Herb Kohnke was born 6 February 1914 in St. Paul, Minnesota; he grew up in the city and graduated from Harding High School in 1933. He volunteered for the US Army in December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

A member of the 99th Infantry Division, Herb (by this time a sergeant) arrived in Europe in November 1944. He was among the thousands of US troops captured by the Germans during their Battle of the Bulge offensive that began 16 December 1944. Herb was captured the first day, 16 December.

Now a POW, Herb spent nearly two months at XIII-C Hammelburg, until mid-February 1945, then was part of a work detail of prisoners sent to a farm near the village of Traustadt, Germany, some eight miles south of Schweinfurt. In the first days of April, with Allied troops nearing this location, the POWs were marched south. On 29 April, the group arrived at the town of Steinbach; two days later, American soldiers of the 99th Infantry Division reached the location and freed the men.

After evacuation, return to the United States, and discharge in late 1945, Herb got married (October 1945, wife Dorothy) and spent a career in quality control with Brown and Bigelow Company. He retired in 1976. Herb was active with the American Ex-POWs organization, and served a year as state commander.

Herb Kohnke died of natural causes 9 December 2012, aged ninety-eight.
Interview key:
T = Thomas Saylor
H = Herb Kohnke
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***)= words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is 24 May 2004, and this is the POW Project interview with Mr. Herb Kohnke, at his home here in Oakdale, Minnesota. First, Mr. Kohnke, on the record, thanks very much for taking time to speak with me today.

H: A pleasure.

T: Some information for the record, and please correct me if you hear mistakes. You were born on 6 February 1914, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Graduated from Harding High School 1933. Entered service December of 1941, and by late 1944 were with the 99th Infantry Division, which arrived in Belgium in November of 1944. With the German offensive in Belgium, which began on 16 December 1944, you were captured on that day. On 16 December.

H: Right.

T: Let me begin with your capture that day. Can you recall and describe how it was when you were actually captured and you had the Germans, in a sense, standing right in front of you there?

H: What we were, we were in a house. Billeted there. They took us out of the home, out of the house, and stood us on the street with our hands over our heads, and then the Germans went in the house and they started spraying it with their automatic machine guns that they had to be sure that there's nobody hiding in the house. We stood there. They searched us. They took everything away from us that we had. I didn't have a lot, but I had a watch. I had a knife, which they took. Generally it was just loose ends that they grabbed a hold of. We did the same thing with the Germans.

While we were standing there, down the street, which Hansfeld is only about a block long, but down to our right there were about three houses there, and there were other fellows billeted there and some captain of the German Army, he was kind of infuriated. He was SS. He demanded these guys come out right now, and some of these fellows were sleeping, believe it or not. But some of them came out in just their underwear. There was eight of them came out of there and all they were told, subordinates, the army, just to shoot them. They shot them down right there in their tracks.

T: Did you witness that?
H: Yes. I did. I saw it.

T: How close to you did this happen?

H: It happened, I would say, maybe one hundred feet from me.

T: In Hansfeld there was a rest and recuperation location, right?

H: It was more or less like getting a shower, new clothes, something hot, foods, and a little entertainment. They had a band there. It didn’t last very long. They started bombing us.

T: What were your thoughts at the moment, when you realized that you were a prisoner of war, at that moment standing in the street?

H: I have a little faith in God. I just felt that if I was going to get killed I was going to get killed at the time, and if I lived it was nice too, but I wasn’t afraid. I’ll guarantee you that. I wasn’t afraid. I just felt that it’s either now or never. Nothing went through my mind at all. I was worried about the other guys being killed but, no, I wasn’t afraid.

T: Did that, witnessing other Americans being killed, did that cause a reaction among the men you were with right there?

H: We made a lot of bellowing noises about it. Cut it out! Geneva Convention! Some of the guys hollered out. These [German soldiers] were SS, and they don’t care. Life to them, it seems as though it don’t make a bit of difference to them. Whether they live or die. They go for the Führer [Hitler] and that was it.

T: Did the Germans who captured you speak to you at all?

(1, A, 45)

H: Just told us, “Heraus! Get out of the house!” Then we had to empty our pockets. No. After that it was just directions, with guns. Tell you what to do.

T: It sounds like you and the others were completely surprised in this house by the arrival of the Germans.

H: Yes. We were. We knew they were coming but, like I told you before, we had put those fellows out there in the perimeter. They were supposed to report back to the headquarters there and let us know if the Germans were coming. I think they got captured before they even had a chance to get back to us.

T: So it was literally the Germans almost knocking at the door.
H: They were knocking at the door.

T: Were you questioned at all at the scene there, or was the first questioning, did that only happen later?

H: We weren't questioned right there in Hansfeld, no. They kept us there. After they're settled down...you know, these SS, they get pretty wild. But they kind of settled down and they turned us over to the Home Front soldiers, which are more elderly fellows and more reasonable. They took us down the street and there was a little hill there, and they put us on the hill. We just sat there for, oh, I would say a couple hours. And all this time, the Germans were going by in tanks and half-tracks and you know what. We were threatened a couple of times, but these German old soldiers they just told them no. They wanted to shoot us. So after the main part of the group went by us, all the tanks and everything, then we got up and they started marching us into Germany.

T: Did you feel, strangely enough, did you feel with the kind of troops you saw going by heading for the front lines, did you feel safer as a POW at that moment, or would you have felt safer, you think, actually back in a combat situation?

H: My feeling was I wanted to be back with the guys that I was with because I think...my job was not on the guns or something like that. My job was...they had it listed as a superior instrument. In other words, I had charge of setting up the guns on different targets. I never had the opportunity to do it, because when we took over from another outfit they already had all that information all staked out in front of all the mortar platoon guns. So I had nothing to do. I really had it nice. But I still had a lot of friends there. A lot of buddies...

T: And suddenly you had none of those people around you.

H: No. They were all...they were down by Loshungrad when I was...that was quite a ways away from them. People don’t realize when a battle starts like that, there’s turmoil. It’s almost every man for himself. It’s a group. A group of men for themselves. And they have to retreat and they go in any direction they figure they can retreat. So I never knew where they were at all at any time.

T: The Germans marched you away, you said. With how many men were you marching originally, when you marched away from Hansfeld?

H: When we went from Hansfeld I would say approximately there was, this is the Hansfeld bunch, I would say there was about one hundred of us, and they marched us into Germany. While we were going into Germany, we went through the Siegfried Line. Then we were stopped and we were told we had to help carry some dead people and put them in a barn. Just before we left there they stopped the whole bunch of us and then they set fire to the barn with these dead people in it. They
were civilians by the way. Farmers. Then we continued on and I can’t tell you just how many miles we walked. I would say we walked a good hour or so, and we came to a bunch of pillboxes. Big ones. That’s where they interrogated us.

T: I’ll have you talk about that. What was the interrogation like for you, individually?

H: We were all told in the beginning if we were ever captured give them your name, rank, and serial and that’s it.

T: Name, rank, and serial number.

H: That’s it. So when you get down there in that lower level in that, there were about three stories in that big…

(1, A, 89)

T: Going underground?

H: Underground. Oh, yes. And they were all officers down there. Naturally, I didn’t have too much to say for them. I wouldn’t tell them. But they told us. They said you were from…we don’t have patches on our outfits. We had nothing. They told us where we were from and we were in England. And they told us what town we came from and when we departed from England and when we came into France. They had all the answers. They wanted to see if we would verify it. All I did is, I stood there and didn’t say anything. All I would say is my name is so and so. My rank is so and so. And that’s it.

T: Did you feel threatened during the time of being questioned?

H: No. I think they were disgusted (chuckles). They weren’t getting anyplace with any of the fellows. They weren’t getting any information other than what they already knew. Before we went down in there they took all of our…we had overcoats and we just were issued brand new rubber overshoes because it was so terrible. A lot of snow and mud and everything.

T: Right.

H: We had overshoes. We had overcoats. We had field jackets. We had our helmets yet at that time. The made us take all of that stuff off. That was before they started interrogating us. Then they took us back up on the ground floor and then they said okay. Some officers said, you can’t do that. You can’t take all that equipment from them. So there was a mad scramble. I ended up with a smaller overcoat and a smaller jacket, but then on our march we kind of switched around and we finally got some clothes that fit.
T: Did you get back everything that you had lost originally, that was taken from you? Your overshoes or your...

H: None of us got our overshoes. We just had to go in our boots that we had. They took all the overshoes. They needed them themselves, I think.

T: Were there any threats or intimidation for you personally? Did they threaten you?

H: Oh! This was later on.

T: Not at the original interrogation.

H: No. The officers were pretty nice. For the conditions they were in, they were pretty nice. All they would do, like repeat that they knew where we had been, where we were, and we had nothing to do but just shut up. Don't tell them anything.

After we left there they marched us, and we hiked through different towns. We got to one town. I don’t know the name of it. But they had an auditorium there and they put us up there overnight. They put us up in an auditorium, which was just covered with straw. There was no sheets in it or anything. We just plunked down and laid on the floor on the straw. But before that, they had a bunch of officers and some noncoms in this one building and they were going to interrogate us again. They were a little bit more mean. They didn't like us too well because we weren't answering their questions. There was this one officer asked me some question and I was getting kind of miffed about it, and I made some smart remark and one of these German soldiers, he had his rifle, and he swung around and hit me in my neck here with the butt of his rifle. I was ready to go to fight with him, and a couple of guys with me held me back. But that was all. There was no other altercations.

T: Had they fed you by this time or offered you food or anything?

H: Oh, no. Oh, no. We never had any food. Going back to where we were interrogated in the underground.

(1, A, 135)

T: Pillboxes.

