Belli, Joachim Interview 10-20-95

[Speaker 2]
...on October 20th, 1995.

[Speaker 1]
No, it was in the beginning, after everything was over and I came back to Germany and then came back to the United States, I would say for the first 25 years, you don't even want to talk about it. Because every time I talked about it, then in a little bit deeper, you know, I got flashbacks and whatever. But lately, the last five or six years, it doesn't bother me anymore.

That's why I come out a little bit more, into the open.

[Speaker 2]
I found that true with many American veterans, too.

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, there must be a parallel somehow.

[Speaker 2]
I think partly for the American veterans, it's the 50th anniversary commemorations of these things. Right, right. And it gets all brought up again.

And some of them, at least, can then talk about things that they have not talked about before.

[Speaker 1]
I was asked a couple of years ago. And therefore, maybe two weeks ago, somebody asked me, I said, give me another six months so I can stay back a little bit.

[Speaker 2]
I understand. Those of us who teach military history, and especially Second World War, we were popular as speakers, too, for a variety of groups. They wanted us.

But normally what I do is to ask, to begin with, what the person's life was like before the war. Education, family, where they were from. I'd like to do the same thing with you.

You were born when?

[Speaker 1]
I was born in November 1922 in Bremen. And due to the business of my dad, we moved to Hamburg. And I spent most of the time of childhood from, I would say, the third, fourth year, until I was 12 years old in Hamburg.

What did your father do? My father was in show business. Oh.

He traveled around on stages. In a way, you don't have it today anymore. He participated in variety shows.

[Speaker 2]

Sort of like vaudeville. American vaudeville.

[Speaker 1]
Yes, sort of, you know. And therefore, of course, I, the family traveled with him. And I went through about 120 different schools.

I still have a book there where every school is documented when I started there. And then I left again and then there was maybe a day of traveling and the next school came. So I was, I think, roughly 220 schools I went through.

[Speaker 2]
Was he a singer or a dancer?

[Speaker 1]
No, he wasn't. What do you call an acrobat?

[Speaker 2]
Oh. An acrobat?

[Speaker 1]
A handstand. He's walking upstairs on his hands and all this tumbling and whatever belongs to it. So anyway.

And as I was 12 years old, we went to Lübeck. Lübeck is a small town on the Baltic Sea. A little bit more inland.

And there I went into the last schools and he didn't have the means. I wanted to become an engineer. But he didn't have the means of financing it.

So I went into a tool and die apprenticeship program. And by that time it was already government plans, weaponry, producing weapons, and so forth. And I learned the trade of tool, die, and then go into gauges.

Making gauges for the industry. All kinds of just and so forth. And as I then finished my apprenticeship, became a journeyman for about three, four months.

And of course by that time, the Polish War had started. And I got the idea I go to the army. And since my dad didn't have the means, I can become an engineer in the army.

[Speaker 2]
So you saw it as a possibility for education?

[Speaker 1]
Yes. So I signed up for 12 years and I wanted to become a, go into the field of weaponry, which I did. But everything went fine in the beginning, but then the Russian theater started.

And they needed every man that they could meet on ice, so to speak. And then I served by the end of the war, I just had four and a half, five years finished. And then I spent five years as prisoner of war in Russia.

And of course that counts towards the 12 years, but I never finished 12 years. After 10 years, everything was over. So I came out with nothing.

Then, after I was released, there was no job, tool and die making. It was just in the beginning that it started, so to speak. But there was no real employment.

And an uncle of mine had a peat moss, it was not really a factory, but where they convert peat moss for farm use. And he had quite an export business going to the United States at that time. So I asked him, this uncle of mine, and he hired me.

So I had the first job there and advanced a little bit. I was in charge of repair, maintenance. I had all the maintenance crews and so forth.

Factory burned down twice due to dust explosions, electrical shortage and so forth. And I redesigned it and rebuilt it and so forth. And by 1950, six, an old army buddy of mine that I was constantly in contact with, he said, I found out, my mother has a cousin in the United States in Connecticut.

I go to the United States. I said I wanted to do that for a long time, but I had no connection. So he went over, he didn't like it up north because he spent the cold winters in Russia.

So he went to Miami, Miami area. And then I came from Germany in late 1957 directly to Miami.

[Speaker 2]
Oh.

[Speaker 1]
To, with him? He was there, yes. He was established.

And then my wife and I got married. In the meantime, he was married too by that time. And we stayed with them.

And then we bought our own house. And that's the way we started out. In 1962, we both were a tool and dye maker by trade.

We opened up a tool and dye business in Hialeah, Miami, down in Miami County. After a while, we went into plastic injection molding, build molds, and started the injection molding business. And at the end, as I retired, I was 64 years old, I, we had about 75 employees.

And working three shifts through all these years with Spanish people down in Miami, I sort of had you know, because I was taking care of manufacturing and the plant. And I was constantly 10, 12 hours a day getting calls at night and so forth. And then I had it.

I said, now it's all yours. They brought me out. And that's when I retired to Signal Mountain.

Oh, to Chattanooga.

[Speaker 2]
It's quite a long ways from Brayman.

[Speaker 1]
Oh, yeah. It is, but I was back every two or three years since my mother was still alive.

[Speaker 2]
But... When, in the 1930s, when you when you left school and began the apprentice program, you would have, you would have been aware of course, that the change in government had not seen you before.

[Speaker 1]
Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

[Speaker 2]
What effect did that change in government have on you? Anything that you...

[Speaker 1]
No, I would say as in 1933, of course, I was 11 years old. So you, you grow up. I really don't know anything before.

What I know from before, before maybe 31, 32, shortly before the 33 period, there were quite some street fights going on in Hamburg at that time and all this. But you live with it. You don't know anything.

So you grow up. It was more, let's say, my parents. Now they saw more or less the handwriting on the wall.

But what to do, I don't know what went through their mind. But they were always somehow neutral, standing back a little bit. I know they didn't agree with the government, but they never said anything about it.

Because in a dictatorship like that, even if parents say something, and the children, they go and report on them, you know, they take the parents away. So it is touch and go. I had, I know we had a friend, he was a father, and he always came to us after hours or Saturdays to cut our children's hair.

And one day he came, he said, so that's the last time I will not see you anymore. And of course I was at that time, 12 years old. So I asked my parents later on, why doesn't he see me?

Oh, he has to move. So years later, after the war, now, after everything is over, it dawned on me, he was a Jewish. He was Jewish.

So he had to, he wanted to leave the country, so to speak. But my parents never told me. You know, it might have been a little bit dangerous, or you know, once the parents say something, the children start more questions.

So they said, strictly, he has to leave, he wants to go someplace else, and that's it. So this is just one of the things. Or my dad saw the handwriting on the wall, and there was an organization at that time called Stahlhelm.

Now Stahlhelm was a veteran's organization, steel helmet, from the First World War.

[Speaker 2]
Was he a veteran?

[Speaker 1]
Yes, from the First. So I know he joined the Stahlhelm. And I have back in my mind, the reason that he talked to my mother was, when he joined the Stahlhelm, since Hitler was in World War I also, he would never question this organization.

