

Fort Hunt Oral History
P.O. Box 1142
Interview of Peter Weiss by Brandon Bies
Manhattan, New York
September 13, 2006

BRANDON BIES: Okay. Today is September 13th, 2006. This is National Park Service historian Brandon Bies along with Sam Swersky here interviewing former Fort Hunt interrogator Peter Weiss in his office in Manhattan. And so, we'll go ahead and get going. And, if you wouldn't mind just telling us a little bit at first about your own background. When and where you were born and a little bit about growing up.

PETER WEISS: I was born in Vienna in 1925. I moved to France with my parents in 1939. And then to the United States in 1941.

BB: Okay. And, why did you move to the United States?

PW: The same reason most of these other people. It was just escaping from the Nazis.

BB: Okay

PW: I'm Jewish.

BB: And so [01:00] how did you end up coming to the United States? Were you sponsored by another family that was here?

PW: We had what was called "the affidavit" at the time. You know, you had to have an affidavit of support. My father's sister had preceded us by some years. They came here in 1937, so we had the affidavit. But, we almost didn't make it because we got a Portuguese visa to try to get a boat from Portugal. So you went from France to Portugal in 1941 and there was no passage to be had. My mother used to make the rounds of all the steamship companies every day looking for a cancellation. After two months of [unintelligible] all day, somebody said "we have a cancellation for you [02:00]." But the Portuguese at that point were

sending everybody back from where they came from. So, we had one month visa and at the end of that month, you either got put on a train and sent back to what would then have been the occupied zone of France, or you paid somebody \$100 to forge an extension of the visa, which we did [inaudible].

BB: Oh, did you really? Wow.

PW: Yeah. But, then if they caught you with a forged visa then you could [inaudible]. We got out by the skin of our teeth.

BB: Pardon me. Let me set that right there. All right. And so, do you remember the name of the boat that you came on to the United States.

PW: "La Magalhaes" (Magellan) [02:58].

BB: Oh. Okay and -- [03:00] where did where did that come in to?

PW: Stopped in Havana and then came to New York.

BB: Okay

PW: Okay. Yeah, 10,000 tons. Small boat -- by German standards.

BB: Sure. And then you ended up settling in New York at that time?

PW: Yeah. And then my mother denies this now. But I think she's -- I think I'm right and she's wrong. My parents sent me to a trade school which was called Straubenmuller Textile High School [03:44], on 18th Street. And they said the one thing they had learned from what was happening in Europe was that the intellectuals were the first people to be sent to the camps [04:00]. So, they wanted me to have a trade. So I went to Textile High. And, I became the first graduate of Textile High [04:10] to be admitted to Harvard.

BB: Really.

PW: In the history of the school.

[laughter]

BB: And when was that?

PW: That was in '42.

BB: Okay.

PW: But I didn't get a scholarship to Harvard so I didn't go to Harvard. Instead I got a scholarship from the Ethical Culture Society to St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland.

BB: Oh really?

PW: Yeah. It was wonderful for me. I didn't know anything about it. I just took it because of the scholarship. I went off to college. So, it was there that I spent my freshmen and sophomore year there and I got drafted in '44.

BB: Oh really? Okay. And, what were you studying while you were there?

PW: What [05:00] everybody else was studying. That's an all-required curriculum; it's known as the "Great Book" school [05:05]. There are not electives at St. Johns. It's a liberal arts college.

BB: [affirmative]

PW: So in '44 I was drafted, and first I got sent to field artillery training at -- what's the base, big base in North Carolina?

BB: Bragg?

PW: Fort Bragg [05:36]? Fort Bragg. That's where I got my citizenship. You know, once you were drafted into the army, a few months later, automatically you got citizenship. So I was sworn in in Fayetteville, North Carolina and [06:00] then

when things started going bad with the Battle of the Bulge [06:07], I was sent to Paris, Texas, for infantry training. Retraining from artillery to infantry. And from there, let's see, at some point I was at Fort Sam [06:32], Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. And, it was there that one day I was called into the Colonel's office, and the Colonel said, "I understand you speak German." And, I said, "Yes, Sir." And he says, "Say something in German." And I gave him the first line of a poem that was by Goethe. He said, "That's good enough [07:00]." He said, "You're going to Camp Ritchie [07:02]."

BB: And did you have any idea of what for at this point?

PW: Well, military intelligence.

BB: Was it commonly known at that time that Camp Ritchie was used for military intelligence?

PW: Yeah.

BB: Okay

PW: You know. I'm trying to think where -- how Fort Strong [07:20] featured into this. I went to Fort Strong before -- I can't remember, but now that I think about it, I think we were sent from Ritchie [07:31] to the Pentagon [07:34] and then transferred to a bunch of other buses to go to Fort Hunt [07:41]. So maybe I went to Fort Strong after. Doesn't say when I left. I know I spent time -- well -- I was at Fort Strong [07:58] on August [08:00] 6th, when Hiroshima [08:02] came. I'll have to see when I was debarked. It wasn't long after that.

BB: And so, what do you remember about going to Fort Ritchie [08:22] and what you were learning there at Ritchie.

PW: Camp Ritchie?

BB: "Camp" Ritchie. Yes. Sorry.

PW: What I remember mostly is the photo interpretation courses. I found that very interesting. It was a basic course in military intelligence, including interrogation.

BB: Okay. And what sorts of folks were there at Ritchie [08:54] with you [09:00]?

PW: I do not know why but I think Arno Mayer [09:04] was there with me.

BB: But was it -- was it primarily German-speaking folks that were there?

PW: Well, there was probably another section for Japanese speaking. Maybe some other languages, too. I wasn't there very long. But, I got some kind of a diploma saying I had graduated from Camp Ritchie [09:26]. So after Camp Ritchie it's just not clear in my mind now because I remember that day we went from Ritchie to the Pentagon and from the Pentagon to 1142. And, as I said before, we had -- nobody told us anything about where we were going. It's conceivable that [10:00] we were coming from Boston to the Pentagon [10:02] and then we were transferred. I just don't remember clearly. So, when we got to 1142 [10:16] -- I think I'll call it that because that's how I remember it --

BB: Sure, absolutely.