H: The pillboxes there. We walked that night until about eleven o'clock, and they put us in a house in some little town, and they put a group of us American soldiers down in the basement of this home. While we were down there...it was pitch black down there. There was no lights. One of the guys, always nosy, they found a bin over there where there was some potatoes and naturally, it got around, there’s potatoes here. So we all start stuffing our pockets with potatoes and we never knew if they were dirty or what they were. When we got out the next morning they took us and we started hiking again. But then we had a few potatoes to gnaw on. We
didn’t clean them. We just ate them like they were. But that’s all we had. We had to
scrounge ourselves and get something to eat.

Then after we hiked for a while we ran out of these potatoes, and there was
snow on the ground. We hit a few farming areas where we saw where the Germans
had cultivated and taken up sugar beets. And why they left some sugar beets there
we don’t know, but some of us, we saw them, and there was one kid, he went after it
and one of the soldiers, he just shot at him. He didn’t kill him, but he shot at him and
told him to stay in line. So pretty soon they got weak-kneed and they said oh, go
ahead. But these doggoned sugar beets were frozen.

T: Sure they were. It was December.

H: Yes. So we took them. We all took off and grabbed some. Whatever we could
find. Whether they were half there, damaged or whatever. We took them. I put
them inside of my coat and let them thaw out a little bit and I started chewing on
them. Believe it or not, they’re pretty good tasting.

T: When you’re hungry, right?

H: When you’re hungry you can eat anything.

T: The first place that you went, according to your map, was the city of Bonn, and
you marched all the way from the point of capture there to the city of Bonn.

H: No. No. No. We had two altercations where we got…like I say, I don’t remember
those towns we got to, but after this first case where we got the potatoes, we got on
a train that morning. But it was only a short ways and then they got strafed by the
Americans and they stopped the engine. We had to get off and we started hiking.
Oh, I don’t know how many miles we hiked. Then there was another train. We got
on that and we only went, I would say maybe a couple hours, and they just stopped
the train. We had to get off and we hiked the rest of the way to Bonn. Now I forget
to Bonn, to Hammelburg, I’d say maybe we had to hike about ten miles. That’s the
second time. To get to Bonn.

T: Right. What did they do with you in Bonn? I mean, you weren’t there very long.

H: No. We came in there in the afternoon of this one day. That had to be about 21
December, someplace right around in there.

T: So five days or so after you’d been captured.

H: Something like that. Right around in there. We got to Bonn. We didn’t go into
the town of Bonn. We came to the outskirts of Bonn and there was a…we found out
it was a former German training center. We don’t know what it was. Army or what
it was. But it was way up on a hill. We had to hike up there and they were telling us,
these German soldiers, telling us we’re going to get something to eat. We got into
the building which was like a great big auditorium, we got in there and there was a bunch of German soldiers there with so-called food in containers, and they gave us these little cups. We came up there and they’d dish it out and it looked just like rice but it was barley. And it was cold as ice. It was just cold. That was our food. So we had that.

But there was no accommodations within that building, which was warm. They stuck us out to where the trainees that they had, the German trainees, where they had a place where they could shower. They had cement stalls where they could shower and then they had long rooms where they had an extensive amount of faucets and the basins. It was cold. Really cold. In December. So a bunch of us, there were five of us, all friends I got to know real well. We just laid down on the cement in that shower room and we put a couple of our GI coats down on the floor and then we huddled up real close to each other and put the other coats on top. And we stayed there overnight. That’s the next morning then we got out of there. No food. Then we marched a little ways and we got on that train and I told you, then we went to a town that evening. We hit that town where we just got lambasted something terrible.

(1, A, 198)

T: You were in boxcars now, right?

H: We were in boxcars.

T: How many of you all together? You mentioned one hundred earlier. Still about the same number of guys?

H: Oh, no. No. No.

T: More?

H: Oh, yes. We must have had, all told, we must have had a couple hundred.

T: In the train.

H: Yes. Well, in the boxcars, I couldn’t tell you how many boxcars they had filled up because they had other fellows at Bonn that were getting on that same train. See that forty and eight…we were jammed in there. You couldn’t sit down. You had to stand up. And I mean, we were tight in there. If you had to urinate, you just go to the door. If you were having any other problems you didn’t go no place. That’s the way you had to stay in that train until we got to Hammelburg.

T: What was it like to have the train…you were locked inside these boxcars, right?

H: Yes.
T: What was that like to be strafed by a plane?

H: To be what?

T: To be strafed or bombed by a plane.

H: It's the old story again. This must be it. I wasn't afraid. I wasn't scared. Really and honest. I'm not kidding. I was not afraid. I just had faith. I just figured, some way I'm going to get out of here. We were lucky. We did get out of it. All that bombing and everything that was going on in that railroad yard and then finally when we zigzagged. We couldn't see it, but we could tell where we were zig and zag. Through that railroad yard on railroad tracks. We finally got out of that town and then we started moving again. But, no, when you're in that position, why you don't have an opportunity to get worried or anything, I don't think.

T: Would you say that when you think of the men around you in that car, were others as calm as you or not?

H: Oh, some were pretty mad. But, no, I don't think anybody was getting...giving outward prayers or anything like that. No. It was mostly get off my feet or get out of the way if somebody had to urinate and stuff like that.

T: Right.

H: Noise like that was going on all the time.

T: You've mentioned your faith a couple times. How would you describe your faith before you went overseas? Were you a particularly religious person?

H: I wasn't a fanatic or anything. I went to church. I believe in God. I read the Bible. I went to Bible classes and stuff like that. Yes. I was normal.

T: In what ways do you think your faith helped you there in that train or elsewhere as a POW?

H: I think it helped. All the way through.

(1, A, 236)

T: In what ways? How would you describe that?

H: Just...I don't know. I just felt that this is it. I gotta live with it. If the good Lord is going to take me away, that's it. That's all there is to it. That's just the way I felt.

T: Rather stoic about the whole thing in a way.
H: Sure. I wasn’t bothered by it. I wanted to be home, naturally. I didn’t want to stay over there. But, no, after we were in Hammelburg, and that was the next trip.

T: That’s right.

H: Bombing. We got to Hammelburg.

T: It looks like you spent until 15 February at Hammelburg, so six, seven weeks, something like that?

H: 25 December until then. Yes.

T: So seven weeks it looks like. That was the only real camp setting you had. Let’s have you talk about that. When you got to the camp and walked into XIII-C, describe the camp from your perspective.

H: You want to start me from when I got there?

T: Yes. Let’s do that.

H: When we first got there…Hammelburg is way up on a mountain. Hammelburg the town itself, is way down in the valley. Beautiful place. But anyhow, Hammelburg prison is up on the mountain and you have to zigzag up a road to get there. When we got there, all of us fellows that were on the train, they took us to one area there and they lined us up four deep and then an officer came along and we had colored fellows, we had Jewish fellows. They weren’t professed...with signs on them saying they’re Jews, but the black guys they could pick them out. The officers with other officers. They just said, when they’d see a black, they’d say you, you, you. Come out. “Raus.” We didn’t know what they were going to do to them. We couldn’t do anything about it. So they had the blacks.

Then, I was thinking, they’re going to start nationalities now. So they asked for the Jews. Juden, come out. You know, there’s some kids kind of reluctant about saying they were Jews because they heard about Hitler and his Jewish program. But these [German] officers, sometimes they’d look at some of these kids, and the profile of the fellow. Maybe he looked like a Jew, but they have him come out. They took all the Jewish fellows out. We don’t know what they did with them. Honest. They took them away from us and that was the last we saw of them. And I had one of the buddies of mine—his name was Green—that was in that bunch. We never did find out what happened to him.

T: Were the black soldiers that were pulled out of line, did you see any of them at XIII-C later?

H: No.
T: So that was also a mystery as far as where they went. How did that strike you that people were being pulled out of line in a way? Did you wonder what was going to happen to you perhaps?

H: We did. We didn’t know if they were going to leave us go to a compound or what they were going to do. Because we saw it happen where they just shot people down. Even their own civilians. They shot them down. We didn’t know what was going to happen to those fellows, and you could surmise what was going to. We thought maybe they would put them in a different compound. But we never did see the different compounds. We saw all these different compounds with other fellow prisoners in these compound, so we knew we were going to be in some compound there. I wasn’t worried about that.

T: And when you walked up to get into the camp and got inside, describe the camp from your perspective when you got inside.

H: When you get on top of the hill, when you look...I’m trying to get perspective as to looking...to the east. Up on top of the hill they had officers’ quarters that was on the left and on the right, and then you went down a road and they had a great big mess hall. The mess hall was not for prisoners to go into like we have mess halls in this country. They served the soldiers. There was just like a place where they prepared all the food. Then, going down another hill from there, on the left hand side was all the compounds. Each building, some were tarpaper shacks that had different nationalities. They were all broken down. There were English. They were in one. Russians in another one. Aussies another one. Polish in another one.

Our, where we went, was a—this was during the beginning of the war I think, we didn’t know for sure—it was an artillery training camp. The Germans have a lot of horses. During the war. And they had horses pulling their artillery. Okay. We ended up in a building where...it was a horse barn. It was a mammoth thing. Oh, boy! It was a whopper. The walls...it was broken down into two sections. There was a center section where I believe they brought the horses in and they had water troughs, and then they had a section to the right where you went through big doors and they had bunk beds. If you went to the left there was another bunch of bunk beds. I mean, they could take care of...this one section was filled, and I would guess there were 250 fellows in there.

(1, A, 326)

T: Wow!

H: There were bunk beds. They were double decked. And they were close together. They were filled. It was beneficial for those fellows, because we had no heat. It was all those guys and their body heat that kept it fairly warm. Our section, which we went to the right, we couldn’t have been no more than about seventy-five guys in there. All Americans. There were some fellows that were captured after I was
captured from my same outfit. So anyhow, we all got together. We were glad to see each other alive.

T: So you saw some people that you knew.