So he then would have been organized, but would not belong to the Nazi party. So he wanted to circumvent that, which was okay for a couple of years. And then Hitler came, he said, now Stahlhelm belongs to the Nazi party.

So he ended up where he didn't want to be. But those were the ways you were guided around and left around. Like I was never in the, what do you call it, Hitlerjugend, until I, maybe a year or a year and a half, I must have been 13 years old, something like that, in order to get accepted as an apprentice boy.

Because if you were not, if you wouldn't have been in the Hitlerjugend, you wouldn't have had time that a company accepts you as an apprentice boy. It wasn't all that hard. So I was never, I never had a uniform.

I always walked behind, the money wasn't there and nobody, and I was not anxious about it. But that was the reason I got into a factory, a government factory, to become an apprentice.

[Speaker 2]
So in order to be an apprentice you had to be an American.

[Speaker 1]
Right. Unless you become an apprentice boy in a small company, like two job shops. You know, but at the job shop they didn't have the means, they didn't have the funding, they didn't have anything to promote an apprenticeship program.

It's the same when you go to General Motors or to McDonald's as an apprentice boy. You learn something, the money is there, but not in a job. And they offered me that place to go to engineer school after I was I think 15 and a half, which I didn't want to, because that would bring me more into an organized system of the Third Reich, so to speak.

[Speaker 2]
How would that have explained that to me a little bit more?

[Speaker 1]
Of course, a factory which is governed and belongs to the government, so to speak, that's what it was. It was individually owned, but that was just a cover. And they sent you to spend the money on you to go to engineer school, of course.

First of all, you have to be in a party then, which I didn't want to. Second of all, after you are through with school, they run it more as a military school, so to speak, and all gets a little bit involved then, strictly as civilian. I didn't want that.

And then I said, if I become an engineer, then I have to sign for the next three or four or five years that I will stay there. I didn't want to be tied down, and that's why I said, no, I don't want that. My dad didn't like it, but that was my decision.

And then I went to the Army when I was 17 and a half, 17 and three quarters, and signed up for 12 years there and become a civil engineer in the Army, which is Army, which is not a party.

[Speaker 2]
That didn't work out. Did you have brothers and sisters? I had three sisters.

Three sisters. When you joined the Army, in 1939? Forty.

In 1940. I think it was 40. So it's after the Polish campaign was over before the French campaign?

[Speaker 1]
Right. The French campaign... That's May of 40.

[Speaker 2]
Yes.

[Speaker 1]
It just started. I think I went in February or March 40, and then the French campaign started.

[Speaker 2]
Do you remember what the reaction was in your town, in your community, people you knew when the war started with Poland in 1939?

[Speaker 1]
Of course. I would say you can't compare with any dictatorship. The young people, they grew up in it.

They were enthusiastic. In between, didn't know anybody. The older ones who went through First World War and had a little bit more experience of life, of course, they were quiet.

They couldn't say anything against it. It was the same like we had in Iraq today. Hussein was re-elected by 99.6 percent. We had the same situation in Germany. But you cannot forget the background. Why Hitler, in my opinion, became so popular.

I think the starting point of all this, how it came about was the treaty in Versailles. I think the treaty in Versailles somehow set the stage, really, for a dictatorship that took place in 1933. Because from Versailles to 1933, all you had were fights, poverty, inflation, unemployment.

In 1933, there was really nobody in Germany who could take the helm of the ship because they all tried to do it and they were not successful. The only one that was a successful thing was the first inflation, I believe, in 1922, 1923, something like that. I read that this was done on purpose, the inflation.

I don't know if you read about it.

[Speaker 2]
It started as a resistance to the French occupation of the Rhineland.

[Speaker 1]
Yes, but it was also the Versailles Treaty demanded of Germany paying X amount of dollars to France in German money. They didn't say anything else. Here they came with the inflation.

The mark went sky high and they paid it off in inflated marks. That's how they got rid of it. They couldn't get rid of it at all in the first place.

They started the second boost in the inflation and that took care of it. But then here came Hitler in 1933. Number one, he was an excellent speaker.

All dictators speak for hours, but he was an excellent speaker number one. Number two, he provided jobs. And nobody cared what jobs, what was the background, why these jobs were created.

He had in mind, oh yeah, the building of an army like that. But jobs were created. People made money.

People could live. They had to keep quiet, yes. But that was the price, I think, an easy price to pay rather than living in poverty.

And that's how he got the masses on his side in the beginning.

[Speaker 2]
When you joined the army, I don't know anything about what that process is like in Germany. I know from talking to American veterans how it goes. If you could tell me step by step.

[Speaker 1]
You filled out an application. You got an application from a recruiting office. Number one, if you want to go as a volunteer like I did, you get an application from the recruiting office.

You are called upon for interview. You are called upon for physical.

[Speaker 2]
What was the interview like?

[Speaker 1]
It was only short. There was not really much what I remember that was outstanding. It was a regular, when were you born, how old were you at 33, and so forth.

They maybe made a background check. But don't forget, where I volunteered to was the old regular army division. I was recruited into the 22nd Infantry Division, which of course, I wanted to go high tech.

I wanted to go to an outfit which is all motorized and all this. At the recruiting office, they said to me, today everything is motorized. Don't worry about it.

They lied. So I came in, I reported, and before I went into the camp, I saw somebody with a wheelbarrow full of horse manure. So I knew my...

[Speaker 2]
Recruiters are not always honest.

[Speaker 1]
So I ended up at the 22nd Infantry Division in the Artillery Regiment 22. This was the old army division. It had nothing to do with the newer armies, with the specialized forces, with the SS.

They didn't know the SS. They didn't have any army forces or armed forces at that time. You started out, yes, but not in that.

And then...

[Speaker 2]
You went directly to the 22nd Infantry? Did you go through some kind of basic training?

[Speaker 1]
No, I got that. In the division? In the division, you got the training.

At that time, they had the French campaign going on. And the 20th Infantry Division, they were involved in the glider, in Holland, Belgium, where the gliders drop the air, the troops there. They were involved in that, our division.

But I was too young, so I was too green at the end. And then they came back, and then I... It started, I went into the special training about weaponry in the division.

[Speaker 2]
In artillery?

[Speaker 1]
In artillery.

[Speaker 2]
What was your basic training like? What did they do with you the first days that you were there?

[Speaker 1]
Oh, you go to a boot camp, like anything else. You got to learn to walk. You cannot walk.

You have got to learn how to salute, because you cannot do these things. It's all step by step. And it lasts about four months.

Four months. And then you...

[Speaker 3]

That's pretty rough.

[Speaker 1]
Yes, yes. They take you out to field exercises. Like the same thing they do here now.

It is just that you learn, like I said, how to walk, how to talk, how to salute, that you learn the discipline, you know, and all this. And then... started the Russian campaign, after the war.

Yes.

[Speaker 2]
So that would have been a year after you were in the army?

[Speaker 1]
Yes.