PW: -- then we got orientation and realized where we were -- we were told this was a place for very high, white-wall [spelled phonetically] prisoners of war and others from Germany who were coming to the United States under the custody of the military. And, it was, as you probably know, it was a very small post [11:00]. It had a total complement of about 100 or less.

BB: Yeah -- somewhere around there sounds correct. I don't think it was more than

100.

PW: I think [unintelligible] maybe 30 officers and 70 non-coms.

BB: And what was your rank at this time? Do you recall?

PW: Probably a sergeant. And while I was there, I was promoted to staff sergeant.

BB: Okay. So what were your -- what were you told your specific role was going to be while you were at Fort Hunt [11:42]?

PW: I only remember clearly only two activities. One was monitoring. That was, they had these underground cells where the [12:00] prisoners were living. And they were bugged. And we took turns listening to their conversations. Usually, two were in one cell. And when there was something interesting going on, we would turn on the tape recorder. And then I spent a fair amount of time on censoring their communications with their families back home.

BB: Okay. With the monitoring, you had said that you believed the prisoners were housed in sort of underground bunkers; were you also underground at that time? Do you recall where the actual monitoring took place where you were at [13:00]?

PW: It was -- it was a central place. I couldn't -- you know, if you showed me a map now, I could tell you where it was. But, there was, you know, a bunch of booths where we used to sit. And the idea -- that's where the guy comes in that I told you about before. The idea was to get people together in the bunkers who were likely to spill the beans about something. They would have conversations with each other. That's -- well, a couple of things -- I don't know, some of the others may have told you about this -- but the most dramatic incident [14:00] happened when they put a guy who was in the German embassy in Madrid during the war,

they put him together with another guy, who was sent to Madrid on some kind of a temporary mission. The second guy started telling the first guy about the woman that he had picked up. You know? You have you heard the story? About this German woman who he had picked up while he was in Madrid, about this fabulous brief affair that he had; it turned out to be the first guy's wife.

BB: No. I have never heard that before.

PW: At one point, they stopped talking. We just heard screams. Did you hear about that? We had to send somebody in [15:00] because they were about to kill each other.

BB: Wow. We'll have to see if we can find that transcript somewhere [laughs].

PW: Well, that was one thing that happened. The other thing that was not as violent but quite interesting was when they brought the Japanese, the top Japanese military attaché from Berlin to the place. We did some research on him. And, we knew that he spoke fairly good English and that he loved bourbon, American bourbon. And they went on a dinner for him. And they gave him the colonel's quarters and the officers' mess [16:00]. And there was -- do you remember the name of the colonel, that was in charge at the time?

BB: There were a few. One of the colonel's, his last names was Bliss, Zenas Bliss, I think? There was another colonel named Sweet.

PW: Sweet? That doesn't sound familiar.

BB: There were a few of them.

PW: Anyway. The colonel was the top guy there. So, the colonel and about three or four other officers arranged this conference, and they had this dinner for this

Japanese guy. And we were supposed to listen in and view the tape. And so they walked in and he was very -- as soon he walked in, somebody said "So would you like some Bourbon?" And he said, "Yes, please." And so, they poured the bourbon. They started making small talk. And it could be 15 minutes or so, and so "Would you like some more Bourbon?" And he said "Yes, please" and always in the [17:00] same tone of voice, right? And he never lost his cool. But they did. [laughs] After the fifth or sixth round. You know, their tongues got a little thick, and they started telling him stuff that he wasn't supposed to know. So, we had to go and break that up.

[laughter]

They said, "Do you know what we do here?" And he said, "No. But I do know it now." Because they started telling.

BB: Wow. No. I definitely never heard that before.

PW: Yeah. I remember that one very vividly.

BB: So, roughly how many room monitoring conversations do you think? Was this on a -- was this essentially what you did on a daily basis?

PW: Yeah [18:00].

BB: And would it be multiple times a day, or would you be assigned for eight hours to the same room.

PW: Well, we'd be assigned, I think, maybe two hours at a time, then got some rest, then go back to work.

BB: Was there coverage 24 hours a day in the monitoring?

PW: Yeah, in the evening, too.

BB: So would you -- so you would sometimes -- would you have to work nights, then, sometimes?

PW: Yeah.

BB: Okay. Okay. Some folks we have spoken to have mentioned it being sort of 9:00-5:00, Monday through Friday, so we were checking.

PW: Yes, 9:00 to 5:00 normally, but there were times when we were sent in in the evening.

SS: Was there a separate monitor for each barrack? Were -- did the microphones catch conversations from a variety of rooms?

PW: All I can -- I can't remember now whether we were able to switch from one [19:00] cell to another or whether a given monitoring post was always hooked up to the same cell. Probably the latter.

BB: Do you remember how the microphones were hidden in the room?

PW: I think they were supposed to be in the ceiling.

BB: Did you ever speak face-to-face with prisoners? Or was your role largely just with the monitoring?

PW: Yeah. We had -- we had occasions to face-to-face with them -- yeah. I remember one in particular. I can't remember his name. He was a -- I think in addition to being a scientist, he was an actor, who was a [20:00] literary person. I had some conversations with him but don't remember his name. Am I right in thinking that von Braun [20:12] was there?

BB: We've heard that from multiple people.

PW: That's my recollection -- yeah.

BB: In fact, Arno Mayer [20:20] had mentioned that, as well.

PW: Yeah. I have to tell you. The other night, I tuned into TCN, Turner Classic Movies, and they showed the Crossbow Incident [20:41], which was about Peenemunde [20:44] and the V-2 [20:45] scientists, and you know, when I saw that, I started thinking, you know, we were really too polite with those guys. I mean, what they were doing [21:00], that whole V-2 [21:04] business that the scientists worked out was really the beginning – was the beginning of “total war” against the entire civilian population. It was the beginning of the erosion of any kind of restraint. When you think back at Hiroshima [21:27], Nagasaki [21:28], the bombing of Dresden [21:31], it started -- it all started with the V-2 [21:35] on London.

BB: Did you -- do you recall doing any work on V-2 and those scientists working on that project at 1142 [21:50]? Or at Fort Strong [21:53] in Boston??

PW: No.

BB: Do you recall any of [22:00] the specific subjects that were coming up in the room monitoring? Or, was it just essentially anything that the -- that the prisoners would be talking about?

PW: Yeah. It was -- it was -- it was the latter.

BB: Would you listen in on actual interrogations or just on the raw conversations?

PW: Conversations. But the conversations were structured often unsuccessfully, but they were structured with a view of producing information about certain subjects that could -- including, you know, the guy from this embassy in Madrid together with a guy who was sent to Madrid going on a mission: what were they doing

there?

BB: Talking about the actual camp itself in 1142 [22:55], what do you recall, if anything, about where you were housed [23:00]? Were you just in typical army barracks while you were there? Did you live on post while you were there?

PW: Yeah. We lived on post. It was fairly comfortable.

BB: Do you remember who -- what other sorts of folks were in your barracks? Was it -- was it just the German-speaking folks or were you mixed in with guards and other people?

PW: I think -- I think we were pretty much by ourselves.

BB: Okay. And what about the food? Did you eat in a mess hall while you were there?

PW: Well, I'll tell you something about the food. One day, I was going on a weekend leave. And there was no transportation, not too much. I mean, maybe it was for the officers there, but not for us. So, I was hitchhiking and this car stopped and there were two [24:00] nice ladies sitting beside; one driving, the other in the passenger seat. And we -- they asked what I was doing. I said I was stationed in a military post here near. "And how did you like it" and so forth. And, "Do you have any complaints?" and I said "Yeah. The food is pretty lousy." And the one in the passenger seat said, "I'll have to tell the general about that." It was Mrs. [Mamie] Eisenhower [24:38].

[laughter]

"Thank you."

BB: Really. Wow. But, so you do, in all seriousness, recall that the food wasn't all --

wasn't all that impressive?

PW: Not terrific.

BB: Do you remember who was doing the cooking? I assume Army cooks [25:00] or

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PW: I [inaudible].

BB: Okay. Did you interact much with other folks there at 1142 [25:10] who were stationed there? Were you aware of any other programs that were going on there while you were there?

PW: I was a big reader. I spent a lot of time reading so -- I think the programs were basically interrogation and monitoring. It was clear to us that before we came there -- did I get there after V-E Day [25:46]?

BB: I believe the date on there was -- was it July 15th?

PW: July 13th was --

BB: July 13th, which would be two months after V-E Day.

PW: We were [26:00] aware of the fact that prior to our getting there, those of us who arrived on July 13th, the interrogations were more focused on ongoing military operations and, in particular, the U-Boat stuff. Whereas, by the time we got there, it was more historical in nature. Trying to develop you know "What happened?" at various times during the war. And also things related to the ongoing war with Japan. Now, a lot of people didn't have a lot to say about that, except that the occasional Japanese who came through. It was like "What happened, where and when?" In retrospect, you know, I am wondering [27:00] if some of it had to do with establishing who committed crimes during that period on the German side

because there were all these prosecutions going on, and all the other trials. You know, that was just the top of the pyramid. It could have been that that was part of the mandate of the place,. I don't recall it as such; this is just speculation because, what I do recall was that the questions were mainly aimed at eliciting historical information

BB: Okay.

PW: By the time I was there.

BB: You mentioned about the ongoing war with Japan and we [28:00] touched upon this a little bit earlier; do you actually remember any of the Japanese-American interrogators who were there?

PW: No. I don't, I don't remember. When did they come?

BB: I believe they came shortly after you were there. I think just the following month, in all likeness.

PW: I don't recall seeing them.

BB: Okay. Do you remember anybody else at the post? Do you know if there were any African-Americans stationed at an farm? Obviously the Army was segregated at the time but I'm curious if you know what the makeup of the complex was.

PW: It think it was all white.

BB: Were there any women who were stationed there? Any females? Any women as clerks or typists or anything [29:00]?

PW: Well [laughs], not that I remember.

BB: Sure. And I apologize for, you know, how specific some of these questions are.

We're just trying to get as much information about what you did while you were there as well as I've said -- there nothing really left of Fort Hunt [29:24] today, so that's why like to ask specific questions. We'd talked a little about what you did on your leisure time, while you were off. You had mentioned that you liked to read. Did you do anything -- did you do much socially with other room monitors /interrogator folks while you were there?

PW: Well, we did something that I'm not very proud of, in retrospect. But those of us in the [30:00] censoring unit used to get together occasionally and exchange some juicy bits from stuff that we had got to read and used to have sessions where we'd exchange some of [inaudible] and as I said in retrospect, it seems like I didn't do [unintelligible] not a nice thing -- not a nice thing to do. One theme that ran through our conversations, the staff's there, was about how you could tell a Nazi from a so-called non-political scientist [31:00]. We had a lot of conversations about that. Both with the general theory and in relation to particular people who were there at the time.

BB: Did you think that any of the scientists, Nazis, folks that were there knew that that many of you were Jewish?

PW: Yeah. I think so.

BB: And did you get any sense how they felt about that? Or, do you have any feelings on what they might have been thinking --

PW: I think they knew better than allowing themselves to let on. So I know there was, there was some rapport [32:00] established between some of us and some of them. And we had gradations in our minds about the bad guys and the people who were

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(End of Tape 1A)

(Beginning of Tape 1B)

BB: And so did you -- or if a scientist or somebody had said, "Oh. I'm not -- I'm not really a Nazi." Did you believe them for the most part most of those times? I -- were there people there that were proud to be Nazis? Were there people who were very open about the fact that they were Nazis?

PW: They wouldn't have told us if they were. But I remember some, who -- it came to the end of my stay there who were really, who really impressed me as dedicated real Nazis. At one point, it was probably my most unpleasant assignment there, I was- I was ordered to take this particular guy and a couple of others [01:00] on a sub-rosa shopping trip to department stores in Washington so they could buy stuff for their families and send back home. Those kinds of assignments I did not like. I mean, I didn't like most of them, but some of them actually seemed like fairly decent human beings. And I had long conversations with some of them. About how Germany got to be what it became under, you know, Hitler [01:44]. And how they should have all done something earlier. Actually, at one point, I can't remember -- at one point in my two-year military career, at one pint I was detached for a couple of weeks [02:00] to Fort Devon [02:01], Massachusetts, to the de-Nazification program [02:07]. Yeah, my specific assignment was to interrogate a bunch of guys and to make a recommendation

BB: Really.

PW: About whether they should be --

BB: Okay. And if you'd like to talk about that for a little bit that would be fascinating. About what -- about specifically what you were doing while you were there and what you were tasked with.

PW: Well, you know, I would ask them whether they were members of the Party, how they became members of the Party, and what they thought when they became members of the party. And you know, particularly, in cases where I was inclined to give them some, some credibility during the day [03:00]. I used to torture myself at night. I couldn't -- I -- Have I been had by this guy??

BB: [affirmative]

PW: Look at the Gunter Grass [3:14] story. I was reading [unintelligible] he went along with the Nazis during the war and became the leading exponent of German guilt.

BB: And, so were many of these guys trying to convince you that they were essentially no longer Nazis?

PW: Oh. All of them.

BB: Yeah.

PW: I mean, there was not one who didn't say, "I had to join the Party in order to do the work that I was doing." All right?

SAM SWERSKY: So the [04:00] interrogators and the monitors had a theory they bantered between each other as to what constituted a real Nazi as opposed to somebody who was swept up with the tide? What was the -- what was debate, how did it play? What was the general theory?

PW: Well, I think the general theory was that the guys who said, "You know. We had

to do this because of the Red Menace from the East. Right? You should understand that.” Because those were generally the Nazis who believed in what they were doing, what they thought was [inaudible]. And the ones who said [05:00] “We were really -- we were really blind to what was happening” -- you know, I should tell you after my experience there, I went and spent a year in Germany, working for Congress, the Office of Military Government [05:20]. I worked as a civilian. But you heard from everybody that it was, “Yeah. You know. It was terrible what we did. We didn’t know. We didn’t know.” They’re the ones who [unintelligible]. There was a woman, and I said “What about, what about all the people who were taken away [06:00] from their apartments and never came back?” And she said, “Well. That was only the Jews.” And she looked at me; she didn’t know. Well, I hadn’t told her I was Jewish. But that was fairly -- that was fairly typical.

BB: I guess trying to a little back to Fort Hunt [06:30], how long do you think you were there at Fort Hunt?

PW: I -- you know I should have looked up. I can give you the dates. You know, I filled it out the other day. I still have my certificate, my demobilization. I just looked for it the other day because I realized I’ve never taken a veteran’s deduction on my real estate [07:00] tax.

BB: [laughs] You can do it retroactively.

PW: So, it must have been -- it was only in ’46 that I got out of the service. So, it was probably sometime after, as I said before, maybe I was at Fort Strong [07:26] after.

BB: Do you want to talk a little bit about what you remember doing at Fort Strong and how that was similar or different to what you were doing at 1142 [07:36]?

PW: Fort Strong was strictly an intake function. It was the first stop for scientists. The problem with Fort Strong [07:51] was, there was a place called Long Island [07:57] in Boston Harbor [08:00]. Two-thirds of it was the military installation, and the other third was an insane asylum. And people from the asylum were free to wander throughout the island. And, we had trouble occasionally, telling them apart from people we were supposed to honor, frankly. But, what I remember most about Fort Strong was August 6th.

BB: So, you were definitely there when you heard about the bomb being dropped?

PW: Yeah.

BB: Okay. And what do you remember about that experience, about learning about the bomb?

PW: Like everybody else [unintelligible]. It means that we didn't have to go to Japan.

BB: So was that a fear in your head there? That you thought you may have to go to Japan?

PW: Oh, everybody thought at that point [09:00] that they'd wind up going to Japan. And having been to Hiroshima [09:07] twice since then, I was wondering what we were all thinking at the time. Let's see now, on August 6th, '45. I was at Fort Strong [09:27]. So, July what, 13th, what??

BB: According to that piece of paper, July 13th of '45. Now that's only a few weeks and so that's why, I was wondering if maybe if you went back to Fort Hunt [09:44] after you were at Fort Strong.

PW: Maybe I was just only there for three weeks; of course, that's possible. Because I was at Fort Strong [10:00]. Maybe it was Ritchie [10:06], Fort Hunt [10:08], Fort Strong, Fort Devon [10:11] and then that could've been the last of it.

BB: And you had said that Strong was being used as an intake center. What was your specific role while you were there?

PW: To see that we interviewed people that –

BB: Get their basic information?

PW: Get their basic histories, make reports about them, so that somebody could decide where they should be sent. As I remember, they were -- they were all scientists, [inaudible] military people...

BB: And so you were mustered out [11:00] sometime in '46?

PW: Yeah

BB: And, then immediately after '46, did you then go over to Germany to work in military government or was there a break there?

PW: I spent the summer -- spent the summer in New York working on a project for some of my teachers from St. John's College.

BB: So you went back to St. John's after --

PW: No. Not -- I didn't go back to college. I went back -- I think I was mustered out in May. I spent the summer working for the Great Books Project [11:44]. "Encyclopedia Britannica" published a list of the great books indexed, cross-indexed to the great ideas. And then, in the fall of [12:00] '46, I was in Germany for a year and then came back the following year to finish this St. John's [inaudible]. That I remember fairly clearly.