H: Oh, yes. So we had no heat. No heat whatsoever. They had a little stove there. It was one of those little fabricated stoves made of sheet metal, and it was only about maybe twenty inches tall and about, I would say, about twenty-four [inches] long and maybe about two feet high. It had a cover on the top where you could put wood into it. Then they had a stovepipe on that thing that went up through the roof. And I'm not lying, that pipe was almost fifty feet.

T: So the ceiling was tall in this building?

H: Oh, this building, this horse barn, that's what it was. It was a stable. It had walls on the sides. They must have been forty feet high. Then they had a pitched roof on top of that.

T: That's a lot of guys in here now though.

H: No. There was only about seventy-five of us in our section.

T: That's, comparatively, not so many when you had 250 on the other side.

H: Yes. It was nice and warm over there. We didn't have any heat. We didn't have any provisions like wood or anything there for us. So we doubled up on a bunk bed. A buddy of mine. We huddled up together on one bunk bed.

T: So no heat. Were they supplying food on a daily basis?

H: Daily basis? That was a fable. We never got a daily—it's when they decided to bring it.

T: So irregular supply of food.

H: No. Not a regular supply.

T: Irregular.

H: Irregular. And the food was only soup. And it was only water. Nothing like we have soup here. They'd bring it in a great big beer barrel and they would dip it out into a little metal container they gave us and we'd get maybe...like remember the old-fashioned water ladles? They would dip that in there and that's what you'd get.

End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 380.
T: Did you have a mess kit or something to eat out of?

H: No. No. No.

T: So if they were supplying soup, how do you eat it?

H: Just sucked it up. It was just water.

T: From the ladle or what?

H: No. No. Right from the can that we had. The little can.

T: So they gave you a can, or you said you found a can.

H: No. They issued them. They were just about... I would say, maybe a quart size. That's about all. Metal can. That's all they were. They were enameled cans. Then they wouldn't fill it up with this watered soup. That's what we'd get. We wouldn't get it every day.

T: How often did you get bread or potatoes?

H: Never.

T: So at Hammelburg you don't ever remember receiving bread portions...

H: I know we didn't get any bread. One time they gave us, I don't know where they got it, but it was like a liver sausage. Only we got a little square. It was about... like a piece of pie, only about the full width of it, the widest portion, was about an inch. And it was only about an inch long. Just like a little piece of pie. Why they gave that to us, beats me. I don't know. But we never received any bread or meat or anything like that. All we got was just that watered down, so-called soup.

T: It sounds like it won't take long before people are going to suffer from malnutrition here.

H: We had malnutrition. We had fellows that had dysentery. We lost fellows. They died from dysentery right in our seventy-five group there. I buried two of them. They had a burial ground over there. They had a little cemetery. We had a regular ceremony with taps and the whole works. But I got into two of them. We had more fellows than that that died, and they were put in the cemetery there.

T: Is this how, if it's possible to answer this, is this how you envisioned life as a POW was going to be, or what did you make of this situation?

H: I thought it [life as a POW] would be a lot better, because we were always told that the Geneva Convention they have to do this, they have to do that. When you're
in somebody else’s backyard, they do what they please. You don’t get what you think you’re going to get. No. Anything that happened, it was something new to us. We never expected to see anything like that. And we thought we were going to get more than what we did, because when... getting back to when I was down at Camp Wallace, we had German prisoners down there. And we treated them like human beings. Those fellows got three meals a day. They even got paid. They would work in the warehouse and they got money.

T: So you had an image in your mind of what it was like to be a prisoner of war and this is not at all close to that, is it?

H: The Americans went ahead and took care of the German prisoners, [in comparison] to what we got. They were living like rich people, because they had all the liberties. They had the food. They had entertainment. They had movies all the time. Anything you could think of, they had it down there. Because I used to be on guard with some of those guys once in a while.

T: Now the tables are turned and you’re the prisoner, and it’s not the same.

H: We got nothing. No.

T: We talked about food. About the quarters. What was the daily routine there during the weeks you were at Hammelburg? Was there a roll call in the morning to start the day?

(2, A, 415)

H: Yes. That was a laugh. That’s the most entertainment we got.

T: Describe that then. What was entertaining about it?

H: This officer, this captain, that... afterwards this Gene Victor and I, we got acquainted with him and he was nice to us. But the other guys, they’d make it rough on him. We’d come out there. They’d sound a bell to come out and be counted. We’d have to come out that big door and then they’d line up both halves of the building. We’d have to line up four deep and we’d stretch out for I would say at least fifty feet.

T: You’ve got several hundred guys though, right?

H: Oh, yes. So these Germans they’d start their eins, zwei, drei, vier, going down the line. They were counting the lines of four. So some of these guys they would—the first four, one in the back maybe he’d sneak down and he’d get down at the other end and they’d count him again. Or sometimes it would be just vice versa. They’d be counting up here and they get down there and these guys would sneak up and there would be less down there. So when they made their count it would be zigging
and zagging. One time they’d have too many. The next time they wouldn’t have enough.

T: Got it.

H: These Germans would go just crazy. And that captain would get so mad.

T: Did you have other daily interactions with these Germans? Were they around or were they kind of just at a distance?

H: They were at a distance. They never came into the barracks. The only time they came in the barracks was when they wanted us to step out and get counted. If at any time we had to go to the biffy or something, to the bathroom, they had, way in the back of the building up on a little hill there, they had an outdoor biffy there where you could go. Right there they had a machine gun tower. There was no...a lot of people, they talk about...you see this Hogan’s Heroes [US television program of the 1960s]. How much liberty they had and everything. That was a fake. You didn’t have that kind of liberty.

T: What’s it like for you? I’ve seen that show, from the 1960s. What was it like for you, watching a show like that?

H: I used to laugh. It was a big joke.

T: As an ex-POW was it still funny?

H: Believe it or not, it was so funny that Hogan’s Heroes was based on Hammelburg XIII-C. That was the biggest fake. We didn’t have that camaraderie, with some American officers with the German officers. There was no such thing as that over there where we were.

T: Can you watch a show like that and laugh?

H: Oh, sure.

T: As an ex-POW?

H: Because it was so...idiocy. You see things there that would never happen. Just like their tunneling and all that stuff. And all this stuff...the equipment. They had a radio and all that stuff. It don’t happen. Now the Air Force was different. See, we were infantry. I have nothing against the guys because—the Air Force—because I got a lot of friends in the Air Force in our American prisoners of war here in our chapter. But they tell me what they had. They lived like kings. They got food all the time. They made food. They even made cakes. They had warm barracks and blankets. They had everything. We didn’t have it. It’s a different faction. The Air
Force, in the German section they honored—their Air Force was premium, whereas the infantry was different.

T: So you noticed different treatment. Did that include, too, the daily routine? What did you do at Hammelburg there?

H: Nothing.

T: Literally?

(1, B, 455)

H: Nothing. All we could do is just lay in bed, because we didn’t have any heat. We didn’t have any food. So we just kind of stayed quiet so we wouldn’t use up our energy. They took us out one time to go ahead and get some wood. They took us out with a toboggan, and we went out into the artillery range and there was snow on the ground. We had to remove the snow and all we could pick up was the small twigs that were on the ground. Something that would, if you got it to light after it was dried out, it would only last maybe about five minutes and it was gone. There was no big chunks of wood we could stick in the stove. Everything we put in there would practically burst...we had to dry it out first. And sometimes it would take four or five days for it to dry out. Because it was cold in there.

T: Now you’re a pretty big guy, stature-wise. Was the lack of food starting to affect you, as far as your own health?

H: I was weaker. That’s about all. I didn’t feel as strong as I was before. But like I told you, I was finally allowed to get to a scale. The Burgomeister I worked for on the farm, he had one of those old butcher scales with the big square base and then they had the graduation bar across. I weighed myself, and I weighed 118 pounds.

T: So you lost a bunch of weight.

H: We used to laugh about it. Believe it or not. Now that was another thing. We laughed because we had some other swear words on each other.

T: Let me ask about the sense of humor. I mean, in a sense, you know, this isn’t funny, what you’re describing, and yet you say a sense of humor was part of this.

H: Oh, yes.

T: In what way?

H: We were out of the prison camp. Now we’re in Traustadt, right? Is that what you’re trying to get to?
T: Oh, any place really. Whether it’s Hammelburg or...I mean, this is kind of a non-chronological...

H: Now just to get out of Hammelburg. We got the twenty-five fellows together...

T: Okay, let’s do that, because, in a sense, from Hammelburg we’ve talked about, really, a number of things. Let’s pick up then and move to the next step, because for you in the middle of February 1945 you volunteered to get out of Hammelburg.

H: Right.

T: And how did this opportunity come about?

H: Well, the captain, like I told you, captain of our compound, with this Gene Victor who is very good, he was very linguistic with the German language, and I had some and was picking up a little bit. I went to German school when I was a little kid, so it kind of came back little by little. But anyhow, there was one night...we weren’t eating, and the German captain wanted to talk to us. He got Victor and me, and we went up to his office up in front. He had a bucket like this. Like a workman’s bucket we have here, with the cover. It was his food bucket, and he had, oh boy, I’ll tell you, it was the most delicious stew you ever saw in your life, and we were drooling and he gave it to us. Gave it to Gene and I to eat.

That’s the time when he told us that they have places where they can put men out, prisoners, into these towns and they were farming towns. And you can work there. And he says, we got one town, and he didn’t mention the town at that time, but he says we’ve got a bunch of Russians there and the people want to get rid of them because Russians, I’ll tell you. The guys themselves, life don’t mean anything to them. Honest. They laugh at death. Anyhow, the people didn’t like them because they weren’t doing their work or whatever. They wanted to get rid of them. This was Traustadt. We didn’t know it until we got there. So he said, now, we can send you out there to this town. He didn’t tell us where it was. And he said you would be able to get a good bed, a warm building. You get good food every day. Hot food. And he said you’d have to work, which is not much work to do on a farm, and he told us what we may have to do there on the farm. Just clean up the barns and put down straw and maybe do some odd things around, but you won’t have to work hard. So Gene and I went back and we start talking...