[Speaker 2]
So you were in an artillery regiment?

[Speaker 1]
I was in an artillery regiment of the 22nd Infantry Division.

[Speaker 2]
What sort of guns did you have?

[Speaker 1]
We had 105mm howitzer and the 150mm. Every artillery regiment has four batteries, they call them. Each battery has four cannons, or whatever.

Four guns. And three of them have light ones, and one has four heavy ones.

[Speaker 2]
What were you, what was your job?

[Speaker 1]
Repair and maintenance. I was brought up in repair and maintenance of all weapons, the artillery regiment was.

[Speaker 2]
So you weren't working on a gun crew? No, no, no.

[Speaker 1]
I had out, basically, but I was not working as a gun crew, I was not assigned to a gun crew, that was also... And I also went through training as a weatherman.

[Speaker 3]
Oh.

[Speaker 1]
And I went through training as a, what did they call it, a red man. Then you, there is one in each battery, yes. You have to translate the command you get from the forward position of if

you have to correct the gap, you have to, the distance you have to correct, not the degrees, we had 400 degrees was the total circumference.

And you had to go one degree this way or this way, and then the weather report came in, and from the weather report you had to figure out the height of the gun, of the barrel you have to set, the elevation, you know, and so forth. And get that all the way into a drum and lines also, and numbers, and so forth.

[Speaker 2]
Did they also, before this, did they train you as an infantryman as well? Did you, were you given a lot of training?

[Speaker 1]
Partially, partially. That was in the boot camp the first four months when you got the infantry training.

[Speaker 2]
What sort of weapons were you trained with in the infantry training?

[Speaker 1]
Oh, we had the old carbine, and we had the machine gun, the 34, the MG 34, later on we had the MG 42, and that's a different story. The MG 42, spit out too many bullets, you couldn't get enough, you know. You couldn't get enough ammunition?

We had the ammunition in the belt, and we left one out every 20 or 25 or 30 rounds, so the gun would stop automatically.

[Speaker 2]
Oh.

[Speaker 1]
So you couldn't run it all the time. So, but anyway, basically training there, and as I was an apprentice boy, I was involved in a little hand-held machine gun, a submachine gun, a little one, all aluminum. The paratroopers had it.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, I don't think I've seen one of those.

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, it was a dangerous one, because it was designed very well, but it was very dangerous. You couldn't, you could shoot. You hit it on the table like this, and it started shooting.

Oh. There was no safety, and with the safety, they came later on.

[Speaker 3]
Oh.

[Speaker 1]
The design was very rude, very simple, and there was no locking in there. There was, it was just, the chamber went just forward, fired, and then back again. And due to the delay of the

spring, the size of the spring gave enough delay that the bullet went out before the recoil started.

So it was a real, and when you hit it on the table, and the spring collapsed a little bit, it picked up a a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a round and out of weather. Many times we shot into the bunker there in the ceiling. So they were dangerous.

[Speaker 2]
Yes, yes. But they were, they were good. They held up well?

[Speaker 1]
They held up well. You could throw a handful of sand and they were still shooting.

[Speaker 2]
But anyway, What sort of training did they give you on the repair of the equipment and the guns?

[Speaker 1]
Oh, you went through a whole program. I mean, if you are brought up, if you are like in a tool and die trade and I started out, it all becomes all a mechanical thing. It was nothing ordinary, nothing, you know, to me at least.

Also the MG 34 and 42 later on. And then I went to Hamburg for a course about four to six weeks about more advanced different weapons. They started out with what they called Panzerfaust and these things.

So I got the inside of that and came back to my division, to my regiment again after four or six weeks in Hamburg. And then I was transferred to the 30th Infantry Division.

[Speaker 2]
Why did that happen? Do you know?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, we, the 22nd at that time, was in the campaign, the French campaign, didn't go right away into Russia. And the 30th, they had some casualties, of course, due to the war in Russia. And they were in need, so I was transferred to the 30th Infantry Division at the same, to the artillery regiment 30.

[Speaker 2]
Were there quite a few in your unit who were transferred at the same time?

[Speaker 1]
No, I think there were about ten.

[Speaker 2]
All of them from the artillery to the artillery?

[Speaker 1]

Yes, but as we arrived in Russia at the headquarters of the 30th Infantry Division, we were transferred from there to the artillery regiment and then we then spread throughout that regiment. So, and that's how I ended up in the 30th Infantry Division. I arrived, the war started, when was it?

June of 41. 41, and I arrived in, I think, February 43.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, so they, were they in the north?

[Speaker 1]
They were between Leningrad and Moscow. There is a, have you read about Demyansk? Demyansk pocket?

Pocket of the, that's, that's where I was. I was directly flown in to the pocket of Demyansk.

[Speaker 2]
Not a good introduction.

[Speaker 1]
No, no, no, no, no. And there, of course, in the pocket of Demyansk, we were sitting for, that's my memory, but we were surrounded and we were supplied by the Air Force. By the Luftwaffe.

Luftwaffe. And, of course, what took place, the supply was really not enough. And we ate our own horses.

We had, we lived from horse meat and what else came in through the air. But there really was, was not enough. And for a strange reason, it was a cold in that, we had, we had 58 below zero.

Wind coming from Lake Ilmen was north of us and it came just over there and blew everything. And we stayed in the pocket until they came from the outside and from the inside we opened it up. What sort of uniforms did you have?

[Speaker 2]
Normal, normal army uniforms. Warm enough?

[Speaker 1]
No, no, no, there was nothing. There just, we had more casualties due to frost than due to wounded, due to actions, war actions. Because there was nothing.

Yes, the Russians, they brought some Siberian troops in and they attacked sometimes. But all little things, you know, there was no, no real...

[Speaker 3]
No major assault?

[Speaker 1]

No major. It just, it was spotted here, spot there and there and something, you know. But our problem was just that we didn't get supply in.

And our problem was that we, ammunition was short. It was cold. It was very cold.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, you didn't have enough ammunition for the guns?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, we had enough, but barely. We had to conserve, you know, and we had to be careful. That means by being careful, let the Russians come close, as close as possible before you fire, right?

And then we have in our guns, the projectiles, you could set a delay action. So what we did mostly, the delay action is you have the barrel at a certain elevation, flat if possible, you shoot up maybe three, four, five kilometers, you hit the ground, and since the projectile comes on a flat angle, it jumps off the ground and then explodes. That gives you the delay.

So you have the shrapnel effect. Shrapnel out. Right.

So what we had to do and what we did, we didn't have the guns elevated. We had it at the negative end and shot into the ground about 250 meters from us. Right?

And then have them explode. That's too close. Yeah, but that was the only defense we had.

That was the only thing we could do. And then the Siberian troops, when they come in on steers, you know, the infantry, the front line, mostly let them run over and they started shooting from behind. And they came as a surprise attack.

And then they penetrated the infantry line and all of a sudden they had formed a horse. So this was the only means we could have a negative angle, shoot about 200 meters into the ground. They jump up, explode.