SS: Did you have an opportunity when you were back in Europe to go to the town you grew up in?

PW: Did I go to Vienna [12:26]? Yes. I went to Vienna. A friend and I -- they had lotteries at the time to buy cars; cars were so scarce. I won the right to buy a new Chevy 1946. So we went on a trip to -- that included [13:00] Austria where I grew up and also Czechoslovakia, where my father came from. My father had fled. My grandfather, my uncle, my aunt, cousin all died in the camps. Yes. I remember very clearly going back to the house where I grew up as a child. I had -- I was in my American military uniform -- not military, but it was a civilian uniform. People working for the military had them. And I rang a bell of the apartment where I had lived. This man came to the door, and he was a little scared. I said [14:00] -- I said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I grew up in this apartment. I have -- you know, I just wanted to come by and see it again." "Oh really?" he said; [unintelligible]. He said, "When did you leave?" I said, "1938" which was the year of the annexation of Austria. And he said, "Is that right, 1938?" He said, "Why did you leave?" In retrospect, actually I spent a fair amount of time in Germany, later Austria because of civilian work there [15:00]. Among friends, young people, you know, who were really struggling with their past. I felt more comfortable with them than I did with the Austrians who said "They made us do it. The Germans made us do it." Bullshit. The Germans didn't make them do it. They voted 98 percent in a plebiscite for annexation.

BB: So, after -- you finished school back in the States, you said, '47, '48.

PW: Let's see -- yeah, '49 I went to law school, '48 or '49.

BB: And, if you [16:00] just want to talk a couple of minutes about your -- what your current career is and what it is that you do now in the 60 years since the war.

PW: Oh well. I was fortunate to be admitted to Yale Law School. And when I came out of Yale, I wasn't sure I wanted to be a lawyer. So, I ran, ran an organization. It was sort of a precursor to Peace Corps. It was called the International Development Placement Association [16:44]. We used to send young Americans with technical skills to what were then called underdeveloped countries. And that folded after two years because we never got our tax exemption [17:00] because the IRS said that we were just an employment agency, even though we were sending people abroad to work at local wages, you know. They had to have villages. So then I had to make a living. So, I got into this racket, trademark law, intellectual property law, and all throughout that period, from then on, I did a fair amount of things on the side: pro-bono work, constitutional work. I work now with the Center for Constitutional Rights, [17:43] which is the first organization to do anything about Guantanamo [17:49]. I told you this. This conference where I gave a paper yesterday was called the [18:00] -- at the University of Southern Florida was called "Pinochet, State Terrorism, and Universal Jurisdiction." And the reason I had these two days was because September 11th was also the anniversary of the Pinochet Coup [18:17], which was in 1973. And, at one point, I got very interested in Africa. That was actually as a result of the International Development Placement Association [18:35]. So I went to Africa first in 1953, at a time when were only missionaries and Coca-Cola salesmen went to Africa.

[laughter]

- And I have always maintained an interest in Africa. Basically, I have been [19:00] half-and-half intellectual property lawyer and a lot of pro-bono work.
- BB: And over all these years since being at 1142 [19:15], have you talked about it much with anyone? Did you, did you tell your family what you'd been doing during the War? Were you told when you left that that was to remain secret? Or, were you fairly open about what you did during the war?
- PW: You know. By that time, I cannot remember. By that time, the war with Germany was over. I didn't know -- how long was Fort Hunt [19:51] operating?
- BB: Our understanding is that it pretty much shut down in the summer or fall of '46.
- PW: Yeah [20:00]. I don't think we were told that we could never say anything about it. I don't think I've told anybody about the particular techniques that we used. But I find that very interesting now in the context of all this talk about what interrogation methods are permissible. I don't think anybody signed --
- SS: I don't mean to interrupt, but could you -- you were talking a little bit comparing the interrogation methods during World War II with some of the issues that have come up, national security and the things from Guantanamo [20:55] and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your thoughts about this [21:00].
- PW: Well you know, it revolves around the question of what is torture and cruel and inhuman treatment. And you know, that's what the whole debate is about. Bush [21:14] says "we don't do torture." Well, you know what do you call waterboarding? What do you call unleashing dogs? What do you call the guy with the electrical wires? Bush's [21:34] position on that is that the lawyers and the Justice Department told us it wasn't torture. Well, you know, nobody believes

that. I don't know what goes on in his mind that he keeps saying "we don't do torture." In the speech that he made last week he said we have all these guys [22:00] that we just transferred to Guantanamo [22:03] in secret CIA prisons and if we hadn't used aggressive methods, at one point he said alternative methods, of interrogation. Alternative to what? Alternative to what is permitted under the Geneva Conventions.

SS: You're contrasting that with what happened at Fort Hunt, [22:27] which is I think what --

PW: No, the contrast -- yeah, the contrast with Fort Hunt as I said in the beginning was, if you had applied that reason about aggressive methods and alternative methods to what was going on at Fort Hunt, a lot of that should have been going on there because those people really had a lot of valuable information. And yet I don't think it ever occurred to anybody to use methods [23:00] like that, in part because it was forbidden by the Geneva Conventions, and we had millions of soldiers abroad who had to be protected by the Geneva Conventions. And if we had -- actually our people were tortured by the Germans, prisoners. So the contrast is stark between then and now, and where was the danger greater? Is there real danger that Al-Qaeda is going to take over the world or was there a danger that Hitler [23:55] wanted to literally take over the whole world [24:00]? You know, despite the enormity of the danger then, it wasn't an issue.

BB: And so at 1142 [24:19] in your mind the harshest treatment was giving someone bourbon or something like that, or do you recall anything else, any other sort of coercion or anything else that went on there?

PW: On the contrary, they used to take the guys out, used to take them out for dinners in town. I know that guy in particular, but he wasn't the only one.

SS: And the reasoning behind that would be?

PW: You soften them up, you know. Establish a personal relationship [25:00]. I think, I think a lot of trained interrogators will tell you that that's the best way to do it.

BB: Are there any specific stories or anything about Fort Hunt [25:18] and 1142 that we haven't talked about? I know you said you jotted down some notes. I don't know if we hit everything that you had jotted down or not, but if there's anything you'd like to share.

PW: I don't think so, I will just repeat that if you can -- you know, if some of the others can remember the name of that German guy, if he's still alive, he would be an enormous source of information. [unintelligible] [26:00] what was going on. What about some of the officers at the time, maybe there were some young lieutenants and captains who are still around?

BB: There actually are, and we're hoping to meet one of them tomorrow. Two lieutenants actually live over on Riverside Drive.

PW: Really?

BB: They live just a block from each other, and they knew each other, they've been friends. They were there as lieutenants, and we also have a historian right now in Monterey, California, interviewing a captain by the name of Arnold Kohn [26:38], and he would have been an adjutant there in '45 and '46, I think the post adjutant and also did something with military, and with intelligence and scientific work.

SS: We need to take a break for a second. Are we done here, too [27:00]?

BB: Okay.

(End of Tape 1B)

(Beginning of Tape 2)

PW: -- anything that was really particularly startling or useful listening to all those conversations that I did listen to, it was mostly small talk. And I think the reason it was mostly small talk was because word had gotten around among our guests that they were being bugged.

BB: Okay, I was going to ask that.

PW: Not from us, but even if nobody told them, they would have suspected.

BB: Do you recall there being bugs anywhere outside, not just in the actual cells per se, cell might not be the [01:00] right word but the rooms. Were there bugs where the prisoners ate or outside, or --

PW: I don't know. I'm not aware of it.

BB: Okay. I guess since we're talking about that aspect, is there anything specifically that you remember about the actual monitoring process, I mean very specific. Were you wearing actual headphones?

PW: Yes

BB: Or were they speakers that projected?

PW: No, they were headphones with volume controls and with tape recorders available to be activated when something interesting -- when it sounded like something interesting was about to happen.

BB: [affirmative] Did you find it to be interesting, or monotonous?

PW: Monotonous [02:00] [laughs]. Most things are.

BB: Did you make lots of tape recordings or was that a rare occurrence, where you actually had something worth recording?

PW: As far -- as far as my personal involvement is concerned it was relatively rare because I [unintelligible] a lot of worthwhile things. You know, they were talking about their food, they were talking about their families. They were talking about how long they thought they were going to be prisoners. That kind of thing.

SS: How long were they -- do you know what the rotation was of the prisoners at Fort Hunt [02:55]?

PW: It was not very long. I think they were brought in [03:00] and somebody made a decision about whether they had any more information than what they had already given us, willingly or unwillingly, then I think they were sent out to regular camps. Well the scientists at a very early date were sent to places like Red Sands and various -- our rocket installations.

SS: Did you get the impression -- you sort of stated that monitoring didn't, as far as you could tell, yield very much useful intelligence, but did you speak with the interrogators, and did you have a feeling for the success or failure of that program [04:00]?

PW: No, as I said, you know, by the time I got there I think a lot of us thought it was a big waste of time and money. But at the same time we appreciated what it was doing before from what we heard people who were there while the war was still on, and they all said that they got really important military intelligence. But, , the war was over, V-E Day [04:39] was in May, I got there in July, what could have

- been gotten at that point from the Germans except the history?
- SS: Do you recall some of the specific successes that the [05:00] soldiers who had been there earlier had spoken about in terms of intelligence that was gotten?
- PW: No, I just remember that general way they talked about, yes, certain pieces of information which when they put them together, when they connected the dots, led to sinking German U-boats and protecting the convoy routes.
- BB: Were there many monitors or interrogators who had been there a long time or did you get the impression that a lot of folks were constantly being shipped in and shipped out?
- PW: I got the feeling that people were fairly, except for people at the top, but yeah I mean, not very [06:00] -- I got the feeling that, when I was there, most of the other people were fairly recent.
- BB: And I know we keep harping on this, but anything at all that you remember about the building where you were actually listening, was it attached to where the prisoners were? Was it the same building, just another wing of that building?
- PW: My impression is that it was a different building. It was a separate building, not far from where the prisoners were, but I couldn't swear to it.
- BB: But you believe the prisoners, you had said earlier, where you think they were actually held underground [07:00], in underground areas?
- PW: I don't know. They were underground or we were underground, somebody was. I don't remember.
- BB: Do you recall if there was, you know, barbed wire in places and, you know, keeping prisoners in certain areas? You had mentioned before they had a great

- deal of freedom but while they were there at the camp, were they restricted by barbed wire fences?
- PW: I don't remember that. I do remember, I have a picture in my mind of the entrance you came into which was closely guarded. You had to have your ID and your dog tags and everything to get in and out so I [08:00] assumed there was also a perimeter wall and a fence, but I think there was only one gate.
- BB: Okay. Were there -- who manned that gate, were they guards or were they MPs?
- PW: Marine guards?
- BB: Okay. And I presume they were armed?
- PW: They must have been.
- BB: Okay. Were you armed at any point when you were there?
- PW: No.
- BB: Okay, not even when you were escorting the prisoners about or anything?
- PW: No, I was not carrying a pistol [unintelligible]. I'm trying to think back now, maybe there were some armed guards following us around? Probably.
- BB: How were the prisoners dressed when you would take them into Washington or out to dinner? How -- did they have --
- PW: Civilian clothing.
- BB: Oh just in civilian clothes, okay. When they were at 1142 [08:59] were they in civilian clothes [09:00] or were they wearing, you know, prisoner suits?
- PW: No, they were not wearing prisoner clothes, not from what I remember.
- BB: Okay. Yeah, as I started to -- said before, is there any other anecdotal stories or anything? Anything about any of the soldiers, any of the folks that we've

- mentioned, that you know the other monitors and interrogators that you were stationed with that stick out in your mind?
- PW: No. I'd have to say no. I'm trying desperately to think of the name of the one German guy who came from – either he was an active or he came from an active family, but he was a scientist. And I think maybe his father was a famous scientist. If I saw the list, I would remember.
- BB: Okay [10:00].
- SS: What was his role again? You said he probably had a lot of information, what was his role at Fort Hunt [10:06]? Why would it be important to speak with him?
- PW: I think he was a scientist. He was part of this intellectual family that was very well known in Germany and was known to be dissident to Germany, at least at that time. But apart from him I didn't have a lot of contact with -- I didn't think contact was encouraged.
- SS: What was the feeling among the U.S., the monitors and the interrogators that were stationed there, I mean you had [11:00] basically all come from a very similar background; you probably had very similar stories. You came to Fort Hunt [11:06] after the -- after the Holocaust was recognized, so there must have been something between you that was --
- PW: Yeah, I mean it ranged all the way from “you should have killed, should be killing these guys instead of feeding them and treating them nicely” to, you know, I mean, “maybe some of them really were anti-Hitler [11:34] Germans” as I think was the case, but it was hard to tell.
- SS: Was there a sense of commonality amongst you? Were you friendly with each

other, did you go out together?

PW: We didn't get a chance to go out a lot. I mean there wasn't like [12:00], we could go to Washington if we wanted every night, you had to actually be on leave. Yes, there was a sense of camaraderie; people were eating together, meeting together, and they were drinking together. [inaudible] the officers mess [inaudible].

BB: You said you don't remember a lot of drinking there, or you do?

PW: No, I don't. I think there was a feeling that we were in something special and I think that gave people a sense [13:00] of the importance in what they were doing. The morale was fairly good in part because the relationship with the officers was not what it would have been in a normal Army post; it was more like a bunch of professionals working together. Pre-professionals.

BB: How was your relationship with the officers, was it relaxed, was it you salute every time you see them?

PW: Pretty relaxed. And discipline was not very strict.

SS: Did you get the feeling that they appreciated the work that you did or [14:00] that they had respect for the work that you did?

PW: That the officers did?

SS: Yes.

PW: Yeah. [unintelligible] We also -- first you got the feeling some of them didn't know what the hell they were doing and were giving kind of stupid orders which we didn't always obey.

BB: Can you give any examples of that off the top of your head?

PW: No. It's just the general impression.

SS: You had only been in America eight years when you were stationed at Fort Hunt [14:38], is that right?

PW: No, no less than that. I came in '41 and I was there in '45. I got there for four years.

SS: And a number of the other interrogators, the monitors, also had been coming in 1937 and quite late.

PW: Yeah, I think I [15:00] was one of the youngest people there at the time.

SS: Did you all speak in English together?

PW: Did we all speak English?

SS: Did you sort of drop into German sometime or? It was your native language.

PW: I think we all spoke English virtually all the time. There was a guy you mentioned, Rudy some?

BB: Rudy Pins [15:32]?

PW: Yeah, is he alive?

BB: We are visiting him tomorrow. He also lives -- the two officers I mentioned who live on Riverside? He lives across the street from them. They live at 160 Riverside; he lives at 155, and we're going to spend a great deal -- Rudy's actually in that photograph.

PW: And when did he get there?

BB: He's not in that -- he's in one of the pages that we skipped in the photocopying. I believe he got [16:00] there in '43. He was there from '43 to '46 and then -- I believe '46, and then went over to Nuremberg [16:09] as an interrogator in Nuremberg and was deeply involved in working over there, has a phenomenal

story himself having lost a huge number of his family in the Holocaust.

PW: I think I remember him, so.

BB: He was a big redheaded guy.

PW: Yes. Well, give him my regards. It can't do any harm.

BB: Absolutely, absolutely. Last question about the officers, you had mentioned how some you think appreciated what you were doing and some were a little bit out of it, for lack of a better term. Were many of the officers of similar background as the monitors and interrogators? I mean other words, did they speak German, were they Jewish, or were they old school [17:00] --

PW: Not as I remember it. But I wasn't that familiar with their background. I know that we used to joke a lot about the colonel. We didn't think the colonel knew a lot about intelligence.

BB: Was it Walker [17:24]? Could it have been Colonel John Walker?

PW: No.

BB: Okay, I was trying to think of different commanders. Sam, do you have any other questions?

SS: Mr. Weiss, I'm sorry to ask you this. But you really didn't talk very much about how you left Germany as a boy. You know, how old you were, what led up to -- well, the background of your family.

PW: I was born in Vienna [17:58]. My father [18:00] as I said came from a small village in Slovakia, near the Bavarian border but moved to Vienna at a fairly early age and served in the first war, World War I. He used to tell me that [unintelligible]. He was either a general or a captain and he was in charge of the

first motorized brigade consisting of confiscated passenger cars [19:00]. And my mother's family had already been in Vienna [19:08] for several generations, two or three. My maternal grandfather eventually wound up owning the biggest men's clothing store in Vienna. He dropped out of the equivalent of high school and started out going from door to door, knocking on doors, buying up old clothes for this big store. He was a big opera fan. Myth had it that he read the entire "Brockhaus Encyclopedia" [19:52] which is the German version of the "Encyclopedia Britannica," from beginning to end, all 23 volumes [20:00] [laughs]. So he was pretty much a self-educated man. Him I remember rather fondly. Then in '38 when the annexation happened, my parents did something that was not very smart; they decided to go to Slovakia where my paternal grandfather lived. Then of course the Nazis -- it became clear that they were about to invade Czechoslovakia. I think that was probably [unintelligible]. So then they went to France and by the time the Germans broke through the Maginot Line [21:00] which was supposed to be -- it was supposed to be invasion-proof, right, the Maginot Line? Took the Germans about two days to get through it. And by that time I was living alone in Brittany; my parents had gone back to Paris; I was going to school there. And I got the last train out of Saint-Malo before the Germans came. I lived with my parents, south of France, lived there for a while. Took some time to get the American visa. The name of the consul in Marseille, he was called Miles [22:00] Standish. And then we came here. My grandfather wanted to start out anew in the clothing business again, but he was talked out of it. So you know, in that sense, my story is like that of so many other

- people. We had a couple pretty close escapes. And I was also -- I guess I was lucky not to be sent into combat or I might not be here.. I had nothing to do [23:00] with that but they kept sending me from one arm of the service to another. I think that's about.
- SS: Is there a chapter in your life that you -- if you had an opportunity to see the other veterans from 1142 [23:25], would you like to have a reunion with them?
- PW: I think it would be great, yeah. At this stage of one's life, one likes to do things like that. It's easy to find the time.
- BB: Well, we're shooting for it as soon as possible. It takes planning, but as soon as possible. I think it would be spectacular to have two dozen or so veterans from 1142 all get together. Everyone we've spoken with thus far who's in a condition to be able to travel has said [24:00], "I'll be there."
- SS: Did you -- I guess there are two other questions, I'm so sorry.
- BB: No, that's fine. I'm pretty much done, so.
- SS: There was a contingent of -- have you seen the film "The Ritchie Boys?"
- PW: No.
- SS: It's a film recently done about mostly German-Jewish soldiers who were trained at Camp Ritchie [24:26] and sent overseas to do.
- PW: No, I didn't know there was such a film.
- BB: Kind of a documentary, sort of.
- SS: We just ordered it at the Park, that's why I really can't -- it was at the D.C. Jewish Film Festival last year, so we've ordered it.
- PW: When did that come out?

SS: Just last year.

BB: Year, year and a half ago. It's called "The Ritchie Boys" and it deals specifically with some of the folks at Ritchie who ended up going over to Europe and working in [25:00] counterintelligence against the SS, I believe, because they grew up or lived in Germany their whole lives, they and had many of them had suffered at the hands of the SS and Gestapo and other folks like that. They actually assisted American forces with counterintelligence and kind of also with morale, trying to break the morale of the Gestapo and the SS, and again, neither of us have actually seen it yet, but there's a fairly interesting website. I think it's RitchieBoys.com or something like that and there's a phenomenal number of people in the New York area who went through Camp Ritchie [25:45]. In fact, I yesterday went up to Sleepy Hollow, just outside of Tarrytown and spoke with a fellow, his name is Erich Kramer [25:56], and he was at 1142 [25:58], he went through Ritchie [26:00] and he lives in an assisted living facility and there are actually three veterans in his community who all went through Camp Ritchie. And so there

SS: I guess my question was, did you -- I mean I realize you were just one soldier, but did you have a sense that when you were at Ritchie that there was something more than just -- more going on, that soldiers were going elsewhere as part of the war effort from basically a German-Jewish background?

PW: Well, I had a sense that there was a lot going on in military intelligence that I wasn't a part of, that I was just in some small corner of it. But, yeah, I'm going to look for that. I have a feeling I was very briefly in Camp Ritchie [27:00].

BB: Some folks we've spoken with have said that the basic course there may have

- been four or six weeks, or something like that, maybe eight.
- PW: Yes, I think I went through the course. I don't know; if I wanted to reconstruct my military history, where would I do it?
- BB: You could contact the National Archives and Records Administration in St. Louis; it's called the U.S. Army Personnel Records Center. They maintained all the files, but here is the horrible catch: in 1973 there was a horrendous fire and 80 percent of records dating from World War I through Vietnam of the U.S. Army were burned. Navy, Marine records, they survived because they were in a different building, but 80 percent of Army records, so [28:00] in other words, there is a one in five chance that your records survived. And they would track -- have all of that information; however, you can as a veteran, and you can get this information online, you can contact them and for the cost of photocopying you can have them send you any records that they have on you. And I'd be happy to send you the email link to how to get to their website, to do that, because I've done that several times for other veterans.
- PW: I'm going to have to ask my mother because I think she kept some of the -- I mean I used to write to my parents [unintelligible] not every day but twice a month. She may have kept some of those so I may be able to do something from that.
- BB: That would be -- that would be absolutely fantastic if you did come across any of those.
- BB: Any other questions [29:00]?
- SS: Thank you so much.
- BB: And anything that you feel that you want add whatsoever.

PW: Yes, I just want to ask, I hope some of those unfavorable comments I made on my superiors are not going to be directly attributed to me, are they?

BB: Of course, what we should have done first since we're meeting in an attorney's office is have you sign the legal release, which we actually do have one.

PW: Yeah.

BB: So we can -- but yeah, well, don't worry, I don't think we're going to play this on a continuous loop at a visitor's center or anything like that, just take some of the snippets here and there. And again, as of right now, this is for research purposes. We hope to take information, and quite frankly, the reason that we're recording it is so that we don't have to be scribbling, you know, word for word notes and everything. If we want to take a quote of something that you said, or just a synopsis of something that you said, more likely, and help us to write. You know, if we were to produce a couple page [30:00] pamphlet to hand out to the public, "Here's what happened at 1142 [30:05]," this is, you know, bits and pieces of this information is what we want to put into that.

PW: You know, I mentioned this before, in retrospect, if I had known when I was there what actually happened in Germany -- you say stuff about the Holocaust was already known, very little was known at that time. I think most of the Holocaust research is subsequent. I didn't even know at that point that my family, my father's family, his father and [unintelligible] had been gassed. All we knew was that we had not heard from them. So when I was [31:00] there I did not know that I had family who perished in the Holocaust. I think my attitude towards some of those people would have been different [unintelligible], and I think that may be

true for some of the others also.

BB: Great.

[end of transcript]

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