(1, B, 503)

T: Were you suspicious at all?

H: Sure we were suspicious. Like I told you before, anything is better than nothing. And we had nothing. So that’s what we brought back to the guys. We told them this officer told us if we can get twenty-five guys, we can go to this little town, and we would be on a farm. We’d get something to eat every day. And we would have a
building where it’s warm, and we would have a bed. Bunk beds. We can’t lose. We’re going to gain. No matter what it was we were going to gain.

Some of the fellows were skeptical. Gene and I were first skeptical when we first talked to him, but this captain was a pretty, we trusted him pretty good. He was all right. So anyhow, we had to work all night trying to convince twenty-five of us guys. We had twenty-three from our outfit and we had two outsiders from a different outfit. The next morning we took a vote, and they all said okay, it sounds reasonable. Let’s go.

T: But it took some convincing. It wasn’t...

H: They were kind of reluctant in the beginning, but then they thought...we tried to convince them that anything is better that what we’ve got. We don’t have anything here. So it finally got to them and the next morning they said let’s go. So we went to the captain and told him.

That evening they got us together and they took us up to this kitchen and they gave us a half a loaf of German bread, which is pretty good size piece. Which we never saw before. And we got a great big chunk of Blutwurst, that’s blood sausage. About that long and about that big around, that we could take. And they took us down the mountain, and we had to wait until the train came. They only traveled at night. We had to wait that evening, after dark. The train came, and we were getting on the train where there were some German soldiers, and we had German guards with us. But they took us to Schweinfurt.

T: Boxcars or regular passenger cars?

H: No. Regular passenger cars. Regular passenger train. We got to Schweinfurt, and then we got into the train station there. Nice and warm. Oh, boy! The first time. That was as luxury for us. We had to stay there for about two or three hours. Finally this guard that we had, so-called guard, in Traustadt, in our building that we were bivouacked in, he came and then he was going to take us to Traustadt, which is about eight miles from Schweinfurt. And we marched.

T: You marched. Now here you are with twenty-five guys and, in a sense, the work at Traustadt, it’s farm work.

H: Farm work.

T: Where did they keep you quartered there? Together?

H: Yes. All twenty-five of us guys. What they did, right in the heart of the town they always have a square. All these little German towns. They have a square. Off the square there was a little home. Must have been a farmer’s home at one time. Right in town. Which all the farmers lived in town.

T: Right.
H: All of their farms were outside of town. We had this one house, and you went in a side door and one side they had the biffy, their latrine, outhouse. It was inside the house though. Then to the left was another door with a big room and a little alcove. And in that big room and alcove there were bunk beds. There was enough for twenty of us.

Then when you went down the hallway, there was another little room where the other five stayed in there. And Zink, our guard, who was just one heck of a nice guy, he was very, very nice young guy, he got wounded. He had a bad hand. He got it on the Russian Front, so they put him in charge of being a guard. He was good to us guys. He was very, very nice. Us fellows we felt, my gosh, we've got a chance to live.

T: Did he stay with you all the time?

(1, B, 552)

H: He had a room upstairs. He locked the door every night. Nobody was going anywhere. We had it pretty nice. Every night he [Zink the guard] locked the door, and every morning he would get us up and then we'd march down the street, which was this narrow street. We'd peel off, wherever we were supposed to go.

The first day—this was a Sunday morning when we first go there. Like I told you, we never have eaten. Nothing. When we got there that morning he had the farmers come up and pick out the guys who they wanted. There was a fellow by the name of Bill Reed who was from our outfit, and he was as big as I was, and the Burgomeister came. He had the first choice. He came to the door and he came in, and Zink told us that he's coming to get two men to work on a farm. He spotted me, I was just sitting on my bunk, and Reed was over in another spot. So the Burgomeister pointed to me and says, “Come with.” So I went with him. Me a blond hair, and I think he knew I was German. I don't know why, but he...and he asked me then if I was German. I told him yes. And you do sprechen Deutsch, and I said a little, just a little. He said, “Gut.” Then he asked me if you have a buddy that you would like to have come with you. I said yes. So he says, you pick him out. So I told Bill Reed. He was from, if I recall, he was from Kentucky or someplace down there. Good kid. One soul of a fellow. Big. But he was kind of raw. He was just like a hillbilly, but he was a nice guy. Peach of a fellow. So we went on the farm with the Burgomeister. Then he took us down to the house at noontime and the mother Wiener, she had dinner for us.

T: So Wiener was the name of the family you worked for. Did you work for the same family every day?

H: Yes, sir.

T: So you got to know these people?
H: Oh, definitely. Mr. and Mrs. Wiener were just like my grandma and grandpa. Honest. It was great.

T: What kind of people were they?

H: Nice.

T: You have fond memories of them.

H: Yes.

T: What made the relationship so pleasant between the Wiener’s and you, as a person far away from home?

H: Like I told you, they were just like my grandma and grandpa.

T: Were they still alive at this time? Your grandma and grandpa?

H: No. They passed away. That was my mother’s dad and mother. They were sweet people. So were they [the Wiener’s]. So anyhow, that Sunday when we went there he introduced me to Mrs. Wiener, and then they had a Russian girl that was working there. They were forced labor. And they had a Polish girl. One was Sasha and the other one was Shimila. Shimila in German is blond, see. That’s how I knew her. By Shimila.

[That first day] we didn’t even do any work. We just came down there to eat. Sunday is a day of rest as far as the German people. They were religious people. We sat down and we had boiled potatoes. We had creamed carrots. We had German ersatz imitation coffee. Reed and I, we haven’t had any solid foods. We were getting filled up and we could have all we wanted. She had a great big bowl of potatoes, a great big bowl of carrots, creamed carrots.

T: Were you pinching yourself to see whether this was for real?

H: No. I wasn’t. I was just thankful that I was getting it. They were so good to us. So when she got all done, we were talking. While we were eating she was asking me questions: if I was Deutsch. If I was German. Yes. Were my grandma and grandpa German? Yes. They asked me where they came from. They come from Germany? Oh, yes. From Frankfurt. Everything started to get jelling. They started to be real nice to me then. So she came out of the kitchen with a great big Kaffee-Kuchen. That’s a coffee cake. Did you ever see them over there?

T: Yes.

H: She had a coffee cake, and it had apples on it. It had cottage cheese, which I hated up until that time, and then they had cinnamon on it. It was delicious. I mean, for us it was delicious.
T: From no food at all to too much.

H: Grandeur, you know. And she set that great big thing in front of us. Oh, by the way. They had a Polish fellow there. He was a little short guy. He wasn't over five feet tall. He had clothes that never fit him. They were always too big. We called him Zep, and he sat at the table. Just the three of us would sit there in the kitchen and eat. She came out after we were filled up with all that other stuff, with the potatoes and the carrots. She came out and she set that in front of me and she told me, she said, “You eat all you want.” I thought, oh, my God! I was so full. I wasn’t going to refuse it. She started cutting pieces off like a piece of pie and giving it to me and it was good. We had about two, three pieces. Reed had some and Zep had about one piece because he’s been eating all the time. We got all done and she said, “You take it back with you.”

T: So you took it with you.

H: She cut it up and gave it to me to take back. So then when I got back I gave it to some of the other fellows that didn’t get any of that. Just gave it out until it was gone.

T: So you went back to the main house to sleep every night and, in a sense, went to work in the morning, it sounds like.

H: Yes. Went down the street to their farm. You said you were in Germany. These little towns, the farmers live in town and they have their farms outside of town.

T: Right.

H: That’s the way the Burgomeister was.

T: Describe the kind of work you did every day, because you were there from the middle of February to the beginning of April.

H: We’d go down there in the morning. Zink would take us down. We’d break off. We’d break it down and we’d go down there. Then we would clean the barns. First off, we would take and get rid of all the straw and we’d have to separate all the manure and everything and get that all cleaned up. Then we would put new straw down. Then when we get that done, previously, the night before, we’d have to go down into a cellar where they had cabbage. Monstrous cabbages. Never had anything like it in the United States. They were monstrous. I bet those things weighed twenty-five pounds.

T: A piece?
H: Apiece. Honest. Then they had sugar beets. Those things, I’d say they weighed at least four or five pounds apiece. And we’d take a certain amount, Bob Wiener would tell us how many, and he had a grinding operation in the cow barn on one end where you’d grind them up. It would make just like little chips, which reminds me of when these guys here in the States, Northern States Power or something, when they’re grinding up trees and they’re running through...

T: They looked like that? Those little wood chips?

H: Yes. It looked just like the wood chips. We’d do that the night before, and it would kind of ferment by the next morning, a little bit with the cabbage and the sugar beets. Then after we got the barn cleaned...now the cows never left their stalls. The cows never left. They were born and when they were ready to be milked they were tied to a stall and they stayed there until they got rid of them. But anyhow, we’d feed them. Then after we got done feeding them, then we would go in the house and eat. Have our breakfast. Then whatever Pa Wiener wanted us to do after that.

Usually, it sounds like I’m getting prejudiced, but Reed was a good kid as far as I concerned. But he didn’t like the Germans too well. He still had that hate towards them. Not real bad, but he still had...he just wasn’t going to do everything that they wanted. I think the Burgomeister could see it. Any time that he wanted somebody to do something with him he’d always want me with him. To go with him. So that’s what I did. I used to go out and drive the horses when we were plowing or something like that. He’d be with you. He’d handle the plow. He’d never let me. He just let me drive the horses. Manual work was very little. Once in a while we had to go and clean out those pits where the manure was in.

(1, B, 680)

T: Sure.

