

Fort Hunt Oral History
P.O. Box 1142
Interview with Werner Gans by Brandon Bies and Sam Swersky
Boston, Massachusetts
May 10, 2007

INTERVIEWER: Are we doing good? Okay. Today is Thursday, May 10, 2007. This is the Fort Hunt Oral History Project with the National Park Service. This is historian Brandon Bies, as well as team member Sam Swersky. We're here at the home of Werner and Florence Gans just outside of Boston [00:26], Massachusetts and we're going to talk a little bit today about why Mr. Gans may -- his name is on our list of veterans that were at 1142 [00:34]. So with that, Mr. Gans, if you could, again, just briefly -- a little information about yourself, when and where you were born in Europe and how you came to come to the United States.

WERNER GANS: Yes. I was born in Mannheim, Germany [00:50]. The city may not be as well-known as Heidelberg, but southwestern part of Germany. Southwestern part [01:00]. Southwestern part. Am I speaking loud enough?

INT: This is just fine.

INT: It's fine.

INT: It's great.

WG: And without going into detail about the history in Germany [01:12], everyone knows that the Jewish people had to flee in order to save their lives. And we were able to just escape before Kristallnacht [01:25], which was the shattering of the glass where many Jewish were deported and actually killed. And in a roundabout way I was only 15 years old when I came to this country. It was very difficult. We had to go through other countries, and my parents actually were not allowed to come to the United States because they needed a visa -- and an affidavit -- which they had neither of the two [02:00]. And I

came on a student's visa. We landed in Cuba, and I was able to come on a student's visa from Cuba to Boston [02:14] and to a music conservatory to a scholarship. I received a scholarship, and my parents came more than two years later to join me. I settled in Boston [02:30] because of the musicianship and that music was [unintelligible] and it was -- I came in February of 1939 and I went to the conservatory. And as everybody knows, the World War II started in September 1, 1939 [03:00]. And it's a very strange thing to tell you this, but each draft board -- that is each draft board in different states -- had their own jurisdiction. In New York, my cousin, who was born on the very same day I was born -- same day, same month, same year -- was fleeing from Germany [03:30], settled in New York. His family settled in New York. And the draft board immediately drafted him into the army. I was of course in Boston [03:47], and the Massachusetts draft board was more conservative and they classified me enemy alien, believe it or not.

INT: [affirmative]

WG: I was just as anxious to defeat [04:00] Hitler [04:01] and the Nazis [04:02], of course, as most all Jews [04:06] were. But it took about a year and a half to two years when the draft board decided after all I was not enemy alien so I was able to enter the U.S. army. And I was initially stationed at Fort Devens [04:27], which was induction center for the Massachusetts [04:30] soldiers, and I was there for about a month and a half before the army decided where to send me for basic training. I went to the clerical school and then I ended up at Camp Grant [04:54], Illinois, which is near Chicago, and [05:00] I had basic training, medical corps training. I was there barely one month -- I think it was about one month -- when the army decided that since I knew the German language and had experience with German people that I would be a good candidate to go into the military

intelligence service [05:27]. And so they transferred me from Camp Grant [05:33], Illinois to Camp Ritchie [05:37] in Maryland. I had my training in Maryland at Camp Ritchie, and after I finished my military intelligence training [05:48], I instructed new recruits who came to the camp for several [06:00] months. And then I was stationed in Washington, D.C. [06:06] and my work consisted mostly of translating documents, receiving documents, theoretical and practical documents which had to do with naval as well as army projects. German projects. And after that I was sent to an island in the middle of Boston Harbor called Long Island [06:45], and I spent the rest of my army days during the time of the war until it ended at Long Island [06:58]. And mostly [07:00] I did interrogating German prisoners and also continued to translate documents -- German documents into English. And most of my work consisted of interrogating German prisoners which were coming over more faster and faster as the Allies re-conquered France [07:36] from the Germans. I had many, many German prisoners -- officers and enlisted men -- from the Paris area especially where were driven out and captured when the U.S. Army swept through France [07:57] and into Germany [07:58]. And [08:00] that's basically the outline of --

INT: Great.

WG: --Army career.

