs)

MH: Okay. Well, if you're able to find that list, I sure would appreciate it.

JW: All right.

MH: Okay?

JW: There is a guy that lives near me; we get together. His name is Pat—Pasquale? Oh, what's his last name? I have his phone number, if you want; that I can give you right away. My lieutenant is dead, my sergeant is dead. We had a few Jewish guys in our platoon. One was Leo Eaker. He lived in Newark. He was a pharmacist. He was a sergeant, and he won a battlefield commission later on, I know that. But it's been years since I've been—hmm.

MH: I'm curious: When you were going nuts in the shul there, with the siddurs being used to start a fire, what was the reaction of the other guys in your unit?

JW: They thought I was crazy. Do you know what the temp—you know that winter was one of the coldest winters on record in Europe?

MH: Yeah.

JW: That's where I got the frozen feet from. I get disability. I used to get 20 percent; they cut me down to 10 percent, but thank God I don't need their money. But we were a bunch of young guys. Hold on a second, I'll get you Pat's phone number.

(to someone else) My friend Pat, you know, from the Army.

Unknown Woman: Yeah.

JW: (inaudible) I'm talking to somebody from the Army. (footsteps)

His name was Pat Scorzelli. Okay? That's the guy whose phone number I'm gonna give you.

MH: Scorzelli, okay.

JW: He went all the way through, so if you ask him, he might be able to—he might have been, although he never told me about that.

MH: Okay. Some people just never talked about it.

JW: Oh, if I was there, I would've talked about it. Hold on a second. I've got to turn the light on. (long pause) Yeah, I'm still here, but my eyes are not as good as they used to be. Scorzelli, yeah, Pat Scorzelli; his wife's name is Beryl. He married a British girl after the war was over. How do you like this? I don't have a phone—wait, yes I do. The area code is.... He's a retired postman. He travels; he and his wife could be in England. I know they go—I'll give you his address, too.... All right, I'm gonna go on a hunt for those—

MH: Okay. I appreciate it. Thank you very much for taking the time to call.

JW: Okay.

MH: Okay.

JW: I hope you get all the information you need.

MH: I'm working on it.

JW: I don't know if this will fit into your story—

MH: It may or may not.

JW: But it's just part of my experience—

MH: Did you run into much anti-Semitism in the Army?

JW: No. When I did—yeah, yeah, I did. I stuck a knife once, a mess kit knife. Well, I'll give you the story. Let me tell you the story.

MH: Go ahead.

JW: When I got out of the hospital, they sent me to an MP outfit. It was a National Guard MP battalion from South Boston. You know anything about South Boston? That's the low Irish. Drinking water was unheard of. They only drank alcohol. The first day that I got there, they sent us over to the mess to get food, and we had our mess kits, and we ate. We ate very good. And then I stood on line to wash my mess kit; there was a line of guys going in. And a drunk walks up, and he says to a Jewish guy by the name of Lipschitz—I forget his first name, but I'll never forget his last name; he was from Brooklyn. He said, "You fucking Jew bastard, you get off that fucking line. Get out of my way." I went over to him, I took my mess kit knife, and I stuck it in his neck. I drew a little blood. I said, "Would you like to say that again, please?"

MH: (laughs)

JW: "Please, say it once again." He sobered up, like, immediately.

MH: This is over in Europe.

JW: This was in Paris.

MH: In Paris, okay.

JW: In Paris. These guys were living the life of Riley, anyway, and there was some—I had some anti-Semitism there. And I took a guy's .45 and I put it in his mouth. I was crazy.

MH: I was gonna say, you got some anger issues there.

(both laugh)

JW: I wouldn't take it from anybody, and they got to know it. And in fact, I'll give you an idea of what happened. They got to know I was a tough guy, and my fists would fly if anybody ever said anything to me. They had a Jewish doctor. He was Major Hyman—what the hell, Hyman—oh, I forget his name. His name will come to me.

Anyway, a bunch of guys came in. There was a guy from Brooklyn by the name of Murphy, who was a prince of a man. He'd fought through Africa and up Italy, and he was wounded eleven times and they finally put him on a limited assignment. Anyway, we all went for physicals, and when we came in and he looked at my feet, he said, "You're not doing any duty until I get you regular shoes to wear, and you can't wear boots, and you can't wear any of the rubber boots." We called them "boot packs." And he says, "I will notify your first sergeant, and when the shoes come in, you can go on duty." Next morning, I'm laying in bed, and they called "Fall out," and I said, "I don't have to fall out, because I don't have to do anything." Next thing I know, the first sergeant is pulling me out of bed, calling me a Jew bastard. There was a baseball bat in the room. I picked it up and I got him off of me, and they put me under arrest and brought me in front of the company commander, and, "You're gonna be—"