H: And scatter that [manure]. We had to clean out the pig sty once in a while. That was fortunate for us, because Ma and Pa Wiener had a little distillery in there, and he would take all the scrapings of potatoes and the scrapings off of the peelings of apples and whatever else and he’d boil it in there and he had a crock in there in the bottom of his coils. It was dripping in the crock. Reed found that. I didn’t. We were in there one day and he saw that and he went over and smelled it. I still think Reed was a hillbilly. He smelled it and he said, “Herb, that’s liquor.” So he had a little glass there. Smaller than this one. Sitting on the shelf. So Reed took it and dipped it in that crock and, wow! So I took some of it.

T: Grain alcohol.
H: I was wowing too. No. No. It was just like...what I’m trying to think off. Not as strong as brandy. Cognac. It was good. Tasted real well. But anyhow, that was our daily grind.

T: So you were essentially...you were the hired hands at the farm.

H: Yes.

T: And doing the work that you would do around a farm during the day.

H: Yes. And then when we’d get done in the morning, then Zink would have some duties for us. We went up into the mountain there to cut trees. Cut trees down.

T: Did he go with you?

H: Zink? Oh, yes. Then these two so-called guards. I can’t remember their names now. Miller was one, and the little fellow that gave me a cigar. They went too. They didn’t carry any guns. None of them. Zink had a revolver, and that’s all.

T: Did it ever occur to you...I mean one of the things that POWs talk about sometimes is escaping.

H: Escape?

T: Yes. Did that [escape] ever cross your mind?

H: Sure [it crossed my mind]. But we got a little message too, a short time after we were there [on the work detail]. These little villages or these towns are so close together. Just a short ways from us was a bunch of Frenchmen. They worked in the woods too, and also were working on the farms. Two of them tried to escape one day, and they [Germans] shot them. They killed them right there.

Now other towns that we found out...I went with Pa Wiener over to get some grain ground. Went to another town. Just a short ways away. The guy had a grinding machine there. We found out too over there that they were all alerted. All these little towns. Alerted. See, we had POWs on our backs. If they see any POWs, they shoot them on sight. They didn’t say halt. They shot you. That’s all.

T: You knew that.

H: We found that out. Yes.

T: So you had a pretty good deal anyway as far as you’re...

H: Yes. We knew we were going to live. We knew that. Like I told you, all the farmers that were in that town, they treated all the other guys real nice. All of them.
T: So when you got back to the main house at night were people, the other guys, talking about their own places of work pretty positive experiences?

H: Oh, yes. A lot of them used to get apples to bring back. I used to get a bag of apples every night from Ma Wiener. These apples were about yeah big around.

T: Small apples.

(1, B, 742)

H: Gave me a small bag. Like a peck bag.

T: Were you gaining weight now?

H: I gained some there. Yes.

T: Because you were down. You had dropped down a bunch.

H: Yes.

T: Could you at all get any kind of news of how the war was going?

H: Believe it or not, that was another thing that Pa Wiener did with me. There were no radios. They were restricted in the town. All over, I think, in Germany. He was Burgomeister. He was allowed to have a radio. And when we’d get done eating he would listen to Radio America.

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: So the Burgomeister, who was Pa Wiener, had a radio?

H: He had a radio. He was the only one allowed to have a radio. At night, after we were through eating, he’d call me into—he’d eat in the living room. We ate in the kitchen, but he’d eat in the living room. Never ate with us. He would turn the radio on, and that was on at six o’clock. Yes. It would come on. Radio America. And it was in English. They were talking in English, and then they were talking in foreign languages. But when I was in there it was always English. He wanted me to listen and then tell him in my broken German what they were saying. So I got to get to know what was going on.

T: So you could follow...

H: We knew Americans were coming. We knew they were winning the war. Because the Germans were backing up, backing up, backing up. Every time we got them on there they were backing up.
T: They’re backing up. It sounds like getting closer to where you were.

H: Definitely. Then two nights before April 1—that was Palm Sunday. That’s when Pa Wiener and I were out in the yard, and I was going to go back to our barracks, and we could see those tracers way off in the distance.

T: So you could see the war coming.

H: Oh, yes. We could see the 40 millimeters and the other heavy artillery. Tracers. Not the 105s. They don’t have tracers. But like the forties, and the .50 caliber. We could see them coming. Shooting up in the air. You could see them. So he said, “Ach du lieber.” He said in German, the end of the Germans. He hated Hitler. He hated him. He was tickled pink that the Americans were coming. So that’s when they told me, “You tell Reed that you stay here, and we’ll put you in the basement.”

T: So he encouraged you not to go back to the main house, but to stay in the basement of the farmhouse.

H: When the thing was getting pretty close.

T: Yes.

H: This was going to be maybe in a couple of days. He told me when they get close, we’ll put you in the basement. You stay here until the Germans get through and the Americans come. You get freed. See? So he was thinking...he wanted us to go home.

T: Was that tempting for you to do that?

H: Sure. You bet. I was ready and willing.

T: Why didn’t you?

(2, A, 24)

H: Well, that night...this was the night of April 1. Palm Sunday. We were working down on the farm and we came back, and Zink was there in our little house. They got us all in the house and he locked the door. We thought that was kind of funny, because usually he’d let us go out in the yard and walk around and kill a little time before we went to bed. This night he locked the door. They got us all in this one room and then he talked to Victor and he talked naturally to me. I was standing there. He was telling us that the Red Cross came while we were working and told us—this is American Red Cross, from Switzerland. They came and told us that they had to move us out of there because we were getting in dangerous areas. You know, that the war was coming close. I guess they didn’t want us to get bombed out. So all of us, we were mad because we thought we had it made here. We were taken care
of. Zink said, "I can't do anything about it." He had to do it. I suppose it was Germans giving orders to do it too.

T: Sure.

H: So anyhow, he had us locked up, and the Burgomeister knew about it. He already knew about it when I was working down there on the farm. He knew about the Red Cross. So I asked Zink, I said, "Can't I even go down there and say goodbye to him?" We knew we were going to leave and I wanted to go down. And he said no, I really can't do that. I was kind of upset.

T: So you never had a chance to see the Wiener's again.

H: I did. I took a chance. Pa Wiener came up. He came up and he gave me a packsack. He had a loaf of bread in there and a great big hunk of ham and he had another bag of apples, which I usually got every night. That night I didn't get one from Ma Wiener. She knew about it too. That we were leaving. I don't know if she was distraught about it or what, but she didn't give me the apples that night. But he brought it up with that packsack that was his. When he finally was going to give it to me, he started crying. Both of us did.

T: That's the last time you saw him?

H: That's the last time I saw him. But after that, for years I wrote to the Wiener's and to Martin Resch.

T: Did they write back to you?

H: Oh, yes. Yes. I used to send boxes of cigars to Martin, because right after the war I wrote to him. It was a good six or eight months later. After I was home. I sent it to Traustadt. This is not a big town.

T: That's right. And they'll get it.

H: And they'll know how to get it. I wrote to him first to find out for sure [that] he was still alive. Then I told him I was going to send packages to him and he had...his business in civilian life, he had pop business. He made pop. So he made pop for us guys. It was the funniest thing. During the time we were there, we used to talk a lot. We went to the woods and we talked to Martin and he told me about the pop. You make pop for the guys, but you can't get the sugar. I said, how could I get some sugar? He said the Burgomeister can get it for you, but you have to ask him. So I asked the Burgomeister and, why sure. He could do all that. He was the mayor.

T: Sure.
H: So he got the sugar. I gave it to Martin. He made a whole flock of pop for us. He brought cartons of it. Like milk cartons...milk baskets. Food cartons. Bottles. Brought us four cases of those, and he gave a lot to the kids in town. He made a whole bunch of pop.

T: This is really rounding out a real positive experience with the Germans. The six weeks you spent there at Traustadt was really a time, it sounds like.

H: It was. It was.

T: Your world is going to change suddenly, because you’re going to leave here and you’re going to go marching. You're going to march—

H: Across the country.

T: Across south...

H: That’s the night...that was April 1. I told you that the Burgomeister came with the pack and gave me all that food to take.

T: Did you leave the same night?

H: Early the next morning. We left about four in the morning. The next morning. And we walked to a town, Bittenburg or Bittenbach, something like that. It was about a two hour walk from where we were in Traustadt. We got to a great big auditorium and we walked in there and my god, what they had in there. There were POWs until you wouldn’t believe. All nationalities were in there. So after they got...they knew from different towns where they were coming in there. They were congregating the whole group. Then we started off marching. From there.

T: This is a much larger group now, that’s marching.

H: Oh, heavens! We had thousands of fellows.

T: And different nationalities you say.

H: All different countries. Yes. And then we had guards. We had the old Home Guards with their old rifles. They could shoot, but they were nice. They were the nicest bunch of guys too. They didn't want any war or anything. They were elderly guys. So we walked.

T: Now along the walk, and it was just to sort of get this on the record. You walked until the end of April. For twenty-nine days I guess it was.

H: That’s right.
T: Hundreds and hundreds of miles. Basically to the outskirts of Munich. Did you walk through towns at all or mostly skipped the towns?

H: We bypassed them. I couldn’t tell you the name of the towns. We went through two big towns. Right down the main street and we got rocked. The people, the Germans, were throwing rocks at us. Not big ones. Like baseball size or less. And swearing in German at us and hollering at us. Then finally this captain we didn’t like, he decided with some of his cohorts that we better not go through towns because they get hit too. The guards. The German soldiers were marching alongside of us too. They were liable to get hit. So they decided to bypass towns.

T: So after those early encounters you basically stuck to country roads.

H: Oh, yes. We went to little farming towns all the time. We’d walk all day and then when it would get about four thirty, five o’clock, then we’d stop at the town and they’d have somebody up ahead to tell the farmers that they had to put so many people in their barn. They had to get the food. Now generally, our food was made in a big cauldron with potatoes, onions. No meat. Potatoes and onions mostly. And carrots. We’d make it. They would have all the material there, but then we’d have to clean it up...

T: They gave you the stuff.

H: We had to clean it and put it in a pot. Get the water. They had the fire going. Then we’d cook it. We may eat about nine or ten o’clock at night.