INT: Fantastic. Well, if we could back up and try to hash out some of the details. After you left Camp Ritchie [08:14], you went straight from Ritchie to Washington [08:18]?

WG: No, no. I was in Washington I believe -- as I recollect -- I was in Washington after Camp Ritchie [08:28] --

INT: Right, okay.

WG: -- and from Washington D.C. [08:32] I went to Long Island [08:33].

INT: To Boston [08:34]. Okay. And so where in Washington specifically were you? Were you in the city in Washington?

WG: Well, that is the part of my story that I'm not sure about. I do remember when I was in Washington D.C. [08:51] -- I remember some of the time we were quartered -- it was not a military [09:00] division or anything like that. Individuals like myself. I think I was living in a hotel --

INT: Oh, okay.

WG: -- in Washington, D.C. [09:13]. Now. I know you've come to ask me about Fort Hunt [09:18] --

INT: Sure.

WG: --and I remember APO 1142 -- strikes a very, very strong bell in my mind. I cannot recall specifically the story about me being in Fort Hunt [09:39]. Although, as you could see from the literature that you gave me, that my name was listed as having been there. The only question is I don't remember the time. This in my mind is not clear [10:00].

INT: Okay.

WG: But I could have -- while I was in Washington, D.C. [10:05] part of the time living in a hotel, quartered there, I also could have been at what's called Fort Hunt [10:15]. I don't know A.P.O. 1142 [10:19] --

INT: Okay.

WG: -- which of course was the way we could communicate with our families without them knowing where we were or what we were doing. As a matter of fact, when I was in Long

Island [10:37] which is outside my home, Boston [10:42], nobody in my family had any idea I was that close.

INT: [laughs] Do you remember if Long Island [10:50] had a P.O. Box number or a secret code name or anything?

WG: I'm sure we had one.

INT: Okay.

WG: I don't remember. But that's [11:00] how I communicated --

INT: Okay.

WG: -- with my family.

INT: And so do you remember about how long you were in the Washington, D.C. [11:09] area? Was it just a few weeks or a few months?

WG: No, I would say I was there at least three or four months.

INT: Okay. And to recap, while you were there, you were largely working with capture documents? You were translating German documents?

WG: German documents that had to be deciphered as to timing, as to locations, as to theoretical. It was sometimes very difficult to get -- I remember the nautical explorations and nautical terms --

INT: [affirmative]

WG: -- which I really had not too much experience with, but somehow [12:00] it worked out.

We found ways of working with it and getting the results.

INT: And do you remember about when you -- about what date it would have been, what month even -- that you would have gone from Ritchie [12:18] to Washington D.C. [12:19] -- when you left Camp Ritchie.

WG: Well, I have to recollect that. If I got to Camp Ritchie -- let's see, I went to Camp Grant [12:32] about maybe June -- May, June -- May until July -- 1943. Maybe I was in Washington [12:55] about four, five months.

INT: Okay [13:00].

WG: That would have been in late 1943 or early 1944.

INT: Okay.

WG: Late 1943. I would say.

INT: Okay. Were you with other people like yourself, other translators, when you were in Washington [13:22]?

WG: Oh, actually, like I said before, you were not with a division or outfit.

INT: Okay.

WG: We were individuals. I was quartered maybe part of the time in a hotel. And I remember one instance I was walking down the street -- it was in the summertime, and Washington D.C. [13:45] gets very, very hot.

INT: You don't have to tell us that. [laughs]

WG: And I remember walking down the street, and I was ready to faint, and I just had an army uniform on [14:00]. And it was so hot I just quickly went into a foyer of the nearest hotel and cooled off.

INT: [laughs]

WG: I was ready to just drop. I remember that.

INT: And so you think when you were in Washington [14:16] you weren't really working with anybody else. You were mostly just working by yourself on these documents?

WG: Yes.

INT: Okay.

WG: Yes.

INT: Okay. And you mentioned a lot of the documents dealt with naval terms and what not. Do you remember what you would do with the translations, if you handed those over to somebody, if there was an officer or an office somewhere?

WG: Yes. There was an office where I handed over the documents.

INT: Okay.

WG: I don't remember which office. It was an office that just gave them whatever work I had done.