[Speaker 2]
I know enough about artillery to know that that's not the way it's supposed to work.

[Speaker 1]
No, no, no. It is not supposed, but that's the only way, the only means.

[Speaker 2]
Did the, I imagine the cold affected the guns?

[Speaker 1]
Yes, we couldn't, we found out that the, of course, a gun you keep clean in oil. But we couldn't put any oil on the guns. You know, the oil froze.

Got too stiff. So we learned real quick that we had little tin cans. Then we put holes in there and put wood in there like charcoal.

And we hung that under our optics. It was always a little bit warm, but the optics couldn't freeze up, but you could turn that. And the guns and everything, we just left it on oil.

Matter of fact, the fine oil you get for guns, it is real like a table oil. It is real clear. We used that oil and we had horse meat.

We made hamburgers and fried them in this oil to have a little bit to eat.

[Speaker 2]
The hydraulic system on the guns worked all right?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, there was no problem. Don't forget, the hydraulic system at that time, the seals, whatever you have in there was leather. It was not like it is now, o-rings or rubber cups.

I think the rubber cups would have gotten stiffer and maybe froze more. But at that time, all the hydraulics were leather. This advantage of leather seals is you always have to keep them tight.

They start leaking and so forth. But no, we really didn't have a problem. As long as we kept the oil away from the guns.

The machine guns as well as...

[Speaker 2]
Were you usually under Russian artillery fire? Yes. In the pocket there?

Right.

[Speaker 1]
But even that was scarce. We had months, weeks I would say. Maybe months, three or four months, where we had no action at all.

We were just sitting there.

[Speaker 2]
Just sitting there being cold.

[Speaker 1]
There was just no action whatsoever.

[Speaker 2]
Did you dig bunkers into the ground?

[Speaker 1]
Yes, we had bunkers. We were in the swamps, but we had bunkers in the ground. And the funny thing was, the snow was tremendous the first winter in Germany.

And when we went out and cut trees down for firework, of course a soldier is lazy. He just stands straight up and cuts a tree. He doesn't bend down and cut the ground.

We were standing up and cutting a tree down for firework. Fine, didn't we? And then after the snow melted, half the tree was still.

I don't want to say, but six feet. So then we knew how high, how deep the snow was. And the funny thing was, of course, then you had to go out and relieve yourself.

You go behind the next tree or whatever is there. And one morning somebody came and he was all upbeat. He said, boy, I was out relieving myself and I couldn't make a hole in the snow.

So that was the time, the real cold winter was over. The spring had come.

[Speaker 2]
When you were, the pocket was cut off until the spring sometime. Yeah, yeah. And then you were relieved someone drove in and...

[Speaker 1]
Right, there was then just a connection road. They called it Schlausehose, you know, like a... That was all.

So it was through the swamps. It was all a corduroy road getting in. And of course, since the ground, everything was frozen, there was no problem.

Later on, as it all got soft and thawed off, of course, even the corduroy road started to sink in. And we got water into our bunkers and we had to build little houses, put houses above ground.

[Speaker 2]
You weren't in the village then. No, no, no, no.

[Speaker 1]
At that time, there was no village. You know, many of the... Yeah, there were villages, yes.

I shouldn't say there was no village, but due to the action during the war, the advancement and so forth, the villages, number one, were practically not there anymore. Civilians lived there, whatever. But as a unit, as an army unit involved in the skirmishes and everything, in the battles, you don't want to be in a village.

You become an easy target for the artillery. So you spread out in the woods. He really has no reason.

If there is a village, and the village is occupied by German troops, you know, he has the village on the map and he almost can pick out every intersection or whatever he wants. But if you spread out in the woods, then... You're harder to find.

You're harder to find. He cannot set his guns for each little bunker or what is there, every concentration. So you don't do that.

You live out in it. And as we went out the pocket, the next thing then, of course, it was an unfortunate thing that the early thaw came. And as we went out, the whole...

ground was still frozen. And while we were moving backwards through the Schlauch, through the connection road, it started to thaw. And of course, since we are in the middle of the swamps, we almost...

[Speaker 2]
Because the guns are heavy and awkward.

[Speaker 1]
They're heavy, awkward, and unfortunately, before we moved out, everything that could have been moved was moved. And our guns, they're set on... sleds, so to speak, so we could put them over on the ice.

And we had to throw them away. And then the guns sunk in quite a bit into the mud. And we had a hard time.

Our horses had a hard time getting out. But we came out without any... that the Russians started to do anything to cut us off.

I think beans, or they didn't want to at that time. If it would have been easy for them, yes, they would have done it.

[Speaker 2]
Were you under Russian air attack at the same time?

[Speaker 1]
No, they're hardly there at that time. We hardly had any air attacks. We had the night owl, I don't know.

It was just a light plane.

[Speaker 3]
A night owl? A night owl, yeah.

[Speaker 1]
And we also called it the coffee grinder. And they threw bombs, what they had, over the side. They had no bomb shaft or anything.

They were more harassment or anything to us. Trying to keep you from sleeping? Right.

I know at one time we had a Russian machine gun and we fixed it. It's like a record on top of the bulletin magazine. And we had a stack of hay which was for our horses.

It was a little bit outside from our very camp. And we didn't know where to shoot it. We wanted to try out this Russian machine gun and we shot into the hay.

Which was fine. Nothing happened. All of a sudden in the middle of the night they got us out of the bunker because the hay stack was on fire.

We had tracer bullets in there, which we didn't know. We said the hay stack's on fire. And now nobody, everybody said we have to be careful.

And then the night owl came. Saw some fire there and then he started dropping these little things. But really didn't do anything.

It was more a nuisance than anything else.

[Speaker 2]
Did you have people in the regiment designated to take care of the horses?

[Speaker 1]
Oh yeah. Right. You have the people who would take care of the guns and then the ones who take care of the horses and all this, they bring you to bring the guns where you want them so you can set them off the fire and they leave.

They go away, they leave into the woods back there maybe a kilometer away. 800 meters to 1000 meters away. So they will be on call if something happens.

But they will not stay with you because it's dangerous for horses. And what we did, since we had four guns in one battery, what they called it, we had three together and we pulled one maybe 500 meters out. And that gun, 500 meters, did the firing when there was anything.

So the Russian, the sound and light batteries, they measured the position of that gun. And that's the only point they had. Now if the action started, we pulled this gun away and put it over here into this battery.

And now the Russians thought the battery was over there, which they, by sound, pinpointed there. Now this made them shoot into, at this point, into empty ground while we were shooting from there. And that lasted about a day or two and then they found out and then they hit us.

So by that time, you know, they really changed. Nobody else.

[Speaker 2]
Did you, that winter and spring in the Demian's pocket, did you have quite a few casualties in your unit or not very many?

[Speaker 1]
No, no, no, it was not too many.

[Speaker 2]
Not that I recall.

[Speaker 1]
We had, no, in our unit directly, I would say we hardly had anything. Because there was nothing going on. The interest, and nobody knows why, but the interest of the Russians seemed to be in other areas than just there.