T: Did you have this can or mess kit to eat out of? The same can that you had from Hammelburg.

H: Oh, yes. We kept that can. Yes.

T: Comment on the food. I mean, you’ve gone through no food at Hammelburg. A decent amount of food when you were at Traustadt. And how about the food quantity now? On the march.

(2, A, 103)

H: On the road?

T: Yes.

H: We ate once a day. We had hot food once a day. That was at night. When we would get out of the barracks, out of the haymows, in the morning, generally they would have some imitation coffee and maybe a piece of bread. Maybe. Not all the places. There were some places, some towns, they were hesitant about giving out any food. Maybe they didn’t have it.
T: Right.

H: But anyhow, some towns would give it to us and other towns we might get coffee and that’s it. Now, I hit one town where we were on the march and it was just a little town. That night we stayed in a schoolhouse. We sat in the school seats and slept in the school seat. The next morning they took us American guys, this twenty-five of us, we went to this German farmer’s house and naturally, he could speak German. He was very nice to us guys. He had bread for us with some ersatz butter on it. Like oleo. We had a cup of coffee. He was real nice. His wife was real nice.

So I told him that I’m going to leave a letter, a short letter, letting the Americans when they come—you give that to them. And I put on my name and outfit and everything, and I told them how these people treated all of us guys and how many were there and what we had to eat. So I told them to take it easy on them. They’re good towards American soldiers. So before I could finish up and I already gave him this note and he pulls up a trap door. He goes down the basement and he comes up and he gave me like a picnic ham.

T: Wow!

H: And a big hunk of bread. And he put it in my packsack so when we were on the hike, all the guys from our outfit that I knew...I didn’t have a knife. I’ll show you what I had. I made it into a knife. It was a fork. I suppose, I can’t the thing to come off.

T: On the record I’m going to describe this as a knife and...

H: It’s a combination...

T: Or fork and spoon that locks together that came in the Red Cross package.

H: You snap it shut right there.

T: On the one side of the fork it’s been...

H: I did that. I ground it.

T: Ground it down to a blade.

H: In the farmyard. I saw there was one of those big stones where you crank it. Got one of the guys to do it and I told him, “Make a knife out of that edge.” It’s not too dull (chuckles).

T: You had one hot meal per day that you cooked yourselves with ingredients that Germans...
H: You mean on the march?

T: On the march. Right.

H: There was food. Yes. It was generally potatoes and onions and carrots. All cooked together. Mish mash. Sometimes it would be cooked wholly and sometimes…but we didn't care. It tasted good.

T: It was hot too.

H: Yes. It was hot.

T: When you went through these little farming villages, were the people generally friendly, hostile, or did they keep their distance?

H: Most of them kept their distance. Even the farmers where we stayed. I don't know if they were afraid. They thought we were murderers or what. But they stayed away from us. They were very aloof about getting close to the prisoners. The soldiers, the German soldiers, would be around us. But the farmers would stay kind of...they’d have all that food, that prepared food. Get it ready. But no, after that we wouldn’t see them.

T: As you walked, was it possible to ask people, or try to barter, for food or acquire things?

H: Yes. I had a guard who's name was Fred. I never did get his last name, but he was one swell guy, too. Nice German. On our walk we had a lot of conversation. We talked all the time. He spoke very good English. But what he did, he was over here. He came over here to New York and he got a job and he stayed here for fifteen years. He had a wife and two kids.

T: In the States?

H: No. In Germany. And he came over here to the States and worked in New York. He worked as a haberdasher. Worked in a tailoring shop.

T: Right.

H: And he would save his money. He lived in one room in New York. He saved his money. As much as he could. And he would send money back to his wife occasionally. When she needed it. But then he was always compiling some money in the bank. He was here for fifteen years. He finally drew all his money out of the bank and he went back to Germany. When he got back there he got conscripted.

T: So he was in the States in the ’20s and ’30s.
H: Yes.

T: He went back and as an older...

H: He went back there in the ’40s. And he got conscripted by the German Army (chuckles). After he got back.

T: So he could speak quite good English.

H: Oh, very good. He was just like another American soldier...American person. Spoke English real well. Nice guy.

T: When you talked to him, what kind of things did you talk about?

H: Talked about family life. He’d ask me about my life and he’d ask me about my German family, my grandma and grandpa and all the rest of them. My mother and dad. And what we used to do and all that stuff.

T: Kind of small talk stuff.

H: Yes. Just generalities. Nice fellow. Very, very nice. Then I was going to tell you that when we left Traustadt, Zink never did tell us before, but he had put away Red Cross packages. Never gave them to us because he said: you were eating. You were sleeping. You don’t need them. He wanted them just in case he needed them sometime. The need came when we left that night. So he brought them out and he gave each one of us a box. There were some cans of fruit and there was little packages of crackers and there were vitamin pills in there. There were twenty-five vitamin pills in a little bottle. Cigarettes, little packages, little square packages. I don’t know if you ever saw them. There were four cigarettes to a package. Box or package. I can’t remember anything else in those boxes. Oh, the cigarettes, naturally. Anyhow, these guys, some of our fellows, they smoked. I smoked. But I never smoked cigarettes. I couldn’t stand the sight or smell of cigarettes. That’s why I smoked cigars. Cigarettes would make me sick.

T: So you had the extra cigarettes now.

H: I had cigarettes. Now we had some kids that didn’t smoke. So I would barter some of the cookies or crackers I had for cigarettes. I had a few cigarettes. In the back of my mind I thought, I don’t know why, but I figured we were on a march. Maybe I can swap some of these cigarettes for food. I might need them. Then they had these vitamin pills. Some of these guys...what the devil you going to do with these? Maybe they never took vitamin pills. I did. When I was in the States. So I gathered up maybe about six or eight of those bottles from them. They were going to throw them away. I said I’ll take them.

So that’s what I was living on all that time. Subsidized myself more or less with vitamin pills every day. I had these cigarettes, and this Fred was walking with
Every once in a while on our hike he’d be needling me a little bit and I didn’t trust him too well, because he was saying have you got anything we could barter with? I thought, yes, barter; you’ll get it and you’ll smoke it and that will be the end of it. But I gave him a cigarette. That’s enough. I was going to give him more. “Ach, nein.” Just one cigarette. He’d go down the line and get to the next town and he’d go to some farmer or whatever and he’d come back with either a hunk or bread or some meat or a bar of soap. God only knows what he’d pick up. So I trusted him from there on out. And once in a while I’d give him a cigarette to smoke. American cigarettes. He just relished that.

(2, A, 207)

T: Would you say you were getting enough food to get by on then, between what...

H: Oh, yes. Another funny incident. This fellow by the name of Red Smith. He was a bunkmate of mine. He had the bunk under me in Traustadt. His name was Red Smith. Nice guy. Very quiet fellow. He didn’t talk much, but he was a nice guy. I’d get him apples. I’d see to it he got it. He didn’t get much from his farmer. Anyhow, we were in one of these little towns, and we stayed overnight up in the hayloft. All of these farmers, they had their outhouses back from the house. And at this particular place he had one building there. I don’t know whether it was a machine building or what. And right behind it was a chicken coop. The chicken coop roof was just about—the roof itself was only about three feet off the ground. I don’t know if you’re acquainted with them. They had this slate roof and you could slide them up. Slide the slates up.

T: To get in the chicken coop.

H: Not that, but they used to use them normally, not to get in the chicken coop, but for ventilation. As you get hot, then they’d slide these up and then leave an opening. Get the air out. Hot air.

T: Got it.

H: Well, this Red, he went up there one night. There was a guard on duty, a German guard. He was roaming around the area. I went up there and went to the biffy and I came back and I said, “Geez, Red, I heard chickens.” He said no. And I said yes. So he goes and he went up there and he told me afterwards he slid one of those things up and he could feel. They were roosting on those bars. He felt around and he finally felt one and he clamped their head down so they couldn’t squawk, and he hauled it out and stuck it underneath his coat. He brought it back up in the haymow. Now this was dark. We hadn’t eaten too much that day. He starts stripping that chicken. He tore the head off of it and he started skinning the chicken.

T: Is this a farm guy? Was he from a farm?
H: No. No. He was one of the POWs.

T: Maybe he grew up on a farm or something to know how to...

H: I don’t know. But he knew how to get one. Anyhow, he stripped that chicken. Skun it. And he handed me a hunk of meat. I said, “What the hell am I going to do with that?” He said eat it! I said, “I don't want to eat that. That's raw meat.” Well, he said, “If you’re not going to eat it, I’m going to eat it.” And he started eating the meat and he said, “It tastes good.” I said, “If you’re going to eat it, I’m going to eat some.” So believe it or not, it tasted just like roast chicken. It was hot yet.

T: Because it had been alive pretty recently.

H: Just a few minutes ago. And we ate that chicken up. We ate the breast and we ate the legs.

T: Did that surprise you? Did you surprise yourself being able to do that?

H: Oh, yes. Another thing. When I was in Traustadt, on the farm. I never did in my life, but Reed found the chicken coops where one of the hens started cackling and we were working in the barn. He said, “Do you hear that?” I said yes. He said, “She’s laying eggs.” He goes over there and he finds about a half a dozen eggs and he stole some of them and we took them back into the barn and he knocked a hole in one end of it and he started sucking it. I said, “Oh, my God! Reed! Are you going to eat it like that?” He said, “Sure. Ever suck an egg?” I said, “No.” He said, “Well, try it.” So I said, “Okay. You tried it, so I’ll try it.” We sucked eggs. From that time we were stealing eggs, and every once in a while we had these two girls that did all the milking. Shimila. The Polish girl. She'd always give me a little bucket like that full of milk. I’d drink milk at night before I’d go in and eat. And Reed would get some of it too.

(2, A, 262)

T: You were doing okay for food on the farm too, weren't you?