In the meantime, there was a guy—his name was Seymour Cohen—from Philadelphia. He was about 6'4", and he was their first baseman and the best hitter on their baseball team. So, I told one of the guys I came in with, I said, "You tell Seymour Cohen to go over to Major Hyman"—I can't remember his name, a real Jewish name—"and you tell him what happened." So, I was standing in the company room, and the company commander was beating my ass, and I told him why. I said, "The doctor said I'm on limited assignment, I can't do anything, and not to fall out and not to wear any shoes because my feet were in bad shape." "We don't care, you're gonna be court-martialed, bah, bah, bah. You can't swing with a baseball bat, that's a deadly weapon." You know, gave me the whole—read my—

And in walks Major Hyman. “What’s going on?” Oh, they all saluted because he’s a major, and they stand up. “At ease, at ease,” and he says, “What’s going on here?” “This man attacked the first sergeant.” He says, “Why did he attack the first sergeant? What happened?” He gets the whole story. He says, “You have my papers. The first sergeant knows he’s not supposed to fall out for anything. I sent them over bright and early yesterday, around lunchtime,” and it was all forgotten. But they all had it in for me. Eventually—I mean, I had a good deal there. I ended up working in the opera house, in a French police station. Do you know Paris?

MH: I’ve been there.

JW: You know Rue Scribe and the Grand Hôtel [Hôtel Scribe]? Know where the Grand Opéra is?

MH: Yes.

JW: Well, I worked in that building, right on Rue Scribe; the back of the building was the entrance to a French police station. We had an MP station there, and that’s where I worked. It was a good deal. I had to be there at one o’clock in the afternoon and I was done at five o’clock. That was all the work I had to do. And I had a lot of friends. The first night I was there, I met a Jewish girl, a couple of girls. I was standing in front of the building under the light post with the guard on duty, and three young girls drove up, and one of them had a nameplate on her, Emilie Gaplin. And they handed us notebooks: they were studying English, and they want to know some idioms. “These are the idioms we know, and could you—?” Well, go think of an idiom when somebody asks you for an idiom.

Anyway, when I saw her name, I said something in Yiddish. She said to me, “I don’t speak that, but my parents do. I live around the corner. Would you like to meet my parents?” I met her parents the next night. I brought them cigarettes and food, whatever I could. The mother was a medical doctor, and the father was an engineer. They lived in a very exclusive neighborhood. That’s where we lived. In fact, I think the houses that we were living in were owned by the Rothschilds. Anyway, they told me that they lived in the apartment house in the cellar all during the war and that their neighbors brought them food. That’s how they survived.

And then, I met dancers in Paris at the (inaudible), and there were girls wearing Jewish stars. “My mother has a restaurant, come eat; you’ll have some chicken soup.” (laughs) I used to go eat there about once a week, and that was—

MH: Not bad duty, considering.

JW: Yeah, and Paris was wonderful for me. I really enjoyed it, and I had a good time. I made a lot of friends who I’m still in contact with.

MH: What’d you do when you came home? What business did you go into?

JW: I went back to college. I ended up with a degree in accounting. I got a job when I graduated in 1948, \$25 a week as a junior accountant, and they promised me a \$5 raise at the end of the year; this was June when I graduated. Promised a \$5 raise, and when it came the end of the year, I said, “Where’s my raise?” “We can’t afford it.” I said, “What do you mean you can’t afford it? Who are you bullshitting? I go out every day. I charge—I earn at least \$50 a day and some days more.” That was a charge; it was a monthly audit that they charged \$50 in those days. Today it’s a couple thousand.

But anyway, he says to me, “We can’t afford it.” I said, “Well, if you’re not going to keep your promise, I’m quitting.” He says, “You can’t do that. This is tax season!” “Just give me the \$5 raise.” My father was a dress manufacturer, and I told my father, and my father said, “Well, so? You don’t need the money.” My family was comfortable. I had my own car and I had money in my pocket. It was not the idea of money; it was the idea of the principle. And I quit, and I went to work for my father. Eventually, I went into my own business, and I did okay. I did pretty good. I’ve been retired for—I really don’t know. Let’s see, 1995, so what is that, thirteen years? That’s it. And I have a very nice family and a lovely wife, and we keep going, that’s all.

MH: Okay. Well, thank you again for calling.

JW: If you can call Pat, just tell him I gave him your phone number. I will try and hunt down that list. I moved into a retirement community, and I got things that I don’t know where—I used to have my little office in the house, and I don’t have that anymore, so I’m gonna have to dig deep.

All right, nice talking to you.

MH: Thank you very much.

JW: I hope I helped.

MH: Okay. Bye-bye.

JW: Good luck with your book.

MH: Thank you, I appreciate that.

JW: Thank you.

MH: Bye.

JW: Bye.

End of interview