INT: Okay, and. [15:00]. So there was no one else there in Washington [15:03] who had come with you from Camp Ritchie [15:05]?

WG: No.

INT: Okay. All right. What about when you were then transferred up to Boston [15:11]. Was there anybody from Ritchie up in Boston?

WG: You know, I don't remember many soldiers at all.

INT: Okay.

WG: We got to know each other while we were there, and when we interrogated prisoners -- if you saw the film "The Ritchie Boys," which you did --

INT: [affirmative]

WG: -- we formed groups of interrogators and we thought up methods of finding information, ways of making prisoners talk [16:00], and validated, verifying, whether they have spoken the truth or not. And many -- I think there was one particular -- are you interested?

INT: Oh, sure. Absolutely. This is great.

WG: There were some countries [unintelligible] being sent to the Russian prisons, which frightened them no end. And there was another very, very interesting way of doing it. Many of them -- many of the German soldiers said, "Well, I'm not a Nazi [16:42]. I'm just a soldier doing my job as a German soldier." And so we countered by saying, "If you were not a Nazi [16:53] and you know that you're losing the war and you know your family, in whatever city [17:00] they happen to come from in Germany [17:03], then help us make the war end faster. Because our American US Air Force is going to bomb your city. Wherever you come from is next on the list. And you don't know what's going to happen to your family." So this was one method that frightened them, of course. And it was one method of getting information. There was no need to do any physical harm to them. They were scared enough if you used some of those ways of extracting information.

INT: And so you had mentioned before, on Long Island [17:56], there were most of the prisoners -- these were military prisoners [18:00]. These were not scientists at this time?

WG: Well, there were some.

INT: Okay.

WG: There were some that were mixed in with corporal prisoners.

INT: Okay.

WG: But there were many, many officers who -- like I said before -- professed not to have been Nazis [18:21], but they found out that they towed the line.

INT: So would you characterize Long Island [18:34] as being kind of like an interrogation facility, and then were the prisoners then taken somewhere else? They weren't held there permanently, were they?

WG: No, not for a long time.

INT: Okay. So was the purpose just to try to get -- squeeze any last information out of them before they were sent to a permanent camp?

WG: Well, some were held there, you know. Matter of fact, some [19:00], for some strange reason, said they wanted to stay in this country. They didn't want to go back to Germany [19:09]. And they were only a handful. Most of them were defiant. And, like I said before, I said that -- you see, what we did -- I was only an enlisted man. I was not an officer. But we wore insignia, which Lieutenant's bars, Captain's bars, or even Colonel's. And, if they didn't cooperate, we of course pulled our rank, you know. And many of them said, "Well, I can't talk. This is all over military man. You are an officer in the U.S. Army [20:00]. I'm an officer in the German army. You know we can only give you name, rank, and serial number. That's all we're supposed to give you. Nothing else." And so they tried to get away with it. Of course we debunked it very fast. So that's all you have to give us. But I'll give you more. And then I called off my past. I said, "I happen to be a German Jew [20:30] who was pushed out of Germany [20:33]. I have relatives who were killed by the Nazis [20:37] in Germany. And if you don't talk, we have methods of doing things to you too and your family," and that made them talk.

INT: Wow.

WG: We never had to touch them, but --

INT: [affirmative] But just that threat?

WG: Just the threat, yeah.

INT: Wow. And so --

WG: It was very effective, saying, "You know, never mind my past, never mind [21:00] my official status, I am a big German Jew [21:05] and you know that I have no sympathy for you."

INT: And so were there lots of other American interrogators on Long Island [21:18] like yourself who were also German Jews [21:21]?

WG: Yes.

INT: Okay. Okay.

WG: Always, like I said before, we formed groups. And so sometimes one would take a prisoner on one side and I would take on some other corner, and we would, of course, try to get the same type of information, and we would cooperate, collaborate, and see whether they were telling the truth. If you had three interrogators on the same subject and two of them [22:00] were telling the same thing and a third one didn't, you know the third one was lying.

INT: Right.

WG: So we formed kind of teams but interrogated separately. That was the usual method.