H: We were sneaking a little food. We were a little crooked, you know, but we got our food. Yes.

T: On the march there, what would you say was the most difficult part of that? Did the weather play a role for you or...

H: No. Thankfully we never had a day of rain. Not a day. It was always sunshiny. It wasn’t too hot at that time of the year. Not too hot.

T: April, right.
H: Yes.

T: Did you ever encounter American airplanes or Allied aircraft that strafed or bombed your column while you were walking?

H: Not while we were going from Traustadt to Steinbach. No. While we were walking we never had any problems. We saw a couple American planes flying and when they’d see the column they’d come along and they’d do this...

T: Waggle their wings.

H: Waggle their wings. They’d come right over like that. You could see the pilot. But they would never shoot at us. No.

T: It sounds like it was kind of just get up every day, walk. Kind of boring in a way.

H: No, it wasn’t. It was pretty country. We walked...we saw...I’m a history buff anyway. I love history stuff. Historical things. I love to travel and that stuff. I love it. You know, you’re going back in history. Little towns. Maybe way back in the 1500s. We’d hit some of these towns. There was a moat all the way around them with big stone walls around them and people were inside. And they have this drawbridge that was down. Some towns we walked right in there. We’d take a break. One little town. They had a bowling alley on one corner of this compound. They had wooden bowling balls and, naturally, wooden pins. And the alley was pretty decrepit. It was pretty old and the alley was, well, the wood was pretty white and it was pretty rough. But it was still there. Now, these people had been bowling for years and years and years over there in that little one-alley bowling alley. We crossed the Danube.

T: Was your health...were you suffering from any bad health or dysentery or anything like that?

H: No. Luckily I didn’t. There were some. Some fellows did. All we had when we were in prison camp, we had a Russian guy. We had no doctors.

T: This is up at Hammelburg.

H: That was Hammelburg. We had a Russian that came in there. But all that poor sucker had was...no bandages or anything like that. I couldn’t get anything done on my leg.

T: Did your leg just finally heal on its own?

(2, A, 308)
H: No. Zink, he used some black salve. I mean it burned. He dug out...I had a lot of infection. He dug it all out and then he put that black salve in there. Boy, did that stuff burn. And he bandaged it up for me. He did that quite often while we were in Traustadt. When we left, he gave me some bandages but none of the salve. He told me if the bandages get bad just change them. No. I didn’t get fixed up until we got to Lucky Strike Camp.

T: Does your leg make it hard to walk at all or not?

H: No. See I had a hunk of shrapnel in it when I got captured. One of the German aides, a first aid guy, he pulled a hunk of shrapnel out of there and he bandaged it up. But there was no care for it for quite a while.

T: So it got infected.

H: It got infected. But it healed up. After I got home, when I got back to New York it was healed up.

T: Because you’d been on the ship across the Atlantic by that time.

H: Yes. It was in pretty good shape by the time I got to Lucky Strike. It was closing up. It was pretty good shape. No. We had that Russian in the compound there in Hammelburg. All he had was ground up charcoal. That was only good for dysentery.

T: Right. But it’s not going to help your leg wound, is it?

H: No. He was trying to help these other guys that had dysentery. He had a beaker and he’d put so much of that ground up charcoal with cold water on top of it which was not a good thing. But that’s all he had. And they’d drink it. But we lost, I think right in our place, we lost three guys with dysentery.

T: Did you ever suffer from dysentery yourself?

H: No.

T: You were lucky then.

H: I took first aid and everything when I was in the States while I was still in aircraft. I learned that you don’t drink ice cold water when you don’t have anything on your stomach. We talked about dysentery, and what effects you could have from it. Diarrhea and whatnot.

And so in Hammelburg, like I told you, we had that center door and we had those troughs where they used to water the horses. Well they had faucets there. It was ungodly cold in there but they had water running. But that stuff was colder than what you’re drinking right there. Some of these guys, we tried to tell them if
you’re going to drink it, put it in your cup and leave it sit until it warms up. Put your hands around it. Do something. But don’t drink it cold because you get sick. But they wouldn’t listen. They were thirsty and they’d drink it, and boom.

T: You talk about talking to guys. You were, by the time you were taken a prisoner, you were thirty years old.

H: Yes.

T: A lot of the other guys around you probably weren’t thirty years old.

H: No. I don’t think any of them were. I was the oldest one of the bunch I think.

T: Did they see you, or did you see yourself, as a father figure at all, in any way to these younger guys?

H: No.

T: Did they look up to you or come to you for advice or...

H: No. I don’t think so. Because we’re kind of more or less on your own at that time. Like when we worked for the Burgomeister. The other guys worked for another farmer. They had different outlooks and whatnot. But we used to compare what we were getting and what we were doing.

T: But you wouldn’t say at Hammelburg, or even there at Traustadt in the house, that the guys sort of saw you, being a little older, as someone different in any way.

H: No. No.

End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 380.

T: The last thing I want to move to of your POW experience directly is when you actually were found by, or liberated by American forces. I think you mentioned that was 1 May. Is that correct?

H: (nods yes)

T: So May 1 it was. Talk, if you will, about the appearance of the Americans and what happened when they arrived.

H: We didn’t see a lot of them. We stayed in the yards of the German people, on their farms. They told us to stay in the barn. The German soldiers told us—that were with us on the march—they told us, stay in the barn because you never know how these radical Germans might be coming through. They might strafe the whole
bunch. We stayed in the barns while all the Germans, the soldiers that were in the war itself, got through.

T: Kind of moving...retreating.

H: They were all retreating. Yes. They were all taking off. We saw no tanks because we were [in] rugged country right there at that time. I don't think tanks or anything would be going through there. Which they didn't. But anyhow, after about a half a day we didn't see any more Germans coming through. So we got out and lo and behold just a short time later, that's when this officer came by. It was a captain. He had a private driving his Jeep. They always have it [unit ID] across the front on the bumper, 99th Division. He was the only one we saw from the 99th. The other soldiers on the front lines didn't hit us yet. But then while we were there we were free, more or less, because all these German guards we had, even this Fred...I ran into him in the town. I thought I was going to say goodbye to him. I wasn't mad at him. I was just going to shake his hand goodbye and good luck. He came up the street and he had civilian clothes on.

T: No kidding.

H: All of them. They all had packs. He told me afterward. They all carried packs. There was no food or anything like that in there. It was civilian clothes. So if they got in a bind, they'd throw on civilian clothes. They weren't a soldier.

T: So they were ready to move on.

H: To become a civilian in a hurry.

T: Did you see this Fred, the American speaking guard, then after the Americans arrived?

H: The Americans didn't arrive. The only Americans we saw...

T: Even the first couple.

H: I talked to him afterwards. He laughed. He had a good...I laughed to beat the dickens because I thought it was kind of a...

T: You recognized him, didn't you?

H: He recognized me too. Yes. We just had a big laugh. I had to laugh at him because he was in civilian clothes. I told him he was a coward and stuff. I said, "What did you do that for?" and stuff like that. Then after we were talking for a little bit I heard a tank. It came down another road in the town. It was kind of a crossroads there, and it came down that road. In the heart of town. The sergeant was on the top.
T: Single tank? Just one?

(2, B, 414)

H: One tank. That’s all. He’d swear to beat the devil. He wanted to know where these old Germans were. We got some Germans here that we didn’t like. This captain, he still had his uniform on...

T: German captain?

H: Yes.

T: Had he been with you on the entire march?

H: Oh, he was at the front of the line. Yes. He was the boss. He was just like little Hitler. That’s about what he amounted to. He had a little moustache just like him and everything.

T: Had you ever seen him abuse prisoners or hit prisoners or...

H: Oh, yes. Yes. He did. Not in our bunch. But like the Russians or the Pollocks [slang: Poles] or something like that. Up in front there. He did. He shot at some of them. Some of them tried to get away and he shot at them. They’d get them back. They never get away. Anyhow, that’s when I told you this sergeant wanted to know if any of those SOBs gave us a bad time. I wasn’t the only one, but we all pointed at that captain. He was down the street.

T: Still in uniform.

H: Still in his uniform. Oh, yes. He was going to be a Heil Hitler guy. So they just went after him. Brought him and shot him down.

T: You said they just literally took—before we were taping—they took him beside or behind a barn or something.

H: They took him by a barn. One of the farmer’s barns. The side of it. Just shot him down. We didn’t want them to do that. But he was radical. That sergeant.

T: Did that strike you, now here you’re an ex-POW, did that strike you as the right or the wrong thing to do?

H: I thought it was the wrong thing to do.

T: Why is that?
H: Why? Because I believed that they weren’t doing anything that...they were doing is what they were ordered to do. Maybe their beliefs were not the same as Hitler’s or their superior officers, but they had to do it. I say we did the same thing. I killed some of the Germans. Beforehand. Shot them. But it was either I do it or I get killed. One of the two of us was going to get it. You play the insurance plan and you do it first.

T: Sure. That’s an exchange between armed soldiers, right?

H: That’s right. But with that, no. I couldn't see that. That was uncalled for. We didn’t know he was going to...I thought he was just going to take him and have him as a captive and interrogate him or whatever he’s going to do to him. I didn’t know they were going to do that. They were in there in that town about, it couldn’t have been fifteen minutes. They did all that stuff.

T: Really? How many Germans did you see them kill? The captain you mentioned.

H: Just the one captain.

T: Just him?

H: Just him. And there were a couple of civilians that were with him. They took them too. But like I said, he was a radical. That sergeant. He was wild. He just came in and like I said, he was swearing like the devil and calling them...who’s in charge of this. That was the first thing he wanted to know. And he wanted to know who was...anybody that's giving you a bad time. Well, a lot of guys, me included, I pointed to him. He was giving us the bad time. But I didn’t know he was going to do what he did. And you can’t stop him because we didn’t have any ammunition or any equipment to stop him with. They just took it over on us.