I think they started in the south, then in the middle and in the south. Or we started to attack in the south again, the Krim area of the Sevastopol or whatever it was. And I think we were just sitting there and sweating it out.

Which comes to my mind now, if I would have been in the motorized unit, I would not have been up in the north and sitting there for months at a time and just sweating it out. I would have been in the south and heaven knows what would have happened to me.

[Speaker 2]
Decisions get made in the war that you have very little control over but are very important in trying to...

[Speaker 1]
I am positive. I would not have been at the horse-drawn artillery. I would have been at the mechanized, like the self-propelled guns and all these things.

These guys were all involved in the south and got cut down and really took heavy losses. But we were sitting relatively unharmed, just holding the front line. And then as the south retracted systematically, retracted also.

That's how we ended up in Tula, in Latvia. Then the Russians bypassed us and all of a sudden we were sitting there and couldn't move safely.

[Speaker 2]
So you spent essentially the whole war in that same area in the north. Yes, in the north. But sometimes that will happen to American divisions as they go across Europe.

There will be sort of a line all the way. But frequently they will be moved up and down and up and back.

[Speaker 1]
Again, they couldn't afford and they wouldn't send a horse-drawn unit into a...

[Speaker 2]
Back to your work. After you got yourself and the guns out of the pocket and back, you went into just another defensive position behind the line.

[Speaker 1]
It was all an organized withdrawal from one position to the other. And due to a strange circumstance, I don't know why, but the Russians bypassed us. It must have been geographically and it was easy to cut us off.

We were sitting in, what was it, Latvia? Kuala? And that's where we...

There was nothing going on anymore. Absolutely nothing. As we were in the pocket there, the Russians started to attack.

But I think they had only secondary troops there. By that time, of course, we knew the end has to come. There was nothing.

And since we were an old army division and we had these old generals in there, not the new ones, the Nazi generals, so to speak. They were mainly after that we sweated out there as little casualties as possible. And that's a good one.

There was once a message came through that the Russians said, the people in Kuala are our cheapest prisoners of war. Because they feed themselves. They don't attack us anymore.

They feed themselves and we have nothing to worry about. And as all was finished, the end of the war in May, that was the end of it.

[Speaker 2]
Now, in... I remember the pictures there in the 43 Christmas book you showed me. You were there in a city or a village?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, it was in a bunker.

[Speaker 2]
That had been fought over.

[Speaker 1]
Yes.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, right. And was that one of the times sort of when you had to retreat and then go forward and retreat and go forward?

[Speaker 1]
No, no, that was after the Xinjiang Spring. But then we just sat there and held that line. And then as the Russians advanced south of us, we sort of retreated also.

But really that the Russians made large scale attacks or something. No. Little things.

Yes, he broke through, you know, and his normal things. But a large scale of what was going on in the south, no, never happened.

[Speaker 2]
Did you have much dealings with partisans? Yes, constantly. What was that like?

[Speaker 1]
Well, it was the point that you didn't trust anybody. And that was a dangerous path. You know, because the partisans, they were there, they were friendly during the day, and they cut you down in the evening or night.

So there was constant anything. But it was not, don't forget, we were the front line troops. And the partisans don't operate in the front line area.

They operate further back.

[Speaker 2]
So you were close enough to the front.

[Speaker 1]

We were always a kilometer behind the front line. Then, the more forward your guns have, the further you can reach into enemy territory. You don't want to sit back three miles or three kilometers behind the front line.

That gives you only a range of six kilometers into the Russian territory. So you want to be as close to the front line as possible so you can reach in further.

[Speaker 2]
But not so close that you're going to lose the guns. It's sort of a nice balance.

[Speaker 1]
You've got to leave it up to the staff to make that decision.

[Speaker 2]
I imagine you got to know the people in your unit very well.

[Speaker 1]
Because you lived together day and night. Be together and all this.

[Speaker 2]
Do you remember any of them particularly?

[Speaker 1]
Yes, I have one body of mine is still in my hand. As a matter of fact, we two started a business out there. He's a year younger than I am.

We've been together since 1942, I would say. He came later to our unit until now. We are like brothers.

I knew his family. He knew my family. We still have contact.

Lose contact, but a contact which will never be cut. If I need him today, I give him a call he will be here tomorrow or vice versa. But everybody lives his own life.

I like that. My wife sometimes says, why did you call Gunther again? I said, I called him three weeks ago.

Then I feel like it. But it is always there. The contact is always there.

One is always there for the other. There's no question about it.

[Speaker 2]
Are there others from that time that stand out in your mind?

[Speaker 1]
Not really anymore. I visited one once, but no. Matter of fact, I said the other day to my wife, it really is a shame either our old division, people who live the division is always from one area so to speak, that they never had a get-together, somehow a reunion.

Either they had one and they missed us here, but this buddy of mine, he still has contacts over there, maybe one or two more persons. I know them also, but not directly. It never materialized.

Basically, it's a shame. We never had a reunion. And if there would be one call, I would be there tomorrow, but I cannot start I cannot get anything going from here.

And I know the little towns, our division, the 30th Infantry Division, the headquarter was in Randsburg, that's close to the Danish border at Schleswig-Holstein. And I know many people from that area. We had farms, little farms in Somalia, because of horse-drawn artillery.

And I know they all live in that area, but I really don't have any contact. And it would have been nice. But then, don't forget, the wartime was from 1940 to 1945, to speak in general.

But after that, the prisoner of war came in. And of course, that time then, most likely overshadows the other one. You know, first of all, it is later, so to speak, and second of all, it overshadows, because it was more harsh.

It was really besides in a real war, you can get shot. But there is not always iron in the air wherever you go, and there are periods of months where there's hardly anything, at least in our area, like I mentioned. And then there is a skirmish which might take two, three weeks, and then it's over again.

Because it was not a war in the north and in the northern part, like attacking them. It was more a war out of an entrenchment, so to speak.

[Speaker 2]
Now, when the unit that you were with surrendered to the Russians in the spring of 1945? Yes, May of 1945. What happened to you then?

Did you march? Yes, yes.

[Speaker 1]
Of course, we stayed in our area for about four or five more days. And then orders came from TAP to get ready and take all your weapons, whatever you had, and march. This was all laid out.

And then we marched through our lines, through the Russian lines. And then, of course, there was a point where you got to put the ammunition you had here, you had to put the weapons there. What did you feel?

You're feeling lost. First of all, it is quiet. Hardly anybody talks.

Because everybody now has his own problems, his own imagination, and wonders what will happen in the future. And you are at the complete stage of your loss. Now, I have to say, as we went through the Russian front line, I'd like to point that out, there was no bad feeling.

Because we were the ones, the front line itself, in the next two kilometers it was begun. We were the ones who were shooting at each other, killing each other, not knowingly, but indirectly. And we were the ones where everybody was happy it was over.

We didn't say hello to each other, you know, but they were relieved, we were relieved.

[Speaker 2]
And you understood each other.

[Speaker 1]
And we understood each other. And we knew everybody was more or less thinking the same thing. They thought glad it's over.

We said glad it's over. But we went into a future where we really didn't know what would happen.

[Speaker 2]
Had you heard rumors about treatment of prisoners?

[Speaker 1]
Yes, but we had rumors. It was told that when you get into prison, what will happen. But this was all in our opinion.

Forty, fifty percent was propaganda. Because don't forget we were a regular old army division, you know, and we sized it up as such that a lot of propaganda was involved. Now the SS divisions, they might have thought differently.

They might have thought ten percent might be propaganda, ninety percent. So anyway, and no, there was nothing until we were marching the first night on the Russian side. They were shooting their guns.

We were standing in the road and walking towards nowhere, no sleep, nothing to eat the first day or so. Until we ended up in an area where they had quite some horses, German horses that were captured also. They had to take care of them.

So the first two months, three months of our prison time, we spent in tents tending the horses, lead them out to the pasture, make sure that they had enough to drink, that they had enough to eat, that they could graze and everything, and nobody really bothered us. Nobody really bothered us. And then of course we recuperated, we got used to the situation, we got out of the tent in the morning and we were in a tree and we didn't see any guards, any Russian soldiers and nothing.

We were under the command of our own old commanders. There was, had nothing changed. So we thought, now if this is prison time, and after that of course the Russians had to organize for all the masses they came in.

I mean they had a tremendous amount of people all of a sudden and they had to get organized to try to get food or maybe get something again. And then we went to the first camp, no then we were marched from there to the first camp. And as we were marched there we had Russian army units with us and they started to steal from us and they started to take away everything from us.

And then it really became a nightmare. As we went into the camp we had nothing. And what we had was taken away from us at the camp.

Where was the camp? The camp was in Telsche. That's also up in that area, I have to look it up on the map.

T-E-L-S-C-H-E-N Telsche? Telsche or Telsche. That was the first camp and there of course everything was taken.

All we had left was a mask kit and a spoon. No toothbrush, no shaver, no knives, no scissors, no shoelaces, no belts, everything. All was taken away.

Now in the camp we felt like prisoners. Second day we were there we had to go to the bathhouse. At the bathhouse we took a bath.

We got old Russian underwear. Our underwear was taken away. Only one set.

We kept our trousers and we got a Russian jacket and Russian cap and all our body hair were shaved. From the top to the toe. So now we said now we are prisoners.

Now they do that to demoralize you.

[Speaker 2]
It worked.

[Speaker 1]
And it did, yes. For the first week we could have all cried. Now we had nothing.

Now we were really prisoners of war. We had the barbed wire around, we had the gas towers around and we were in the camp. There were no buildings, we pitched tents, we slept in the tent and there was nothing to do.

Absolutely nothing. These were the most terrible months we had. Now we really didn't know what would happen.

And after that we stayed. This was still in the summer of 1945? It was still warm enough.

Yes, it was still warm enough. And from there on, from that camp we stayed there for maybe three months, four months. They marched us to the city of Klaipeda.

And the city of Klaipeda is the old city, the German city of Memel. I know you heard about that. Memel, yes.

It was Lithuania. And we came in there and the march over to Memel was the most terrible I ever had. We were about 2,500 prisoners that marched there.

And when you marched, you marched in a column for about an hour and then you had a ten-minute rest. But the ten-minute rest means nothing. The ten-minute rest means standing there.

You could sit down, but you had to sit on the road. But you couldn't go to a ditch to relieve yourself or anything. You just had to do it there where you were standing.

Among all the guys around. And many had foot problems from walking blisters and all this and they fell back. And of course, they cannot start the second column back there for all the ones with foot problems.

So they had to drive them on. The Russian guards drove them on to keep walking. And I have not seen it personally, but here, it went to the lines that if you fall back, you cannot keep up with it, they shoot you.

That's the end of it. I'm positive they did, because they had no other means. And at that time, I don't think we were registered yet.

So if you're not registered with the Red Cross, Did you hear gunshots? Yes, we heard gunshots. We also heard that some Russians started to take things away from Germans, which they still had.

Little things like a wrist band. And that one instance that a Russian general took three Russian soldiers behind a barn and shot them dead. So that went through all.

So they were just as rough with their own than they were with us. And this was the most terrible massacre, I think, three or four days. And then, like I said, you cannot relieve yourself.

You have to do it all. There you walk, and then you walk. Hardly anything to eat.

Sleep in the field. And while you're sleeping in the field close together, the Russian guards run through it, and you had your little bag that you had under your head. And you had one blanket.

You had that under your head. All of a sudden, somebody ripped the bag away. So there was a Russian soldier again.

He thought he could find something there. If he didn't find anything, he threw the bag away. And going through that ordeal, I myself started to have some blister, or not directly blister.

My feet were very hot. I felt the blister would come out. And it was a late afternoon in the evening when we started to camp, and there was a little water stream running.

It was maybe a foot wide, two foot wide. And I was walking towards the stream. On the other stream was a guard sitting there.

And he was screaming at me and said, Stay back. I kept on walking. He said, Stay back.

So all I wanted to do is sit on this little stream, take my shoes and socks off whatever was left, and put my feet in this ice-cold water. And he was good enough to leave me there. He didn't say anything anymore.

And I was sitting there for 15, 20 minutes or so. I put my socks on again. I saluted him.

He saluted me. So that, I believe, saved my feet. Because it cooled them down.

They were a little bit swollen. It took the heat out of it. And the next day we started walking.

And I had no problem. Then we got into a camp in Klaipeda in Memel with 2,500 and we stayed there. And there was a it became more organized.

Now a camp, even a Russian camp, is organized like a little city. Except for the barbershop. Because you couldn't have a shaver.

You could commit suicide with a shaver. Or something. Or do harm to somebody else.

But you could go for a shave. So now you could go every second or third day the way you felt like. Even so it hurt because their razor blades were dull like.

But you could go for a shave. It was established that we had a dentist there. So you could go to a dentist.

Matter of fact, I got a filling in one of my feet. A Russian. He made silver fillings out of Russian coins.

I don't know how he did it. But anyway, I got a silver filling. And then you are leased out from the camp to a business outside in the city.

And I was at a complex for a builder who rebuilt and built all kinds of things. He had all kinds of electricians, carpenters, painters, everything there to rebuild houses and apartments and build houses and all this. And I they lease you out to a company and when you work there, this company has to pay the camp for the hours you work out there.

And there was a minimum of 680 rubles. If you made 680 rubles a month, the camp would take that money for a room and board. And whatever is all my 680 rubles, they pay you out.

Up to 150 rubles a month and the rest goes in the savings account. In that camp, I was working outside rebuilding the gymnasium and the lyceum in Memel. And I was specialized in heating systems, centralized heating systems, steam heating and warm water heating.

So now I had contacted civilians and now you could deal with them. Now you could do them a favor. Now they gave you a piece of bread or whatever it is.

So therefore, that prison, that area in Memel was quite good. It also changed at that time that you were escorted by the Russian army. The Russian army kept you in the tent.

They manned the towers around and so forth. They had a guard there. But soon as you were released to work, the business who picked you up, they had to send civilian guards.

Now we had civilian guards. Once in a while the civilian guards went out there or they paid the army. The army escorted us.

But it developed a certain relationship that these people, they had nothing to eat either. So if you went out and you had a job on the side, you went to the guard, the job there and there, which brings me 50 rubles. He said, right away, how much do I get?

I said, okay, you get 10. Then he let you go. But don't forget to come back on time.

I know we'll be here. So then you had a private job doing something. You came back.

You gave him some money. And that kept on going and kept on going. And it worked out really.

We had people in the camp. We had one who was a singer, a tenor. And the other one had a band.

And there was this bird guy with them. And they tuned pianos. Because all the city in Memel, the buildings were occupied by Russian people.

Not necessarily from the army, but their families and so forth. And they had pianos there. So they tuned pianos.

And they, it's just one of these curiosities, they had a little dog, these three guys. A spitz. A white spitz.

And every morning they went out. The dog went along. And every evening they came back.

The dog was in the camp again. The guard didn't say anything. They knew it already.

They counted out, counted in. The dog went along. And then they started to sell the dog.

They sold the dog for X amount of dollars to a Russian family. And it took about three, four days. The dog was in the camp again.

I think they sold the dog at least three or four times. See, all these little things you dream of, because basically you got nothing to do. The food in the camp was bad.

The food in the camp was a quart of soup a day. And about ten ounces, eight to ten ounces of bread. Little piece of butter like you get in a restaurant.

And a tablespoon full of sugar. And that was the food in the camp. And you couldn't really exist on that.

It's not only that. They had potato soup. You ate for two, three months potato soup.

Then they had tomato soup. You ate for two, three months tomato soup. Then they started to have fish soups with a little bit of potato and a little bit of tomato in there.

They scaled the fish. They took the inside, the gut out, and they threw the whole fish with that and everything in the pot and cooked it. So when you had fish soup, you had the tail in there and the bones that you pulled out and everything was in there.

The eyes from the fish and everything was in there. So lucky or not, I have seen people, they normally weighed 160 pounds and then down to 90 pounds. I have seen people they were so waterlogged they looked heavy and fat because there was a saying if you are waterlogged and you are sick and you cannot you are not of benefit to the camp anybody sent you home.

People thought they would go home this way. So what they did, they ate salt or they drank water and blew themselves up. But very rarely I heard that somebody was sent home because of that.

[Speaker 2]
Did you know anything about your family while you were in the camp?

[Speaker 1]
No, not the first year. I wrote finally after one year, we got the first cards and it was 1946 where we got the first card. And I could write the first card at home.

Then they knew that I was there.

[Speaker 2]
But you didn't know if they had survived the war?

[Speaker 1]
No, I knew only from the last moment, the last letter I got from my parents.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, okay, but you did get mail.

[Speaker 1]
Let's say for a year and a half there was no contact. And of course I assumed that they survived because they lived in the city of Lübeck and Lübeck got the first air attack in the war. And then Lübeck was never attacked again.

And as far as I hear, not officially, that Lübeck was the town, was declared a Red Cross town where they had all the connections to Sweden, which was neutral over there, with the Red Cross too. There was a channel somehow. It was said that Lübeck was never attacked because of that.

I had no idea.

[Speaker 2]
But for whatever reason...

[Speaker 1]
For whatever reason, Bremen, Hamburg, Berlin, and everything. Kiel, I believe. But Lübeck was always Red Cross.

So I assumed then that my parents, everything was alright. I didn't fear so much of that. I think they had more hardship not knowing their problems, not knowing their items.

[Speaker 2]
What did your father do after the war? I mean, there was not a task for musical players.

[Speaker 1]
No, and he was too old. What did he do? He went into a business like carnival business.

He had a carousel. He had a merry-go-round. And he went into that area.

And then, of course, retired.

[Speaker 2]
Did you stay in Mabel for quite a long time?

[Speaker 1]
For Mabel, no. In Mabel, I stayed about two years, two and a half years. And then we were sent from Mabel to Klin.

Klin is a town near Moscow. And German prisoners rebuilt the main road from Moscow to Leningrad. And Klin, which is just on the outskirts, I don't know how many kilometers from Moscow, there was a bridge to be built over a river.

And I came from the camp of Mabel to this camp. And it was a camp where you had nothing. It was way on the outside, nowhere.

They built a road there. There was no connections. There were no civilians.

It was winter by that time. And the bridge was finished, but it was not over the river yet. It was built on land.

We had to finish it off, and there was no supply, extra supply of any kind. I had money in my pocket a little bit, but you couldn't buy anything. And it was one of the camps which was really, really rough.

And because of the situation they needed to be resupplied, resupplied, because they had so many people that died or were undernourished and all this. They had quite a turnover of people in that camp. And there was nothing but sleeping in the barracks, go up to work, come back in the evening, and stay in the barracks.

Once a week you had maybe a gallon of water to wash yourself, and that was about it. So the bathhouse wasn't open every day. So it was rough.

But fortunately I stayed there for about four weeks, and all of a sudden people came in and they questioned civilians. There was one civilian which was an engineer I knew later on. There were two from the army, and there was one German prisoner.

Prisoner of war. And they came, and the civilians, the civilian engineer and the prisoner of war, they interviewed people. And they also interviewed me.

I don't know what was happening. I don't know why. No idea.

But it took two months, and I had to pack. We were about three or four guys out of the camp. We had to pack our things, and there came a truck.

We went on the truck, and off we went. We had a guard with us. And he drove us from Klin to Kaliningrad.

Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad. Between Moscow and Leningrad.

And for the whole road building program in Kaliningrad, there was a camp of about 110 people. They were all specialists. All auto mechanics.

Mainly auto mechanics. Tool and die makers. Body shop people.

Painter. So this was a camp where we had our barracks. We went through a gate right into our working barracks.

And there we rebuilt engines, repaired everything from tractors and caterpillar tractors we had there, and compressors. All road building machinery was rebuilt there. So all of a sudden, after being four weeks in that camp, I came into the camp of strictly specialists.

And that was the camp. Religiously, every month, I got my 150 rubles. Made my month.

We worked together with civilians. Besides our... We were about 110 people in the camp.

And about 90 worked over there. 20 or so. And we were with civilians.

There were about 30, 40 civilians working there also. And the engineer who was at that time, he was a Russian Jew who spoke German. And he was pro-German all the way, because he wanted them for their qualifications.

He was in charge of the camp, of the labor force, of the output, of everything. And the guy, the German soldier he brought along for interview, he was a German engineer, and he was in charge, he was the German guy in charge. And Edward stayed there nine years.

Like I said, every month the $150 came. Matter of fact, I started to have money in the bank. They say you cannot have more than 150 rubles, and the rest goes in the bank.

So I tried it, and my birthday came up, and I wrote a request for 50 rubles for a birthday party. I wanted some extra money. And I got 50 rubles out of my account.

Okay. So, that went for quite some while, and then of course the rumor started soon, you will be home.

[Speaker 2]
And all this went on. Had you done any mail from home while you were there? Yeah, after I wrote.

Yeah, you wrote, but did they write back?

[Speaker 1]
They write back. Matter of fact, as I got this together, I have all the letters there from my mother saved and all during the war time. And in one of these cards, I wrote my mother that I and otherwise I don't remember anymore, that I thanked her for a package to send in from Germany to the prison camp in Russia.

So it must be that during the time I got one or two packages from there. But I don't, physically I don't remember. So from there on, we were sent to Leningrad.

[Speaker 2]
Was Leningrad still pretty well destroyed?

[Speaker 1]
Yes, yes. They rebuilt, but you know, it goes slow, and I didn't know Leningrad before, and they don't give you the liberty of running around in Leningrad. There was a camp on the outskirts of Leningrad.

And we then supposedly went there to be released. So we came to Leningrad, and there was no release. I am sure that we replaced some in the camp who were released, but we had to stay there.

So we stayed in Leningrad. What was the point? It went from one to the other.

If you could read these letters I wrote in 1848 already, that this Christmas I will be home. You know, and so they told you, they have to keep you up somehow, and they always promised you, and they are sent now, and then you come, and then it's your turn. But it was supposed to, but the higher authority said, no, you have to wait.

So anyway, we spent about three months, I would say, in Leningrad working again, but just to keep us busy. There was no money to be made anymore. But I still had some money soon as I left the camp.

You are careful with your money. And I think once more I got some money out of my account. But then we went from Leningrad to Kursk.

More to the center. And then we stayed in Kursk for another three, four, five months. Something like that.

And we went to the, this was outside of Kursk, about five miles outside, five kilometers outside Kursk. And then we went to a camp inside Kursk. In that camp there were only, what, 50 prisoners.

And that was inside the city. That was an old house with a barrack on there. And there was a wooden fence around and only a guard up front.

No other guard around anymore. So on the back side of the fence there were a couple of doors that were loose where we went out. Matter of fact, we went into the city.

We went into a movie. You know, all kinds of things. But there was no work anymore.

We used to hang around. And then it became winter then. And December 24, 1949, from this camp we packed our things.

We went to the railroad station. And that started our journey home. Merry Christmas.

And I arrived at home on January 3, 1949. And since then, I have never worked on January 3 anymore. Always took a day off.

So now this is just, in general, years as a member. I want to point out that it sounds good as a prisoner of war. It was not always.

We had bad times. We were hit. We were spit at.

We were demoralized. All kinds of things. Sometimes you thought, this is the end now.

It cannot go any further. It always went on. But those are times you forget.

And you really don't want to speak. Of course, that would transfer me into situations where I have a hard time talking about it. But I'll tell you one funny thing at the end, which was really, when you were, the first trip we made by train from Memel to Clean, Kalin area, they put you in boxcars.

Close the boxcar. You don't know where you may go. Now there are, I think, a hundred people in one boxcar.

There are no bunks or anything. You all lay down on the floor. And with the amount of people don't walk, with the amount of people, the floor was covered.

You hardly could step. And you had a door, a sliding door. You had a chute which was about six inches wide and six inches high.

And that's where everybody had to relieve themselves. That was the only way and the only daylight and what you felt like a piece of meat. And then when you lay down and the railroad runs, you get foam sideways and there is a noise in there which transfers to the boxcar.

There's no insulation and nothing. So you really, while the train rolls, you cannot sleep or nap or nothing. And then it was dark as the sun went down and you rolled and you stopped.

And then as the sunlight came up again, the door opens and you got some water and you got 400 people breath in there and they closed the door again and that's it. And when the train is standing, they have a wooden mullet. And the wooden mullet must be about eight, ten inches long, six inches wide, six inches high on a handle that's just three, four feet long.

And with this mullet, when the train stops, they hit the boxcar from the outside. If there are any loose bolts in there, people want to run away. And they hit, you lay and they hit the floor board from underneath and the sides and the roofs.

And it was constantly, while the train stopped, they went back and forth. They must have had ten guys with these wooden mullets hitting always on the boxcars. You could hear them from three boxcars away.

So, you know, you feel like at the later days, as we went from Kalining to Leningrad, we went by regular train. We were only 60 guys, I believe, 40, 60 guys. We went by a regular train mixing and mingling with Russian civilians.

This wasn't bad. And as we went from Leningrad to Kursk, we went to Moscow and then down to Kursk. And now comes the funny thing.

It must have been either shortly before Moscow or shortly before Kursk. Anyway, we were one boxcar with about 40 guys in there, the same 40 or 60 guys, with one guard. He had to sleep, take a nap once in a while also.

So he was among us. But there was no danger. Most of us, like me, we spoke Russian to them.

We conversed with them. It was a nice day, nice spring day, as I recall, or summer day. And we had the boxcar open slightly, where we were sitting with our feet dangling out.

And when the major called, men have it easier than women, of course. So we just opened and one of those guys was just standing there. He just wanted to relieve himself and started.

And the train rolled to a small station where people stayed with their suitcases and wanted to travel to Moscow or Kursk. And he just was, in no time, he went through and he was holding in there. We all had to laugh like crazy.

I will never forget the picture. I see it still. And I also see it.

[Speaker 2]
Even then, some funny things. Oh yeah, some funny things happened all along. But more bad things.

Oh yeah, more, more bad things. Did you lose good friends?

[Speaker 1]
Yes. Two of them in the camp. It was a really bad storm.

It was electrocuted by accident. It was we rebuilt in Memel, we rebuilt the water tower. And next to the water tower, there was an electrician working at the transformer.

It was a transformer building. And he wanted to help him, give him a hand, which he was really not supposed to do. He wanted to give him a hand.

All of a sudden, we heard a big bang. Somehow the ladder must have slipped into the power lines. So that was one.

And there were other things. We had tried some situations. Now nobody, to my knowledge, died of a heart attack or congestive arteries or something like that.

Because there was not enough fatty foods to create that. I have never, no. But we had tried some people, they had problems, their intestines got tangled up.

Because when you don't get any care, nothing, your body loses all their own fat. And all the intestines are embedded in the fat layer. And when this is taken away, the intestine just can't, can't tangle up.

And I know quite some, they had to be operated in the camp.

[Speaker 3]

So they had medical facilities? They had medical facilities.

[Speaker 1]
I myself had an accident on the water tower up in about 12 meters, like 36, 42, poor cement floor, concrete floor. And it was finishing time, quitting time, ready to go back in the camp. It was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

And somebody threw a red brick. I don't think it was quite a full red brick. It was maybe a little bit more than half.

And I got it on my head. So I went...

[Speaker 2]
You threw the brick. Was it an accident? It was an accident.

[Speaker 1]
Because you are not as careful as you could. I just put the tools together. I wanted to bring it to the tool shed.

So I saw a shadow flying. I didn't pass out, but they put me on a horse and wagon and brought me to the camp. I was bleeding like crazy.