INT: Okay. Okay. And any sense of numbers of how ... while you were at Long Island [22:23] -- just ballpark -- how many German prisoners came through?

WG: I couldn't tell you.

INT: Okay. I mean, was it thousands or hundreds?

WG: I would say more like hundreds.

INT: Okay. Okay.

WG: Dozens. I don't know hundreds but not thousands.

INT: And did you get the sense that these prisoners --

WG: At least not the time I was there.

INT: Sure. Do you get the sense that these prisoners were specially selected for further interrogation, or were you interrogating all of the Germans who were coming in through Boston [22:59]?

WG: Oh, that's a good question [23:00]. I don't know who made the selection, but I just was assigned certain German prisoners, and that's what I did. I don't know how they decided that -- I suppose once I was able to work on certain subjects -- like I told you, nautical --

INT: Right.

WG: -- they probably assigned other types of German prisoners to me because I had some experience.

INT: Some specialty that you would work on. Okay. Fantastic. Do you have anything that you want to --?

INT: Where did you live at the time that you were working at Long Island [23:44]? Did you live on the Island or did you go to the city?

WG: I couldn't leave. I couldn't leave. No, I told you nobody knew where we were. I couldn't leave there. We were qualified so to speak. We -- I was [24:00] right outside Boston [24:04]. My family lived there, but they didn't know. I couldn't leave the Island [24:09].

INT: How did the Germans come onto the island? Did they bring them on boats I presume?

WG: Oh yeah.

INT: Okay. And so --

WG: Harbor.

INT: How would a troop ship full of Germans come right to the island, or do you remember how the prisoners got there?

WG: I don't remember.

INT: Okay.

WG: I think in smaller boats.

INT: Okay.

WG: Smaller boats.

INT: Okay.

WG: Not big ships.

INT: How were they -- how were the prisoners -- was there, like, a barbed-wire compound there, or where were the prisoners kept while they were on Long Island [24:46]?

WG: Well they had large areas which were fortified.

INT: And is this -- and we're not [25:00] very familiar with Long Island [25:01]. We've only seen Long Island from a distance. Is where you were at, if you recall, is it where the current hospital is today, or was it out on the tip of the island where the fort is?

WG: Well, I don't remember that.

INT: Okay.

WG: I don't remember that. I suppose the whole island was more or less engaged in this endeavor.

INT: Okay.

WG: You know, more or less. It's not such a huge island.

INT: Right. Did you get the sense that the buildings there were built specifically for this purpose or they were old buildings that you were reusing? Do you remember if the place was kind of run down and dilapidated, or did it look kept up?

WG: I don't remember.

INT: Okay. Just curious.

WG: I don't remember that.

INT: Sure. Because we know -- there's some folks we've spoken to -- a few people here in Boston [25:55] with the National Park Service and the city archaeologist -- and we're not sure [26:00] how much they know about what went on there. We don't know that there is much of an understanding at all of what happened there. And so that's why we're asking some of these, what might seem like, really nitty-gritty questions, to get any detail because there's very few people who even knew that German prisoners were on Long Island [26:19]. And so ...

INT: It's like where we were at with Fort Hunt [26:24] a year or two years ago but even worse. I think they have very little understanding that it was used during World War II at all. We've spoken with the city archaeologist, and she has no information on it.

INT: But this is fantastic. As I know we need to keep an eye on the time so we can get to the Marriott and everything, but is there anything else that --

INT: Sure.

INT: Go ahead.

INT: I'd like to clarify approximately what months or what year this was that you were on Long Island [26:58].

WG: Well [27:00] -- I'm trying to recollect again. I went first Fort Devens [27:06], then I went to Camp Grant [27:08], Illinois, then I went to Washington, D.C. [27:15].

INT: Did you go to Ritchie [27:21] before Washington, D.C., sir, or did you go to Washington and then Camp Ritchie?

WG: Let me think a minute. There was an induct at Fort Devens [27:36], two months, then Camp Grant [27:45], several months, I think I was ... the question is when I was on Long Island [27:55]. Is that what you --

INT2: Right, yeah, when you were there, but if it's helpful for you to go through your whole chronology [28:00] --

WG: I would say in 19 -- after the summer of 1944, I went to Long Island [28:12].

INT: Okay. And so you --

WG: And I was there through the end of the war.

INT: Okay. And when were you mustered out? Obviously after the war, but --

WG: This is interesting. The war ended August of 1945, and the army had -- and the United States Army and armed services had raised war bonds as you know during the war to raise money for the Army waging war. After the war ended they called it [29:00] victory bonds. Still raising money after the war. And when the war ended I was assigned to a special musical outfit in the army. That was when my military intelligence service [29:22] ended.

INT: Ended -- but you were still in the army.

WG: Oh, yes.

INT: Okay.

WG: I was not able to leave the army yet because then there was a point system --

INT: Right.

WG: Are you familiar with it?

INT: Yes.

WG: I did not have enough points to be discharged.

INT: Sure.

WG: So they formed a victory bond drive and there were musicians, some very famous musicians actually, classical musicians, and in different small towns [30:00] around big cities they toured to raise money for the army. And I was assigned to one of these groups because I played an instrument. And so for several months we toured, and guess which city they chose for me.

INT: Boston [30:21].

WG: By coincidence.

INT: [laughs] So you really didn't have to go that far throughout the whole war then. You were pretty close to home then.

WG: Because then my parents know where I was.

INT: Oh, good

WG: So we toured around Boston [30:35] and in different small towns we gave concerts. So I was in the army band corps, whatever we were called.

INT: And so were you --

WG: And I was discharged, I was discharged on May 14, 1946 [31:00].

INT: Okay. From Fort Devens [31:05]? Is that where you were discharged at?

WG: Yes.

INT: Okay. So you never returned to Washington [31:09] -- after you were in Washington for that brief time, you never came back to Washington.

WG: I might have for a short period of time. I really don't recall.

INT: Okay.

WG: It could have been for a very insignificant short time.

INT: Short. Okay.

WG: Anyway, you see I was discharged May 14, I think it was, 1946.

INT: Okay.

WG: I'm not sure it was the 14th, but 1946.

INT: Sure. That's great.

INT: You showed us the certificate from Camp Ritchie [31:49] that's on the wall, and it has dates that are on the certificate. Those are the dates that you were attending Camp Ritchie [32:00]? Do you want to take a look at the dates that are on --

INT: Yeah, I think -- do you remember if they were the dates that you were at Ritchie [32:07] or just the dates that you were working for the Military Intelligence Service [32:11]?

WG: I can't remember exactly.

INT: Because I think the ending date was July of 1945, and I'm wondering, could that be maybe you were with the military intelligence service up through and including Long Island [32:27]?

WG: It's not comprising the whole -- this certificate I got --

[End of Tape 1A]

[Beginning of Tape 1B]

WG: -- what specific work I was doing at the time, but they called me something special.

INT: And you were given that certificate for that.

WG: Yes. The award or whatever.

INT: Okay.

WG: Commendation of a particular project --

INT: Okay.

WG: -- that we did. This was not the whole time.

INT: Got you.

WG: I got two of those. There was another even shorter period.

INT: Oh, really?

WG: Even shorter period than this where we accomplished something where I got a special citation.

INT: Okay. I'd be curious because, again, what we're largely trying to do is decipher why your name is on our list of being at 1142 [00:50].

WG: That baffles me.

INT: Yeah.

WG: Because this was after the war ended unless, while I was in Washington [01:00], and like I said, I did live in a hotel I remember, but I also could have been at what you call Fort Hunt [01:09].

INT: Right. And sometimes I even wonder if perhaps, even though you weren't working at Fort Hunt, maybe the overall military intelligence service [01:22] operation that oversaw what you were doing was based out of Fort Hunt [01:29] and so you showed up on their roster.

WG: Quite a coincidence -- middle initial.

INT: I'm pretty convinced that it has to be you.

WG: Maybe it could be another time that I was there but the date of this is when they [unintelligible].

INT: And that could be, because the date that you're listed, there are about 25 or 30 names all listed on the exact same day. So they may have just put a bunch of names on the roster [02:00] all on the same day.

WG: It was much earlier --

INT: Earlier than that.

WG: It was not after the war. There was no reason for me to go back when the war ended.

INT: Right.

WG: I was, so to speak, free. I didn't --- I wasn't military intelligence [02:20]. I did not have to adhere to any of these -- you know, like I say, we played music.

INT: Sure.

INT: Do you want to look at the roster?

INT: I gave him a copy of the roster.

INT: Do you want to take a look at the names on the list?

INT: Did you -- if we were to pull out the roster real quick just to see if any of those names looked familiar at all. I can go get it if it's over -- is it over here? Okay.

INT: And then we probably should wrap up. I think it's about 1:00 now, so.

FLORENCE GANS: Two minutes after.

INT: Two minutes after. Just don't want to leave the other folks standing there [03:00] at the hotel thinking that we took the early plane home or something like that.

INT: So I'm just simply curious – I think what Sam is mentioning is if any of these other names look familiar to you. And your name is there at the bottom of that page but if any of the names ...and you see how the dates is all July 13.

WG: Good point.

INT: And I wonder if any of those other names could have come from Ritchie [03:31] like yourself. And they're continued onto the next page.

FG: You know, he was awarded three times to go overseas.

INT: Oh yeah?

FG: For some reason they didn't send him so that many of the people that --

WG: [unintelligible] strange ways I went home [unintelligible] three times I've gone overseas.

INT: Right.

WG: And then they sent me to Long Island [03:56] --

INT: Yeah.

WG: --to interview prisoners.

INT: And that's one of the things that we're always trying [04:00] to understand with the veterans we're speaking to is why were they transferred to 1142 [04:07], to Fort Hunt [04:09]. They were all trained --

FG: It was a cover up.

INT: -- to go overseas just like Mr. Gans. That's what they were all trained for, and then all of a sudden they went to Washington [04:20] and they never went overseas. And largely we're trying to figure out why that was made.

FG: Because his fellow soldiers went over.

INT: Right. Right.

FG: But he didn't.

INT: [unintelligible] Just as a closing question about when he was in Ritchie [04:37] if he was expected to go --

INT: Did you -- when you were at Ritchie was that your expectation, that you would be going to Europe?

WG: Of course.

INT: And that's what you were training for? So that you were -- they weren't training you specifically for what you did on Long Island [04:53] or anything like that.

FG: We have pictures of him in German uniforms where he dressed -- just to show [05:00] the other --

INT: Really?

FG: -- people what the Germans looked like.

INT: And these were taken at Ritchie [05:05]?

FG: Ritchie.

INT: Are they handy? If they're not, don't worry about it.

WG: I don't have it

FG: You do have it, but you don't know where it is.

INT: Well, if you ever find them we'd love to see copies of them. Because we've kind of -- there's not many people --

FG: There's no pictures of people [unintelligible].

INT: Exactly.

FG: And that's what he did.

INT: We certainly don't consider ourselves historians of Camp Ritchie [05:30] at all, but there's not really too many other people working on Camp Ritchie.

FG: Right.

INT: So since it relates so closely to our project

FG: Who wrote this?

INT: Wasn't it done by the military?

INT: I think it was done by the military.

FG: Oh.

INT: So those are certainly yours to keep, and you can peruse over those in the coming days and see if any -- but I just figured on the off chance maybe you recognized a name from Ritchie [05:56] --

WG: No. There are quite a number that I would remember [06:00] their names. I remember some of them, but where they are now I don't know.

INT: Sure.

WG: I remember Battle of the Bulge [06:12]. You know what that was.

INT: Sure.

WG: In 1944.

INT: Sure.

WG: I remember just where I was.

INT: Oh, really? When that was going on. And where was that?

WG: It was at Long Island [06:25].

INT: So you were at Long Island during the Battle of the Bulge [06:27]. Okay. All right. Well.

WG: It was the last gasp of the Germans.

INT: Sure, sure.

WG: They were trying desperately. There was quite a slaughter.

INT: [affirmative]

FG: They took his [unintelligible]. We have a friend who was in the ROTC and they pulled him out and put him in the infantry and he's the only one who survived.

INT: Oh, jeez [07:00]. I was going to go ahead and turn it off now if that's all right.

[end of transcript]

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