(2, B, 448)

T: We’re moving back the United States. We’re moving through Camp Lucky Strike and past your voyage across the Atlantic on a ship back to New York. It was October 1, 1945, when you were discharged in Texas you mentioned. Camp Fannen?

H: Yes.

T: Where is that, by the way?

H: Paris, Texas. Way up in the northeast corner of Texas. Paris is a very small town.

T: It is. You’ve been through a lot of small towns by now, hadn’t you?

H: Oh, yes.
T: That’s also the day that you were married. October 1. So you were out of uniform and into the...

H: I was in uniform yet. And I was…see, when I came home I was sent, first I was home for thirty days. Sent to Hot Springs for two weeks and then I got shipped up to Camp Fannen. When I got up there I got a new rating and then they put me on the rifle range—not the rifle range, the range office. That’s what it was. Range office. They put me in there as a telephone operator. I never knew anything about telephone operators, but that’s what they…they hung onto me for a while on account of my leg.

T: I see. I see.

H: And that’s the reason they hung onto me. So I was on there as a telephone operator.

T: You had time to go home, back to St. Paul before this time? Had you been back in St. Paul?

H: From Camp Fannen?

T: I mean even before Camp Fannen. Had you been back in St. Paul to see your folks?

H: Let’s see now. (pauses three seconds) Yes.

T: Do you have brothers and sisters? Or did you?

H: I had a sister. Yes. She passed away many, many years ago. Back in 1954.

T: And you had no brothers. No other siblings.

H: No.

T: What was it like when you got home and saw your folks again? You’d been gone for a long time. Specifically, how curious were your folks and your sister, if you saw her, to know about...

H: I saw her right away.

T: How curious were they to know about your POW experience?

H: Not much.

T: Neither your folks or your sister?

T: Your parents weren’t and your sister wasn’t.

H: My sister was more so than my mother. My dad died many years before.

T: I didn’t know that. So your sister was curious to know.

H: Yes.

T: Were you forthcoming with details about what it had been like?

H: Believe it or not, no.

T: Why not?

H: I don’t know. You ask any of the POWs, and you see if they talk about it. I don’t talk too much. You’ve got to get it out of me first before I talk. But a lot of fellows did the same thing. Say the same thing. If you come along and say, what did you do in the war? I’d say with the infantry, and I was a POW. Oh! And that’s about as far as it goes. But in general, people...not that we were looking for everybody to fall over us and think it was such a great thing to be a POW, which it wasn’t. They never ask. They wouldn’t even ask if you would talk about it.

T: When your sister asked certain questions, how did you describe it to her? Did you give her...

H: I gave her lots of...

T: Was she older or younger?

H: She was four years older than me.

T: So you remember telling her kind of what it was like?

H: Here she is—that was one time I came furlough. She lived down in Winona at that time.

T: How about your mother? Your mother was still alive you said. Did your mother, was she curious to know about your POW time?

H: No.

T: Didn’t even ask really?
H: Oh, sometimes she’d ask a question, but not much. No. Very little. I don’t know why. I don’t know. I don’t know why. To tell you the truth, I don’t know. What was the reason, I don’t know. Kind of hurt.

T: Did she ask about when you were a soldier? I mean, before you were a POW. Did she ask about that stuff or not really about anything?

H: I’d write letters to her.

T: But when you got home and saw her face to face.

H: No. Not really. Generalities. About so and so is gone, and he’s here, and he’s there. Different guys got drafted or whatever.

T: But very general.

H: Just general stuff.

T: You were married in October 1945.

H: Yes.

T: How much did your wife, Dorothy, know about your POW experience?

H: She knew a lot of it.

(2, B, 503)

T: Did she know it, would you say, from the very beginning or was it something that came out slowly over time?

H: No. I could only write to my immediate parents. When they let us write. I only had a chance to write one letter.

T: From the camp.

H: That was in Traustadt. When I was in Hammelburg they wouldn’t allow you to do anything like that. But I was in Traustadt, and Zink saw to it that we got these little letter forms and we wrote a letter. That’s the only letter. I wrote that to my mother. I couldn’t write to anybody else.

T: After you were married in October, how much did you tell Dorothy about the POW experience then?

H: When I was back home you mean?
T: When you were married.

H: Oh, I told her a lot of things. She asked a lot of questions, and lots of times she couldn't believe it. But she listened to everything I talked about.

T: If you think about it, would you say you told her pretty much the way it was or did you find yourself clipping off the rough edges?

H: No. No. I just told it like it was. There's no sense in beating around the bush. Just tell it right out what it was like.

T: Did you have any children?

H: No.

T: So you didn't...that was shared with your wife.

H: Yes.

T: You've also been a member of American ex-POWs for a long time.

H: Yes.

T: When did you first join that organization?

H: It was funny. I didn't know about it until 198...it was either '87 or '88 when Earl Miller, you've interviewed him, he had an article on the editorial page of the *St. Paul Dispatch*, and he was expressing his thanks to the paper about some editorial they had about the POWs. I saw that and I thought, they've got an outfit. Some group. So I got into the telephone book and I found about a dozen Millers. Earl Millers.

T: Did you just call him up?

H: So I went from the top to the bottom and I finally got a hold of Earl and I went out to his home and talked to him about the POWs, and he gave me all the dope and he gave me the form to fill out and I joined them.

T: How has that organization been helpful or been good for you?

H: Well, the camaraderie part of it. Being together. It was just darned nice. We had lots of experiences told between guys. Different times. I don't know. It's a good friendly outfit. They always...like maybe I shouldn't say it here. But we do have a little clout out at the VA. At one time we had a director out there that was very, very—they all are for that matter—but they had a director out there once when I first got to him that he really took care of the POWs. I mean looking out for anything...
T: Have you always been pleased with the treatment you’ve received from the Veterans Administration?

H: Oh, yes. But I don’t go there very often. I went out there once to have my eyes checked and get glasses. The fellow...at that time I got turned sour. Because before that I used to go to a private one and I got a lot better examinations and stuff. I found out later, don’t ever go to him again. Other than that I’ve been out there with my hearing and for my leg.

(2, B, 552)

T: So you’ve been, on the whole, you’ve been pleased with the treatment. You think you’ve been treated very fairly.

H: Oh, yes. Another thing too. They called me up here just a short time ago. About a week ago. They wanted to know if I had my flu shots and my pneumonia shots. They wanted to be sure I had them because they want me to come out there and have them. Now here I’m only one guy out of hundreds of thousands that go out there, and they call me and want to check on me to see if I had it.

T: One of the things the VA offers, this and other VAs, is counseling groups or kind of psychological help for people who have memories or...

H: Problems.

T: Yes. From their POW times. Is that something you’ve taken advantage of?

H: I didn’t think I need it.

T: When you got back from Europe in 1945 or even afterwards, what kind of issues did you have with nightmares or dreams about your POW time?

H: Oh! I had some of those nightmares. Battles and fighting.

T: Were your dreams more from your combat experience or from your POW experience?

H: Combat.

T: More combat related. Do you remember any kind of dreams or images that were about the time you were a POW? Hammelburg, Trausadt or the march?
H: No.
T: So for you, the images were combat.
H: Yes. My first wife, Dorothy, I broke her nose one night.
T: In bed?
H: Yes. I started flailing away...without me knowing it. One of those things came up in my mind and I start flailing and I hit her in the nose.
T: What kind of images came back to your mind? Was it typically the same ones?
H: No. Different ones popped up in your mind. It wasn’t a whole nightmare. The whole thing. All night. It would just come popping up.
T: Just like one specific thing.
H: Thing came flying up in your mind.
T: Did those go away over the years, Herb?
H: Yes. I don't have those dreams at all any more. I have good ones now.
T: When you worked at Brown and Bigelow, and you worked there for thirty-five years, how much did your fellow, your coworkers know? Did they know you had been a POW?
H: Some of them did. But nothing said about it. Other than knowing it, and that’s it. Some fellows that I knew real well. Some guys were in the service. Let’s put it that way. Because we’d banter back and forth. Where were you? Who were you with? And all that. That’s when it would pop up. But like I said before, okay, you were a POW. So that was another branch of the service.

(2, B, 588)
T: It doesn’t sound like you carried a lot of baggage around from your POW time. It was more like something you…it sounds like you went through it and then you just moved on.
H: That’s right. I did.

T: The last thing I wanted to ask you is this: what would you say is the, if you can identify, the most important way that being a POW might have changed you as a person?
H: I got...what would be the word...more considerate of people? I don’t have any animosities towards people. The only thing that I used to say, and I don’t now but different people that I knew were, they were on relief or something like that. Colored people or something like that. I admired the people that had the good jobs. Good job. Or even a fairly good job. They were working and making a living. Then I’d get a little grumpy about other people just sitting on their duffs and just doing nothing. Instead of doing something for their own good. I used to get that way, but I kind of mellowed out on it now.

T: Do you think that, I mean, would you link that directly to being a POW? Are you more considerate after your own POW experience do you think?

H: I think so. I feel more gratified and I feel like I can give it out a little bit too. From what I got—I came back home. A lot of my buddies are buried over there. So I feel grateful that I came home. I got out of it.

T: When you hear other ex-POWs talk about their POW experiences in Europe or in the Pacific and you hear stories that are comparatively a little rougher than your own, how does that make you feel?

H: I feel I was lucky. After you heard what I’d gone through. Now, when I hear about these fellows...now, I’ve got a fellow that’s in that picture. Ken Porwoll [of Roseville, Minnesota]. Ken called me up and told me you were out to interview him. Ken was in that Death March, at Bataan. When you hear those guys talking and then you start making comparisons, I had it nice. Those guys really lived a rough life. It’s surprising that a lot of them came home. After you hear what they went through, and they went through hell, I would say that we had kind of a vacation.

T: In comparison, perhaps. Well, that’s the last question I have, Mr. Kohnke, so let me thank you once again for your time today.

H: You’re welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW