

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT A. PAOLI

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Hanne Ala-Rami: This begins an interview with Robert Paoli in Ridgewood, New Jersey, on December 7, 2007, with Hanne Ala-Rami ...

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: ... And Sandra Stewart Holyoak. Mr. Paoli, thank you and your wife so much for having us here this morning. For the record, can you tell us where and when you were born?

Robert Paoli: I was born in Upper Manhattan, New York City, on December 7, 1934.

SH: Happy birthday.

RP: Thank you.

SH: We did not know we were here to help you celebrate. Let us begin with your family background; we will start with your father.

RP: Sure.

SH: Tell us about him, if you would.

RP: Sure, sure. My dad was born in Milan, Italy, in 1902, and he traveled extensively throughout his life, because my grandfather, his father, was Antonio Paoli, who's a very well-known opera singer. ... Because of the fact that he traveled so much and sang in almost every major opera house in the world, my father had the luxury of being privately tutored, spoke several languages, and came to ... this country in 1926 and settled in New York City.

SH: He would have been how old in 1926, about twenty-four?

RP: Twenty-four.

SH: Did he come alone?

RP: He came alone. I'll tell you, my grandfather, I never met my grandfather and my father was an only child. My grandfather was not a very nice person, from what I ... understand. My grandmother died of cancer shortly after she gave birth to my father, and my grandfather, being in the opera, ... ended up marrying a showgirl, or a chorus girl, from the opera and she was not a very nice person. ... She kind of dominated his life throughout his career and wasn't very close to my dad at all. So, my dad was just sent here, in New York, at twenty-four, and left to his own devices to [survive].

SH: He was not sent here to study or to learn a trade or anything like that.

RP: No, nothing like that, no, no.

HA: Was it his decision to come here or was he coerced into it?

RP: Well, he had married. He met my mother. My mother was Aida Josephine Paoli. Her name is also Paoli, because my father and my mother are first cousins.

SH: Really?

RP: Yes. My father's father and my mother's father are brothers and she was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, and she met my dad in Ponce at a time when my grandfather was there singing and, of course, they were family related anyway, and my mother ... came here and ... joined my father here in New York City, and then, they got married.

SH: How did her family wind up in Ponce?

RP: Well, my roots are Corsican. My roots go back to Corsica and, when the Napoleonic Wars started, the first thing that Napoleon did, who was Corsican, [was], he seized all the finances of the rich merchants, in order to finance his campaigns, and, apparently, the Paoli Family, at that time, they were pretty well business-oriented and they didn't want any part of this. So, they decided to emigrate and, of course, the decision was made of, "Well, where do you go?" They certainly couldn't go in any other place in Europe, and the United States, America, was still a very young country. So, what they did was, they went to Venezuela. They went to South America, which ... had a very vibrant economy and it was very Continental and they settled in Venezuela. ... Then, of course, as the years passed by, revolutions came in South America and they went, ... let's see, I guess you would go north from Venezuela, and then, they ended up in Puerto Rico. ... They spoke the language. Puerto Rico, at that time, was still a colony of Spain, and then, the Spanish-American War changed all that, and then, my mother came to New York and joined my dad. ...

SH: Do you know what business your mother's father had in Ponce?

RP: My mother's father was a newspaper man. He owned a newspaper in Puerto Rico and, also, a string of movie houses. ... They did pretty well. Actually, my grandfather did quite well in his life as a singer. He was a contemporary of Enrico Caruso. He sang in the Metropolitan Opera House. He sang in every major opera house in the world. He debuted at the Paris Opera House. He opened there as Othello. My grandfather's forte as an opera singer was the role of Othello. He sang *Othello* more times than any other opera star has since. ...

SH: Was his voice recorded? Do you have any recordings?

RP: Oh, sure, oh, yes. Oh, I have recordings, oh, absolutely. If you go to Ponce, Puerto Rico, ... where my mother was born, and my grandfather, it's called Casa Paoli. It's the house where my mother was born and where my grandfather was born and where I have some very elderly relatives, but the whole house now has been turned into a museum and it features all the artifacts and memorabilia and things about my grandfather, but I can show you pictures and things. He wore a beard. He was a big man, my grandfather. He was six-foot, he had blue eyes, big chested, you know, like most opera singers. He was a tenor and he had a beard and Othello never had a beard, according to Verdi's depiction of what Othello should be, but he refused to shave his beard and he was allowed to sing *Othello* wearing a beard. ... He made a great deal of

money in his lifetime and, I have to tell you, he almost disowned my father. I mean, my father never got any of that money. My father was a very hardworking person, very well-educated, but my father, I think, also, wasn't very assertive in trying to do better. He concentrated on his married life and his four sons and just making a living, paying the bills, ... but my father, I think, with the proper push, probably could have done much better, because he spoke several languages. From his private tutoring and being at all these opera houses and listening to his father sing in French, Italian, Spanish, German, you know, he learned the languages.

HA: Did your father pass any of these languages down to you?

RP: ... My father was an only child and my mother was one of eleven children. The major language spoken in the house was Spanish. I grew up learning Spanish and speaking Spanish, I guess until ... I started grammar school. I know a little Spanish now. I can understand it very well. ... What I usually do, if I travel to Puerto Rico or the Caribbean, someplace, I get a couple of recordings from the library and it comes back to me, but, no, I've been very derelict in that area as well, and none of my children speak Spanish.

SH: Going back to your father, what did he find to do here in this country and where did he emigrate to from Milan, Italy?

RP: To New York City and he had a lot of different jobs. He was a salesman in Spanish Harlem, because he knew the language and he sold furniture, not a great job. I think, just being an immigrant, although he spoke English very well, unlike many immigrants, and other languages as well, the success of many immigrants when they come here is quite historic; I can't say that about my dad. I mean, he was a great person and I loved him and everything else, but I was just a child, of course, and so, what did I know? My mother was always after him to do better, but, somehow, he just [did not]. I think he was very disappointed over the fact that his father wasn't around. All the time my grandfather was in Puerto Rico, my grandfather retired and lived in Puerto Rico and opened up [and] ran a school for opera lessons, classical music, and he never visited New York City to see any of his grandchildren. Now, my father had four sons and we never met my grandfather.

HA: Did your father ever try to reach out to his father?

RP: Oh, yes.

HA: It just was ...

RP: No, it wasn't done. He visited him once, many years ago. He went there with my mother and met ... his father and his new wife and they were treated cordially and they were hospitable to them, but, outside of that, there was a rift, you know. So, that was very sad.

SH: Did you go to Puerto Rico to visit your mother's family?

RP: I have, yes, her cousins. Most of them were her cousins.

SH: Was she an only child as well?

RP: No; my mother? No, she was one of eleven. Many of her sisters lived in New York City with us. So, I knew my aunts. My grandmother, her mother, lived to be a hundred, smoked cigarettes right up to the end and had her glass of brandy every day. [laughter] So, there was longevity on my mother's side. My mother lived to be eighty-four or five, I think. My dad died at an early age. He was only sixty-one.

RP: He ate all the wrong foods, he was heavy, didn't exercise, smoked, but who knew way back then?

SH: You indicated on the pre-interview survey that your father served in the military.

RP: No, he did not.

SH: Okay, I misread that. I am thinking of your brother, your older brother.

RP: I have three brothers, who all served in the military.

SH: I was thinking of World War II.

RP: Right.

HA: You mentioned on the survey that your father worked as an interpreter for the shipyards.

RP: Yes.

HA: Can you tell us more about that?

RP: Sure. During World War II, since my dad was fluent in many languages, ... he worked for the Todd Shipyards in Hoboken, New Jersey, interpreting for the Italian immigrants who were craftsmen, welders and steel workers, and he gave them the instructions on what needed to be done for the war effort. ... I remember the periods during World War II because I was, let's see, I guess I was about eleven years old, and we had more money in those days, [laughter] because ... everybody worked in the shipyards. You know, there was complete unity in the country. Even the women went to work in the shipyards. My father didn't [serve in the military]. I think he was already over [the maximum age]. He was already forty-four years old, or something, with four children. So, he was exempt, but they also needed him in the civilian capacity, because of his propensity for these languages, but I remember that they got paid very well. So, we were able to buy a washing machine and we had a television and all kinds of stuff. [laughter] I said, "Wow, this is pretty neat."

SH: You were living then, as you said, in Manhattan.

RP: Yes, in Upper Manhattan. Washington Heights, it's called, yes.

SH: This was your father and mother's original home.

RP: No. Our original home was down; oh, well, we lived in Upper Manhattan, but in a different street, but still in the same neighborhood, but, when I grew up, until I was, let's see, I guess I was six years old, right up to the age I was six years old, we lived in Harlem. We lived on Broadway and, I think, 148th Street, and then, ... we lived in a very small apartment. There was six of us. So, we had to move. The war came, my father went into the shipyards, and, as a result, we were able to move uptown. As they say on television, "I'm moving on uptown." [laughter] So, that's how that happened. I'm sorry I don't have the address. I just don't know.

SH: That is fine. Sometimes, people stay in an area because of the community around them, or they speak the same language. I wondered if that was the case.

RP: No. That wasn't true for my family.

SH: With your father speaking so many languages ...

RP: Yes. Well, he spoke English, so, it didn't matter. We could have lived in any neighborhood.

SH: Did your mother as well?

RP: My mother also spoke English, yes. She had an accent, Spanish accent, but, you know, it's funny, because, when you go back to [the] 1930s and '40s, if you told somebody you were from Puerto Rico, I mean, ... the first thing they would ask you is, "Where the heck is Puerto Rico?" It's not until the '50s, when you had this great influx of Puerto Ricans coming into New York City, and other parts of the country, that people [were] realizing now where Puerto Rico was, but, prior to that, nobody knew where Puerto Rico was. Plus, ... in those years, it was an immigrant [nation]. Most communities were full of immigrants. So, it didn't matter where you were from, but if you'd asked people where Puerto Rico was they wouldn't know. It was like [the] outbreak of World War II, when ... you were told they bombed Pearl Harbor. People would say, ... "Where the heck is Pearl Harbor? Where's Hawaii?" So, my mother didn't have any of that racial bias, or the prejudices that existed against some immigrants ... that still exist today.

SH: Your mother came to New York because of your father, because she was engaged.

RP: Correct.

SH: Did she marry your father in New York?

RP: In New York City, in a civil ceremony.

HA: Did your grandfather go to the ceremony?

RP: No, no.

SH: Did any of her family come from Ponce?

RP: Her family was already here. Her sisters; ... I only remember two of ... my aunts, two of her sisters, because they lived right in the neighborhood where we lived, and they were at the wedding.

SH: Where did your mother fit in with these eleven children?

RP: She was number eight.

SH: She was almost one of the babies.

RP: Yes, yes. ... You know, I can give you the names of all her siblings, but I'd have to look.

SH: You can add that later.

RP: I can add that later, okay, and most of them died, I think, a few of them died, at an early age and I'm not so sure that they had children. I know, when I visit Puerto Rico, I don't have any of her ... sisters [who] are living. So, I really have very little information about [them].

SH: I was just wondering if she came to their home, her sister's, and renewed her friendship with your father, or did she come specifically to marry your father?

RP: No, she came to New York City to marry my dad, yes.

SH: What about your mother's educational background?

RP: My mother was not an educated woman. ... As a matter-of-fact, my mother never even worked. She never had a job in her life. She grew up in Puerto Rico. As a young lady I'm not sure if finished high school, but again, being a Spanish lady, she learned the social graces, how to cook and take care of the house, but never held a job, and, throughout her life, she never held a job. No, my father was the only wage earner.

SH: Did your father and mother encourage you and your brothers to go on to higher education?

RP: Oh, absolutely.

SH: That was important.

RP: Yes. ... My dad came to this country, he had been all around the world, he knew what existed in all those other countries and he loved America. My father was a real, true patriot. I mean, the one thing he emphasized for his four boys; first of all, I think, one of the reasons I grew up not learning many of the languages is because he wanted us to speak English, and he learned all about American history. He took us to the library. He would talk to us in the evenings, at dinnertime, about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and everything, you

know, stuff like that. So, he was really a real American and, like many immigrants, I guess, certainly in those days, and probably during World War II and after World War II, when the immigrants, when the refugees came they learned and assimilated into American society. So, the emphasis was on being American.

SH: Did he ever talk about becoming a naturalized citizen?

RP: Oh, he was a citizen.

SH: No, I meant, did he talk about that at all, when he decided to do that, did he do it right away?

RP: I don't know. I would think that he probably did it right away, because of his outlook on coming to this country. I could probably give you that information.

SH: I was just curious. He did not need to take courses to learn the language, like many immigrants did.

RP: Right.

SH: Sometimes, in teaching English, they also learn American history, prior to becoming naturalized citizens. It is very interesting that he had this interest in American history and passed it on to you.

RP: ... He was always interested in history, no matter what country he visited. I mean, he could tell us, ... when he talked to us about, for example, George Washington, he would relate George Washington's exploits to [Giuseppe] Garibaldi, who was the patriot and a soldier of Italy. So the correlation was always there. ... It made it much easier for him to talk about it by relating it to somebody in Mexico, somebody in South America.

SH: He sounds like a wonderful man.

RP: Oh, he was a great guy. Yes, he was a great guy.

SH: Talk to us about your earliest memories, as a young boy, of growing up in Manhattan.

RP: Well, I'll tell you, I had a wonderful childhood, and, unfortunately, things changed in the city. I think it's a wonderful experience, growing up in the city, in almost any urban area, but especially New York City. I mean, I love New York City. I've been through a great many major cities of the world and I don't think any of them compare to New York City. My childhood, I mean, we could run around in the streets and we had no organized sports activities, like you have today. We had the PAL [Police Athletic League], but we didn't need those. ... I grew up in an apartment house. It was four families on each floor. It was a five-floor apartment, so, that was twenty apartments. Each apartment had an immigrant family, with a gang of kids, and we had Jews and Irish and Italians and Greeks. Our doors were always wide open. You could walk ... into the vestibule of my apartment house and you'd [smell] all these ethnic flavors ... coming

from the kitchens and everybody knew each other on a first name basis. The doors were always open. There was never any fear of people coming in and burglarizing your house or some pedophile, or anything like that. So, it was a wonderful experience. I went to public schools. Of course, I had three brothers. I had two older brothers and my twin brother. So, my twin brother and I always had ... friends. I mean, we had friends in the apartment building. If I didn't like the kids in my apartment building, I'd go around the corner and there was another five-story building with another twenty families and they had a gang of kids. ... You never had to leave your block, which was nice. Living in the city, you could ... walk to the movie house. ... We didn't have any malls, but you could walk to the stores. There was always a fruit and vegetable store and a shoemaker and the grocery store, unlike here, living in the suburbs. I mean, the only reason I left New York City was because, actually, I was forced out. ... I had three daughters. You don't want to grow up in a city being surrounded by a lot of projects and unsavory characters, and with three daughters, or even with three sons; it doesn't matter. So, I was kind of forced ... to leave New York City, which I hated, because I think the experience for my children, growing up in the city, would have been wonderful. I always allowed my children to visit New York City at an early age. I always gave them instructions on what to do, where to go, who to see. They always knew that the policeman was always their friend. I always ... gave them directions on the subway and the bus, and, as teenagers I would let them go. The three girls would all go by themselves and take care of each other. So, they're pretty savvy today going into New York City. I find, living in these communities the suburbs are nice, it's a great place to grow up, the educational system is good, you've got the parks, you've got the libraries, but, somehow, there's something missing, not growing up in the city.

SH: You lose those street smarts.

RP: You could take some of these kids and drop them off in New York City and they'd be lost. They just wouldn't know how to cope because kids in New York City are very smart, very streetwise. ... They can take care of themselves.

SH: What were some of the games that you played?

RP: Oh, the games, yes, all right, games that I don't think they play today, maybe. Maybe they still do in New York City, I'm not so sure about that, but we had things called kick-the-can. Are you familiar with kick-the-can? It was just a can that we took out of the garbage and ... we drew a circle in the street and the can would be placed in the circle and we'd split up the kids [into] two sides; "A" side and "B" side, or "my side" and "your side," and the idea was to kick this can and you would have a guard, almost like a goalie, who would protect the can and, as you approached, to try to kick the can, your other partner would come around, up the backside, so that he wouldn't see them, but, of course, he had people on his side. So, he was the goalie, but he had people that were [protecting him], and the idea was to kick the can as many times as you could in the course of [the game]. Whoever kicked the can five times would be the winner. Then, we had Johnny-ride-the-pony. Johnny-ride-the-pony was, you had sides and you had to get up against the wall. It was something like this. [Editor's Note: Mr. Paoli demonstrates.] You get up against the building like this, and then, all your teammates would be behind you and the other guys would have to jump on top.

HA: Over them?

RP: No, on top, and, if you fell down, you lost. [laughter] So, we always had the fattest and the strongest kids on the bottom, you know. ...

SH: Just for the record, I want to describe that Mr. Paoli showed us that you put your head down and you anchor yourself against the wall, and then, your teammates line up behind you.

RP: Correct. ... Of course, we played a lot of roller hockey, on roller skates. In those days roller skates were a big item for most young people and we would play hockey in the street. I was usually the goalie, only because I can't skate backwards. So, I would just [be goalie]. We didn't have ice or any place to play ice hockey, so, we played it in the streets, and most of our games were ... always played in the streets, on the sidewalks. Playing in the street is not the best way to do things, because of the traffic. You always have to stop because there's a car coming, but those were the devices that we were left with and we just coped. We did the best. We played a lot of stickball; one sewer, two sewers, three sewers. I guess you know what I'm talking about, but, in any event, stickball was a game with a Spaldeen [a common term for the ball used in these games, a corruption of Spalding, the name of the manufacturer]. It's a pink, rubber ball, which bounces very high, and we would use a broomstick. We'd get an old mop or a broomstick and remove the whiskers, I guess, or the brush from the broomstick. I remember, when I was a kid, the police always confiscated our sticks. Quite frankly, I think it's because the police, in those days, really didn't have a great deal to do. [laughter] I mean, there were no so-called gangs or drugs. ... There was always a policeman walking the beat, unlike today, ... where everybody's in a car. So, I mean, the car goes down this way and the burglar is on the other side, you know. [laughter] In those days, a policeman actually walked the beat. So, he knew all the merchants, he knew who all the wise guys were on the streets, he knew all the business people, and, in those days, you could talk to the policeman. ... I guess the worst thing that could happen to you was that, ... "Mike is always climbing over my fence," and the policeman would say, "Okay, Mikey you have to stop doing that," but that was the worst thing, I think. Policemen didn't have a great deal to do. So, I think that's [why]. ... They were probably trying to protect us, also, from the traffic. By confiscating our broomsticks, it kept us from playing in the street, but I remember, once, my brother and I climbed into the 34th Precinct, police precinct, to steal all the broomsticks that they confiscated from us. ... We actually went around, the police station was on 182nd Street and Wadsworth Avenue, and we went around, my brother was the lookout, I remember, and I went around and climbed this ladder, and they had a platform and they had hundreds and hundreds of these broomsticks. So, I just kept grabbing them and dropping them down and my brother would catch them. Of course, we were caught by the police.

SH: You were up on a fire escape or something.

RP: It was like a fire escape. It was a fire escape, as a matter-of-fact, and they took us inside and they rapped us on the behind, with their hands, and we cried. I mean, we were, I don't know, we were teenagers, I think, but very young teenagers, probably just about thirteen, and I was very afraid that they were going to call my parents and they would have died, but they didn't. They just reprimanded us and slapped us on the behind and my brother and I went home, and so, we never did that again. ...

SH: Did you tell your parents?

RP: No, no. [laughter]

SH: What about your older brothers? How far in age are you apart?

RP: My brother, Joe, is six years older than I. Growing up, we didn't have a great deal in common with my two older brothers, because they were older and you know how older brothers are. They were hanging out with girls. ... Even as teenagers, they didn't want anything to do with us and we had our own friends anyway and they had theirs.

SH: There were the two of you, twins, left to your own devices, I am sure.

RP: Yes.

SH: There is six years between you and the older brother.

RP: No, next oldest, and eight years difference from my oldest brother. Now, my brother, my oldest brother, Arnold, he was the one that probably gave my mother and father the most trouble. He had a mind of his own. He was very independent. If he was told that curfew was midnight he would walk in at one o'clock. He knew very well that he was an hour late, but he was ready to take his punishment, and he would do the same thing every night. ... The following weekend, he'd say, "Yes, Mom, I'll be home at midnight," and he'd come in at two o'clock, and he'd take his punishment, but that's the way he was. ... He never graduated from high school, because, when he was seventeen years old, in October of 1943; I guess that's right. He was born in 1926, okay. So, he was seventeen years old, in high school, and [in] '43, and he wanted to go into the military and my father said, "No, that's crazy. You're too young, first of all. You're going to finish high school next year. You'll be eighteen, and then, we can consider it at that time." My father was hoping that the war would be over by then. My brother, Arnold, insisted on joining the military and he said that if my father didn't sign the papers, because you had to sign the papers, if you were under eighteen, that he would run away from home and go Upstate or [to] another state and just join enlist, tell them that he was eighteen, which a lot of kids did in those days. ... Being the way my brother was, with a mind of his own, he definitely would have done that. So, my mother said, "Listen, let's sign the papers. At least we'll know where he is. We could correspond with him and everything." So, they hated doing it, but they did. Anyway, at seventeen years old, here he is, in 1943, October 1943; June 6, 1944, which is, like, five months later or six months later, he's Day One at Omaha Beach, on D-Day. He was in the Navy. He was assigned to what they call LSTs. Those are landing ships transports [tanks], and what they did was, they would transport ... all the men, the armament and, ... equipment from the ships to the beach, drop everybody off and go back out again and come back make all these runs. He's like a great many of our veterans today, especially the so-called "Greatest Generation" veterans, ... they never talked about their experiences. They're starting to talk about their experiences now, I think because of the [films]: *The Longest Day*, *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*. They're opening up a great deal more now and there's a lot of people out there asking questions about these veterans, because they're dying at fifteen hundred a day. Another ten years I don't

know if there's anybody going to be left from the ... so-called "Greatest Generation." So, he saw ... a great deal of action, but he never talked about it, and, when he left the European Theater, he went to the Pacific, was assigned to a destroyer and saw a lot of action, a lot of major battles in the Pacific, and even came under attack with the *kamikazes*. He was never wounded and it was quite an experience, I'm sure.

SH: To back up a little bit, what do you remember about Pearl Harbor?

RP: Well, ... let's see, I was seven years old, on Pearl Harbor [Day].

SH: Do you remember?

RP: ... You know, quite frankly, I don't. I remember, everybody in my house was worried and crying, because we went into the war, because Pearl Harbor was bombed. I didn't know what Pearl Harbor was and I said, "War?" ... You know, as a kid, I always played war games, so, I thought it was, "Oh, this is neat. This is the real thing," [laughter] and then, when my brother went in the military, I said, "Oh, boy," I said, "I've got a brother over there. He's going to kill all those Nazis and those Japs." I never dreamed that my brother may not come back. ... In the house that I grew up in, a lot of my neighbors' children were in the war, and I can remember, my mother used to send me downstairs; I would come home from school and the postman would always bring the mail at about three-thirty in the afternoon. ... My mother would always send me downstairs to get the mail and I'd be downstairs with all of my neighbors, who were also collecting the mail. Normally, we wouldn't worry about going downstairs and getting the mail. We would get the mail whenever we wanted to, or had to, or whenever we had a chance to, but, because of the war, everybody was afraid of receiving one of those letters with, "Sorry to inform you that your son or husband," or whatever, and, sure enough, I witnessed some of that. Not a lot of that, but I remember ... Mrs. Dennin, who lived upstairs, who had six children. Her oldest son was in the Navy and he was killed and she got this telegram. I mean, she didn't even have to open it up. She just [knew], and everybody just cried and it was terrible, and then, the DeVivo Family, an Italian family downstairs, they had five sons who were all in the war and three of them were severely wounded. So, their letter was a little bit different. One was missing-in-action, only because when he was picked up on the beach, and was sent to a military hospital in London and nobody really knew where he was. So, he was listed as missing, but, then, another follow-up letter came that said he's recovering from his wounds, but there was a family of five sons, all in the military, and they all came home, except the one person recovering from his wounds, was the only one that was wounded, but the others all came home. They were all in the Army.

SH: Did this perhaps influence your brother's decision to want to get into the military, living in this close proximity to each other, knowing that there were so many kids going in?

RP: No, I think my brother was just a wise guy. He thought he was a tough guy and he said, "There is a war on and I'm going to get in it and do what I can." I think that was it, and many of his friends from school were drafted. When you grow up in the urban areas, I remember I was drafted. When I was drafted, I was nineteen years old and I was drafted with fifty other guys, guys that I went to high school with, kids that I grew up with in the neighborhood. We were all

drafted. ... Conscription was the law and that's what we did. Some of us decided not to be drafted, because that meant you were going in the Army. They didn't want to go in the Army, so, some joined the Air Force, some joined the Marines, some joined the Navy. My brother always liked ships, for some reason. I asked him once, "Why the Navy?" I would never dream of joining the Navy. I could certainly walk farther than I could swim [laughter] and being out there in the middle of the ocean, I mean, what happens if you fall into the sea? So, I was glad I was drafted. I'm not glad I was drafted, but ... I knew I was going in the Army, which I preferred anyway.

SH: Do you know which destroyer your brother was on?

RP: One of them was the USS *Oglethorpe* [(AKA-100), an *Andromeda*-class amphibious cargo ship]. I remember being in grammar school and we were talking about the [Revolutionary War], in our, I guess, today, it's called social studies class, but, in those days, I think it was called civics, and we were studying about the Revolutionary War and I remember this General Oglethorpe, who was an English general, and, somehow, ... he was the opposing general during the Revolutionary War, against, I guess, George Washington, you know, General Washington. ... When the teacher said, "Oglethorpe," I raised my hand. She said, "Yes, Robert?" I said, "My brother's on the USS *Oglethorpe*." I remember that very clearly. [laughter] ... Who cared? but, I mean ...

SH: I think that is a great story. That is one of the questions that we usually ask, is what did you see? You talked about the mail and how it impacted the family, but were you also being asked to buy stamps or war bonds?

RP: Oh, yes. I don't have a very good memory for a great many things of my childhood. I can tell you that, during the war years, ... I have an excellent memory of what happened during World War II. My father, of course, worked in the shipyards, like many of the neighbors, the neighborhood people, all worked in the shipyards. I can tell you that many of the housewives didn't go to work, because we all had large families. So, ... they stayed home with the children. If they had an older daughter, who was already out of high school, she worked in the shipyards, as welders, ... you know the story about that, they're welders or whatever, and many of them joined the military, ... in the nurse corps. I remember air raid wardens. Mr. Triantefelides was the Greek immigrant, he was in charge of the air raid warden [duty]. He was the air raid warden in our building. At nighttime, we had to draw the curtains and keep the lights down to a minimum, because of the air raids, and Mr. Triantefelides ... the bells would go off, there was an air raid. We didn't know if it was the real thing or not, but everybody would run downstairs to the basement. Mr. Triantefelides would come out with his air warden hat, this steel helmet, and he could hardly speak English, but we knew what we had to do. I was very involved in school projects. I remember, my brother and I used to stand at gas stations and gas was rationed in those days, of course, but what we did was, when the cars pulled in, we would ask them to give us their rubber mats on the floor boards, and that all went towards the war effort. We had victory gardens. Right across the street from us, we had several empty lots and we would clear the lots of the tin cans and the growth and the bushes and broken glass and whatever, and make victory gardens, and we grew tomatoes and lettuce. I remember, my brother and I, we'd walk the streets of Manhattan, from Washington Heights all the way down to the tip of Harlem. My brother and

I would walk down one side of the street and we would go into all the litter baskets and look along the curbs and pick up cigarette packs and the cigarette packs came, they were lined with silver [tin foil], and we would take those home, throw all these packs into the bathtub and remove the silver and roll them up in a ball. We'd walk down one side of Broadway and up the other side.

HA: Wow.

RP: I mean, you talk about giving to the war effort. I mean, at the end of the day, we had this much silver. [laughter]

SH: About a six-inch ball.

RP: I don't even know why we did it. It really wasn't worth it, but it was ingrained in our minds, that this is what you had to do. There was a unity in those days that was so great. I don't think it exists in our country today, even with the conflict going on. I think the problem today is that we have a volunteer military. You could go down the street and ask anybody, "Well, do you support the war?" Now, they'll tell you, "No, of course not," and nobody does, but they support the military. They're glad that there's a volunteer military, because it means that their sons and grandchildren don't have to go. See, now, I'm different. I'd love to see the draft again. Now, I have eight grandchildren, I have two grandsons, which would mean that they would be drafted. I mean, it's easy for me to say this, I guess, because I wasn't a combat veteran, it was a peacetime army. The Cold War was the biggest thing that we had to worry about. So, I guess it's easy for me to say this, but I learned a lot as a nineteen-year-old kid. I'd never been out of New York City, I'd never met anybody from the South, I didn't bunk next to a black person. So, the experience was excellent, and I think that's missing today and I think you would find that that would be a great experience and I would make the draft include the women. Nobody would be exempt, and I don't see why an American young person can't give up two years of his life towards service for his country. Now, you can ... have certain exemptions. Okay, maybe the person that you draft has a certain expertise in nursing; all right, so you put him in the nursing corps, or maybe they could go to Africa and build houses, but I think the service to their country, for two years, is not a lot to ask when you live to be eighty years old, and I think the experience would be wonderful, but it's hard to do that today. You ask people to do that today, they'd say, "What are you, nuts? I'm not sending my [kids]." I mean, I have eight grandchildren, six granddaughters. I'm sorry, they would go. I mean, that's the way I feel about it. My daughters would probably kill me [laughter] if they heard that and nobody would be exempt. There's no such thing as going off to college and getting [an exemption], you know. I'm sorry, you go, but that's me.

SH: To go back to your next oldest brother ...

RP: Joseph.

SH: Joseph. Did he join the military as well?

RP: He went. He was drafted. Actually, my brother, Joe, and I were both drafted together. My brother, Joe, was drafted. ... He's six years older than me. In those days, when you were drafted, you were probably in your early twenties. It was unusual for a draftee at nineteen years old. The reason I was drafted was because, when my brother, Joe, went in the military, when he was drafted, I said, "You know what? Maybe I should do the same thing." I said, "Well, I'm not going to go out and get a job for two, three years, and then, get this notice and disrupt my whole life. Let me get this thing over with now." So, I went down to the draft board and I said, "Well, you took my brother, Joe; I'd like to go with him." So, we went to basic training together at Fort Dix.

SH: Did you really?

RP: Yes, and, being my older brother, of course, he still pushed me around and disciplined me and then, ... when we finished training at Fort Dix, he went to Fort Eustis, Virginia, because, before he was drafted, he worked, he was a merchant seaman. So, he had a lot of experience on ships and Fort Eustis, Virginia, is a big Army base, but for maritime [training], these so-called landing ships that are manned by sailors or soldiers who have ... this maritime training, which my brother had, but he stayed in the States. He never went overseas, and I went to Germany. The scuttlebutt was that I was supposed to go to Korea, because this was 1954 and the Korean War had just ended, in '53, late 1953. So, the scuttlebutt was, we were going to Korea and relieve the men coming back, but I never got there. I went to Germany and I loved it, got a chance to travel. ... I was a pretty good soldier and I didn't mind the experience at all.

HA: Where did you get a chance to travel to?

RP: Oh, my God, I went to Italy, I went to Denmark, I went to Holland. Well, I went to Copenhagen, Rome, Amsterdam, throughout all of Germany, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Rome.

SH: Where were you stationed in Germany?

RP: I was stationed in a place called Ulm, U-L-M, Ulm. The only significant part of Ulm is that it's the birthplace of Albert Einstein and it's in, I guess, Central Germany. It was a big Army base there, but in the '50s, all of Germany was Army bases.

SH: What specifically were your duties there? We are jumping ahead.

RP: No, that's all right, no. Fifty percent of the time that I was in Germany was spent on maneuvers. You have to remember, the Cold War was on. I was part of the Seventh Army. The Seventh Army was delegated, by General Eisenhower, to be the army that would repel the Russians, if it ever came to that. The Russians, of course, were expanding into Eastern Europe and, gradually, going into all these countries. So, a great deal of our time was spent on maneuvers, just putting into effect what we were trained to do. I was a squad leader for a small weapons platoon. It was very cold in Germany. ... Most of our maneuvers were held in a place called Hohenfels, which was extremely, bitterly cold, in the winter, of course. ... I saw a lot of men get frostbite, but, most of the time, it was just through dereliction. I mean, they just didn't

pay attention. They would go to the field without proper clothes. The extremities were very important to keep warm, your fingers, your nose, your ears and some of them were just careless. Some of them would sit on ... the fender of a truck and they found themselves [stuck], they couldn't get off the damn thing, because their behinds were frozen to the fender. There were times when it was so cold and bitter that I wished I was home. [laughter] ...

HA: What kind of impression did you have of the locals there? Did you get to mingle?

RP: I did get to mingle with a lot of locals, and most of the locals, the elderly locals, I think, were glad that the war was over. I think they pretty much appreciated the American GIs there. They probably had siblings or relatives that were killed, but nevertheless, they understood what war was, because they were much older. I found that the young people ... that I encountered ...

HA: By young, do you mean teenagers?

RP: Teenagers, teenagers, young toughs, did not like Americans and they were bitter about the war. Maybe their fathers were killed, or their uncles or something I'm not so sure.

HA: Were there any fights or anything?

RP: Well, yes, there was. ... We were always told, when we went into town to always travel in pairs and "Stay out of the saloons. I mean, go in and have a drink, but ... be careful. Keep your eye on your clock. Try to be back in the barracks before midnight." But, yes, we would leave a saloon and there'd be ten, twelve, fifteen young toughs outside, waiting for us, and we didn't encounter any fighting, a lot of heckling, but we stayed away from them. We didn't; I mean, I didn't, and the people that I traveled with, but, the next day, we always heard stories about guys that said, "What did you say? Are you talking to me?" you know, probably from New York, who knows? [laughter] but, no, I never did that.

HA: Did anybody make any effort to try to bridge the gap between the Germans and the Americans, because of the Cold War, that there was this greater common enemy now?

RP: Well, I'm sure that went on, but it certainly ... wasn't the foot soldier. It wasn't me.

HA: But ...

RP: You know, the hierarchy ...

HA: They were trying to enforce this, but it did not really go down the ranks.

RP: ... The hierarchy had units, community relations, that would go out into the communities and, I guess, try to have an appeasement kind of attitude, "Listen the war is over. Let's get along now. We both lost people on both sides. Is there something we could do?" ... We would help them with the infrastructure because was there 1954. That's only nine years after the war. Outside of the major cities, like Berlin, which were being reconstructed, most of these other

areas, outside the big cities, were still devastated. ... There weren't any roads and hospitals or schools. They were all destroyed.

SH: You saw that.

RP: Yes, I saw that. I saw that destruction.

HA: How did the Germans talk about Hitler? Was it just like it never happened? Did you ever see anyone speak highly of him?

RP: I have to tell you the truth. My experiences with the locals [laughter] were mostly with the *frauliens*. Let's face it, I was nineteen years old, I was single, my God. I'd go to a *gasthaus*, which is a saloon, and it's sad, because these young ladies, the only way they could make a living or to provide for themselves was the GIs, and we didn't talk about Hitler and the war, anything like that. We talked about, "How much do you want? Where do we go?" [laughter]

SH: Were there men who were marrying the young women?

RP: Yes. We had a few that married young German girls. We were told, when we got overseas, we had a lot of these sessions with our upper, ... the sergeants and the lieutenants, that told us what the proper behavior was. ... Many of these young ladies were looking for marriage, to come to the United States. Invariably, what happened, ... they had too many divorces. The girls would come to the United States, become citizens, and the first thing they did was get divorced and go out on their own. So, the GIs had to be very careful. We found that most of the GIs who got married were young, probably never had girlfriends, and then, there were those who were just beguiled by these ladies and got married. I'm sure many of them did fall in love with each other, and probably had stable marriages. It's not uncommon. It happened with the English ladies, and I'm sure it happened with Japanese ladies, and, certainly, with the German ladies.

SH: There were no non-fraternization rules.

RP: No, no. We were just told to be careful, yes.

SH: When you would go off the base, out into the community, you said you had to go in pairs. What about the economy? Were you given US dollars? What did you use?

RP: No, we used German *marks*?

SH: You used *marks*.

RP: We had to use *marks*. I'm not so sure why. I think, probably, at that time, because of the German economy, I guess the only way to build it up is to reinforce and strengthen their own currency. I was in a small town. Ulm is a very small town. They had a very large cathedral there. Like most of these small towns in Europe, the largest structure in those towns is the cathedral, and they're magnificent. I mean, they go back many hundreds of years.

SH: What months were you there in Germany? Obviously, you were there in the winter.

RP: I was there from May 1954 until April 1956.

SH: You actually had a two-year tour there.

RP: Two-year tour.

HA: Did you get to go back to the States at any point?

RP: No.

HA: Did you keep in touch with your family?

RP: Oh, sure, letters, and no phone calls. I never made any phone calls, because it was expensive, but letters. I used to write once a week, to my mom or my sister or my brothers. My mother used to send me packages and she would get a loaf of rye bread, slice it in half and cut out all the bread from inside, so that it was hollow on both ends, and she'd insert a bottle of whiskey [laughter] and close it up, tape it, and that was part of the package. ... I was always good to get one of those once a month, and I'd pass it around to the guys in the barracks. I always remember that.

SH: You had barracks.

RP: Oh, we lived in barracks, very nice barracks. Yes, we were billeted in barracks. We slept, I think, six to a room. We had our bunk beds. It was like any other Army installation. It was an installation that was built for the GIs. ...

SH: It was new.

RP: It was new. It wasn't a leftover ... from the German barracks. We had a parade ground. We had a lot of parades, we had a lot of maneuvers, on the base, as well as off the base. Now, when we went off the base, it was usually in a place called Hohenfels, which was very mountainous, very hilly, very rocky.

SH: Were these maneuvers only with US troops?

RP: No. There were times when we had a massive operation with NATO troops.

SH: I was just going to ask you that.

RP: Yes, the French, the Canadians. I guess they were the two largest that I remember, the French and the Canadians. Let's see, Italy wasn't involved, and the Austrians, no. I mean most of those other countries were so devastated themselves that they didn't even have much of an army to go on. The French, we'd get a lot with the French. I guess they still had an army, and the Canadians, of course.

SH: Were any of the Scandinavian countries involved?

RP: I don't remember the Scandinavian countries being involved at all, no.

SH: There were a lot of hot spots, because, as you said, Germany, the war is over there, but the Russians are still expanding.

RP: Yes.

SH: Berlin is isolated.

RP: Correct, right.

SH: After the treaty, that became East Germany, under Russian control. What about interaction with the Russians?

RP: No, I never had any interaction with the Russians. I never saw them.

SH: There were a lot of hot spots.

RP: If you were a GI based in Berlin, which was cut up into the four sections, the British, French and Americans, and the Russians, your interaction with them was probably; it was probably a hot spot, somewhat like the North Koreans and South Koreans, you know, right across the border from each other, but not where I was.

SH: Were you restricted in where you could go in Europe?

RP: No, no. We could apply for leave. We weren't able to go to those countries that were dominated by Russia, Hungary, Romania ...

SH: Czechoslovakia.

RP: Czechoslovakia, thank you. We weren't allowed to go there, because ... you'd become too vulnerable to be kidnapped, become a pawn for the Russian propaganda, things like that.

SH: There were hot spots during this time period as well.

RP: Well, the only "hot spots," really, was the fact that we never knew when the real thing was coming. I mean, ... they would ring an alarm in the middle of the night and you'd get up and grab your pack and grab your weapon and jump on a truck. We all knew where we had to report to, and we didn't know if this was the real thing or not. We didn't know just how close the Russians were coming or what was going to happen. So, that was the only thing that was "hot" about it.

SH: What about nuclear weapons? Were there any missiles or anything like that?

RP: I never saw them.

HA: How were the relationships between the ranks?

RP: The ranks? Well there's the private, and then, of course, there's the sergeant, and then, there's the lieutenant and captain. So, you had the hierarchy and you had, the superiors and the ones underneath. The relationship was quite good, actually, I mean, from my experience. We all knew what we needed to do. We were well-trained. ... I was always ready for any contingency that I had to do. I never had any problems.

SH: You went straight from Dix to Germany.

RP: Germany, yes. I went on, by ship. It took me ten days to cross the Atlantic. I left December 15, 1954, and got to Bremerhaven, Germany, on Christmas Day, spent Christmas Day onboard ship, playing, we played Monopoly, I think. [laughter] That's how we passed the time. When I was in Germany, I was delegated ... to go to a special leadership school. It was a six-week training course. It was kind of like a mini-West Point. I mean, there was a lot of discipline, a lot of map reading courses, how to survive on your own in the wilderness, in the forest, advanced military tactics and those kinds of things, and I was quite glad that they sent me, because I was a private and privates do all the work the KP, the guard duty and all that stuff. ...

HA: On what basis were the candidates selected?

RP: Oh, I'm not sure. I think they just felt that I ... had, maybe, some leadership qualities. I mean, I was only nineteen. ... I was one of the youngest people in the, battalion or the platoon that I was part of. Like I said, when most of these guys were drafted, they were already in their twenties. Who knows? I'm not sure. I was called into the Captain's office one day and he said, "Robert, we want you to go here. Would you like to do that?" I said, "Sure, why not?" So, it meant an extra stripe, which made me a corporal. So, I was corporal of the guard. I would say, "You go there and you go there," [laughter] and I'd go back inside and have a cup of tea or something. So, that helped, but it wasn't easy. Those six weeks were quite hard.

HA: Did a lot of people not make it through?

RP: Oh, yes, some people didn't make it. It was in a place called Schwabach, Germany, and, like I said, it was like West Point. You sit down and you're told when to take your cup and when to drink, when to get up, when to sit down. Your closet, with your clothes in it, ... everything had to be faced one way and your shoes always had to be spit-and-polished. I think, probably, it was a recruiting device, hoping that if you had a class of, let's say a hundred, if you could get five percent of these guys to reenlist that would be good for the military, ... because draftees, you know, they come and they go. Two years, bingo, they're out of there. ... They've got the GI Bill, they're going to college. They don't want any part of this, but, if you can get five percent of these hundred guys, that's a pretty good ratio.

HA: Did you ever consider a career in the military?

RP: No.

SH: Was this school segregated or integrated?

RP: Oh, no, it was integrated. Oh, yes, 1950, it was already integrated.

SH: I know that it was, but, sometimes ...

RP: Oh, no, no, it was integrated, yes, sure.

HA: Was there any racial tension between the men?

RP: None. I never experienced that at all.

SH: What about on the base at Ulm?

RP: No, never. The only thing that was segregated was, there were certain parts of town, when you went into town, if you wanted to visit a *gasthaus*, ... some of these *gasthaus* were just for blacks, ... not that they were appointed just for blacks. It's just that when you went in there, you were surrounded by blacks. So, you didn't bother going in there. You went to the [other *gasthaus*]. The blacks were very well-liked by the German ladies. I'm not ... so sure I know why, but the black soldiers in Germany didn't lack any company. I mean, they could go into town, just like I would, as a white soldier, and have the company of a lady and have drinks and have a dinner. ... I remember, one night, I was delegated CP, meaning courtesy patrol, and we had a jeep and there were two of us in the jeep and we would visit all these *gasthouses* in town, or patrol the streets. If we saw a GI that was perhaps drunk or something, we'd put him in the jeep, take him back to the base, before he got mugged or robbed or whatever. ... I would visit some of these *gasthouses* and me and my white partner would walk into this saloon that was all full of black GIs. Sometimes, we were hissed [at] and called, "Whitey, get out of here. We'll take care of our own," something like that. So, we would just turn around and leave let the MPs worry about that if there's any trouble. I was there strictly to say, "How you doing? You need help? You want me to take you back?" and that was it. That was the only segregation I saw, but on the base when you went to mess hall, you sat down with them. ... I'm not so sure why this happens, but I'm sure it's still the same today. I know, in the local Ridgewood High School, Asians seem to sit with Asians, the blacks still sit with the blacks, Hispanics still sit with the Hispanics. ... Maybe they just feel more comfortable, maybe, culturally, they have ... something more in common with each other. I think it's a mistake when that happens. I mean, you can't force people to sit with others. They gravitate to their own kind or, ... whoever they're socially engaged with, but I think that's probably something that's never going to end.

SH: When you went to Fort Dix from New York, was that the first time that you had really been out of New York City?

RP: First time. I had walked across the George Washington Bridge, I think, when I was with the Boy Scouts, which brought me into ... another state. Yes, that was the first time.

SH: To get to go to Europe and do all this traveling must have been marvelous.

RP: It was marvelous.

SH: Did you travel alone when you went visiting?

RP: Alone, yes. When I went to Italy, I went with another [GI], a friend of mine, whose name was Rosario Palermo, and he was from Leominster, Massachusetts, very fluent in Italian. I said, "Well, I've got to go to Italy with this guy," and so, we had a grand time in Rome and he spoke the language, of course, ... but the other times, when I visited Amsterdam, I was alone. Amsterdam was a safe city to go to. Most of the cities I went to, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, [were safe]. My experience in Copenhagen was funny. ... I had been to Copenhagen just recently, about three years ago, and it's changed a great deal from the time I was there in 1955. In 1955, Copenhagen was a; let's see, how can I put it? It was a refuge, maybe, or a city for military people, and I remember, as a soldier, I would go to Copenhagen and there'd be hundreds of other soldiers and airmen who came from all over Europe, and I'd meet them in the bars or at a restaurant.

SH: Tivoli Gardens.

RP: Tivoli Gardens, exactly. As a matter-of-fact, I fell in love in Tivoli Gardens. Her name was Asa Hansen. I met her at Tivoli Gardens and we had a wonderful time. I was still only nineteen and I thought I was in love with her, and I'm sure I was at that time. ... Thank God I had enough sense not to marry this girl. I'm not so sure it would have been a mistake, but like I said earlier, when you're nineteen and there was this blue-eyed blonde, ... you know, I went ga-ga. [laughter]

SH: There were so many American GIs in Europe at the time and places for them to go. Did you go to Paris at all?

RP: No, I did not.

SH: Ironically, I hear that often. Was there any reason that you did not go to Paris or to England?

RP: No, no.

SH: Did you take military transport or the trains?

RP: No, ... I took public transport. Public transportation in Europe was quite good. I'll tell you what we did, though. ... I traveled on the train. I went to Italy, and I would buy the cheapest ticket they had and I'd get on the train and the first thing I would do was head to first class, and you know how the trains are? The ... conductor would come by and open up the doors, he'd ask for your ticket, but I'd close the doors and lock it, and he'd [Mr. Paoli imitates the conductor knocking], and I just wouldn't answer him and he'd be speaking to me in Italian. ... I knew what

he wanted, but I'd act stupid. I did the same thing throughout Germany and I did the same thing when I went to ... Amsterdam, Holland.

HA: Were you in uniform?

RP: I was in uniform.

HA: Did different people react differently to you?

RP: I always found traveling in uniform was better for me, I think, probably, for two reasons. One, I wanted them to know that I was an American soldier. I don't know, maybe I felt that I deserved better service or greater respect, I don't know, but I felt that way. I didn't have that many civilian clothes to begin with. So, traveling as a GI was always better. It was a good pick-me-upper too. [laughter] ... Traveling as a GI, I got a lot of thank yous from civilian populations. Even though I didn't speak the language, I could tell that they were very sincere in their gratitude for what we did liberating them from the war. When I was in Amsterdam, I met a girl. Again, I've fallen in love with all these girls everywhere I travel, [laughter] and I spent all my money and I extended my leave, which was a no-no, and I didn't have any money to get back to base in Germany. ... I had borrowed a friend's very expensive camera and I hocked it. So, now, I had to go back. I had no money. I had to go to the American Embassy, told them I didn't have any money. They gave me transportation back to my base. I arrived at my base two days late. I was a corporal. They took a stripe away from me, and then, I got that back shortly afterwards, and they disciplined me ... for running out of money, and then, I had to face this big Dutchman, who was about six-foot tall, and explain to him why I hocked his camera, [laughter] but he was very understanding and I bought him another camera, ... but I always remember that.

SH: That would be something that you would remember. How did you redeem yourself and get your corporal's stripe back?

RP: Oh, I was just a good boy. ... I knew I was getting it back, but I didn't have the privilege of wearing that extra stripe for about six months, I think it was.

SH: You were not put in the brig or anything.

RP: Oh, no, no. Stockade, actually, it would be called a stockade.

SH: I have the wrong branch.

RP: Right, wrong unit.

SH: What were you planning to do? You said you did not consider staying in the military. What were you planning to do when you came back?

RP: I had no idea. One of the regrets I have in my life is probably not taking advantage of the GI Bill of Rights. When I got home, I was just twenty-one. I didn't know what direction my life was going to take.

SH: Did your brother get home at the same time, since you went in together?

RP: Oh, yes, yes. We both were discharged together, yes.

SH: Did he stay in the Merchant Marines?

RP: No. I'm trying to remember. When he came back, no, he didn't go back to the Merchant Marines, no. He went to Maritime High School in New York City, to learn all about seamanship, and then, he graduated in 1946, I think. ... One of the first jobs he had aboard ship was to go to Europe and all they did was transport, actually, bodies; American GIs that were being brought back to this country for burial, and then, he traveled throughout the world, as a merchant seaman, all over.

SH: All this before he went in.

RP: Before he went into the Army. He traveled [to] South America, throughout the United States, the Caribbean, some parts of Africa. Yes, he's got quite an experience, also, but none of us took advantage of the GI Bill, me or my three brothers, and I certainly regret it.

SH: Your homecoming, what was it like to come back?

RP: You know, it was funny, because I had written my mom that I was coming home on, I don't remember the name of the ship, that I would be docking in New York City, and I said, "Please, Mom, do me a favor. Don't meet me at the ship," which was a mistake, because she thought, "Why can't I meet him at the ship? Did he lose an arm or a leg or did he have an accident?" What I wanted to do was surprise them. I wanted to get home, go to the barbershop get a haircut, get my uniform pressed, and then, walk in on my family give them a phone call and say, "Okay, Mom, I'm coming home," but she went and met me at the ship anyway. My Mom, Dad, and this woman who I consider my sister, who really is not my sister, and like you see in the newsreels, all these GIs coming back and they're hanging over the edge of the ship and they're waving to the people at the dock. ... I had the same experience, and it was ... good to be home and heartwarming, hugs and kisses. For the next three or four weeks relatives would come by and the neighbors would come by.

HA: What did you miss most about being at home?

RP: The holidays. I got very nostalgic around the holidays. Thanksgiving was very big in my house, and certainly Christmas, not birthdays so much, but Thanksgiving and Christmas, the holidays, because ... I had three brothers, my mom and dad, of course. ... I had tons of aunts and uncles and, when you live in a city at holiday time your doors were always open, certainly in those days. So, it was always festive. Christmas would fall on December 25th, but Christmas parties, which started on December 10th, and that probably [did not] end until after New Year's. So, it was always happy and a lot of merriment, yes.

SH: How did you celebrate the holidays? You talked about being onboard ship, playing Monopoly.

[TAPE PAUSED]

RP: ... So, the holidays at my house?

SH: No, when you were in Europe.

RP: ... We stayed usually in the barracks. I mean, they would make it as pleasant as possible for you. They always had a Thanksgiving dinner. We had entertainment. We had a lot of local people that would come in. ... In Germany, we had a dance group that would come in. They were young; I don't think they were professionals. They're just local kids that would come in, in period costumes with these very attractive *lederhosen* that the men wore and the attractive, festive dresses that the ladies would wear, and they would do dances and they'd ask some of the GIs to come up and dance with them, something like that, and Thanksgiving and Christmas, that's what it would be. We never had any outside entertainment, like they had in prior generations.

SH: There were no USO shows.

RP: No, no, we never had any of that, no.

SH: I asked about your homecoming. When your brother came back from World War II, what do you remember of his homecoming?

RP: Well, that was very exciting, because he hadn't seen me in several years and I had grown up somewhat, and he treated my brother and myself, almost every single day, after he got home, either to the movies or Palisades Park in New Jersey. He'd always buy us things. He was my hero, and, when I got a little taller and heavier, I was wearing his sailor uniform, the bell-bottom trousers and everything. I'd say, "Look at me, I'm in the Navy," and when he got home, it was like a miracle, of course. I mean, the guy had been; ... well, he spent three years in the military. He was discharged in 1946, I think, and he was home, finally, for good, and the neighbors were there to meet him. I remember, ... I was in school, but my mom and dad met him at ... Pennsylvania Station and rode home with him on the subway, or maybe my father just went and my mother stayed home. I forget, but I remember being in school and saying, "Gee, my brother's coming home today. You know I haven't seen him in a long time," but you know how it is; it's a hero worship.

SH: How important was the church in your family and in your community?

RP: The church? We were not a very religious family. We were all Catholics. My mother was a very spiritual woman, but she wasn't a church goer. Unlike our neighbors, who all went to church, my mother stayed home on Sundays, and most of us did, also. I had Catechism, Confirmation, the religious training, but, to this day, I still don't go to church. I have a lot of issues with the Church and I just believe in being a good person. I'm a humanist. My mother

loved the Church. She had a lot of religious icons in her bedroom. She even had a statue of a rabbi. She said, "Listen, I need all the help I can get, so, I'm going in every direction," you know. [laughter]

HA: Just in case.

RP: ... Oh, she had numerous statues of various saints, and my mother loved the American Indians, the Native Americans, and she had a spirituality, but with Indian folklore; the skies and the wind and the environment, and I think ... she got a lot more inner peace and solace going in that direction, rather than going towards the Church.

SH: The Museum of the Native Americans was right in your neighborhood.

RP: It was right in my neighborhood, and my mother never went there. It's not in my neighborhood any more.

SH: No, I know, but I was wondering if she did.

RP: No, she didn't. She never went there, no. My mother really never; my mom and dad never really got out much. They didn't go to a lot of Broadway shows or the movies. I'm not sure why. I think, probably, because they were just home with the children. My father, ... he was just happy to be home with his family, spend the holidays with his family, have dinner with his family. He would have hoped that we never got married, [laughter] that we'd still all stay home and we would talk constantly, because my father was so educated and well-learned. We would have games. "Okay, what's the capital of Sweden? Robert, it's your turn. Okay, Albert, what's the capital of Germany? That's your turn. What's the capital of Venezuela?" Now, I had two brothers, one in the Merchant Marine, the other one was in the Navy. They had traveled throughout the world. So we knew the capitals we knew our geography and we knew the capitals of the world, you know, of major cities. It was funny, because a lot of the immigrant children that I grew up with, in my house, when they were doing their history lessons or geography lessons and they didn't know the answer, we'd always get a knock on the door, "Mr. Paoli, can you help us?" They didn't know what the Island of Hispaniola was, so, my father had to tell them, "Well, it's really two islands. It's Haiti and the Dominican Republic." "Oh, is that right?" [laughter] So, he was the resident tutor, you know, for the building. [laughter]

SH: What was your favorite subject in high school?

RP: I think history, because of the influence of my father to know your history.

SH: You talked about Boy Scouts. How involved were you with Boy Scouts?

RP: I was very involved in Boy Scouts. I loved the Boy Scouts. My brother and I belonged to a church; the church sponsored the Boy Scout troop, and then, when we were boys, growing up, Boy Scouts were quite popular. Unlike today, in the urban areas, I don't think you want to tell somebody that you're a Boy Scout, and certainly [not] go outside the house wearing the uniform of a Boy Scout, [laughter] but, in those days, it was quite popular and there were Boy Scout

troops ... in every neighborhood and we used to go to Boy Scout jamborees and Boy Scout camps.

SH: Where did you go to camp?

RP: We went to, actually, right here, up in New Jersey, a place called Ten Mile River, to this day, is still very active with the Boy Scouts. ... I was a First Class Scout, which is, I think you start off as a Tenderfoot, and then advance.

SH: I do not know what the ranks are. [laughter]

RP: I don't know. ... I forget what the ranks were, but we loved it. We loved ... being Boy Scouts, yes.

SH: You talked about ...

RP: Actually, you know, I told you earlier that the first time I'd ever been out of New York City was when I got drafted, and outside of those two or three times I crossed the George Washington Bridge; no, actually, it was earlier than that, because we were Boy Scouts and we went to New Jersey. We got away from home and [were] going to these Boy Scouts camps.

SH: You said there was a jamboree. Was the jamboree in Jersey or in New York?

RP: No, it was ... also up there in Ten Mile River. Unlike today, they have these yearly jamborees and they have them out west and the Boy Scouts come from all over the country, and, also, from overseas, and they have one giant what they call a jamboree, a session where they all intermingle and socialize, our jamborees were kind of like mini-jamborees. It was just our troop, or maybe an association of troops, just for our neighborhood, just from, maybe, Manhattan, or something like that.

SH: Where did you go to high school?

RP: I went to Samuel Gompers High School in the Bronx. It was an all-boys school and it was a trade school, and the reason I picked a trade school was because, in the '50s, when I graduated from high school, in 1953, television was the new invention, the new toy, and I said, "Well, that's where I should go. I mean, somebody's going to have to fix these things and repair them and sell them," but I was not a very good tradesman, trade person. [laughter] ... My mind, to this day, is not channeled towards things technical. So, I was never very good at it. So, I transferred from the trade part of the school to just the general education.

SH: You switched before you graduated.

RP: Yes, I switched.

SH: What were some of the jobs that you had as a young boy, growing up?

RP: I had a lot of jobs. I worked in the local A&P, as a teenager, helping the people with their packages, either taking them, actually walking home with them, carrying them up the stairs, flights of stairs. ... When I got to be old enough, when I was in high school, ... because of my relationship working ... at the A&P helping these people with the packages, they gave me a job just packing things on shelves.

SH: Like a stockman?

RP: Yes, like a stock boy. That's all I was, and then, after I got out of high school, before I was drafted, I worked for the Bank of Manhattan, before it merged with Chase Manhattan, which is now Chase National, or something, I don't know, there has been all these mergers over [the] years, and I really didn't have very good jobs in those days. I mean, I wasn't educated. I was a high school kid and, like I said, I never went to college. I regretted not going to college. As it worked out, I think I did all right. I have this lovely home and my three kids all went to college and I paid for their weddings and everything seemed to work out all right.

SH: I think you have done very well.

RP: ... But, I've always been comfortable talking to people and being in front of people and I think I would have liked to have been a high school teacher, teaching high school kids, ... unlike my wife, who likes to teach the young children. She taught fourth grade.

SH: When did you meet your wife?

RP: Well, she was a neighborhood girl. I just got out of the military. I was twenty-one and I went to a dance in the Bronx. There were a lot of dances in those days you could go to on a Friday or a Saturday night. You could go to the local church, there was always a dance, or you could go to a ballroom, which they don't have them today. I used to go to dances at the, I think it was called the Stardust Ballroom. It was on Tremont Avenue, White Plains Road, in the Bronx. Now, I don't know if you remember this movie, *Marty*? You know this movie, *Marty*? No; well, it's about this man who lives in the Bronx and he goes to this dance hall and he meets this girl. ... It's the same dance ballroom, dance hall, that I went to when I was in my early twenties, but I met Diane. Diane was from the neighborhood, which I didn't know at the time, but I met her at a church dance and I was twenty-one, I think she was fifteen, and I said, "Wow, she's cute, but she's kind of young," but, anyway, I introduced myself. It turned out that we're both from the same neighborhood. So over the years, I just kept in touch. She was still in high school. We dated and I courted Diane, I guess, for six years before, we finally got married. I was twenty-six. Diane was one week shy of her twenty-first birthday. [laughter]

SH: When you married, you stayed in New York then.

RP: We left Manhattan and we got an apartment in the Bronx and stayed there for three years. First we lived on the top floor of a ... four-story building and the neighborhood was getting very bad and Diane got pregnant and I said, "Well, we can't stay here, climb all these stairs." So, we moved to the East Bronx, to a two-family home in a very nice area, on Olmstead Avenue in the Bronx, in the Castle Hill area of the Bronx, which was very nice. It was all private homes. It

was lovely. The church was right around the corner. They had a good religious school. We thought we could put the children there and, like everything else, over the years, that neighborhood started to change. So, we moved to Ridgewood.

HA: When were your daughters born?

RP: Let's see, Lisa was born; you're testing me here?

HA: [laughter] No.

RP: No, no, Lisa was born; you want the exact dates? I mean, Lisa was born in 1964, Robin was born in 1965 and Karen was born in 1969.

HA: I just wanted to get a feel for how far apart they were.

RP: Well, we had Lisa, we were married three years. I got married in 1961. Lisa was born in 1964. Robin was born the following year, I think eighteen months later, and then, Karen was born four years later. Diane and I always wanted four children. We thought that's what we would do have four children, but, after the third, after Karen was born and living in this two-bedroom apartment, in the Bronx, I said, "We can't ... afford any more children. I've got to get out [of here]. I've got to buy a house." I mean, ... when I tell you, "Here's my apartment," you would open the door and step in; this was the living room. It went from here, this way, to here. I swear, this was the living room. We had a couch that, ... when you sat in that couch, if somebody wanted to go by, you had to stand up. That's how small this apartment was, because the man had a two-family home and what he did was, he had, like, a four-bedroom apartment upstairs and he cut it in half. So, we had three rooms and the guy next-door, I think, had the four rooms, with the wall just separating us, but the apartment was tiny, tiny. There was also a long flight of stairs, and there were some housing projects about three blocks from where we lived. In the beginning, the projects were very nice. They were built after the war, after World War II. Most of the project's tenants were civil servants, so, there were firemen there and policemen and office workers, people who worked for the city, but, as usual, what happens is, life gets better for them. Their income rises and they had more children and had to move. So they were being displaced by a lot of minority groups, and, unfortunately, some of them were pretty unsavory and the neighborhood wasn't very nice. So, we had to get out. Projects, I think, in my opinion, were a horrible, terrible enterprise that the city made. I mean, it was easy to just build these, ... and get everybody in there, but I think it was a mistake. Even to this day, projects are still a problem. Every time I pick up a newspaper, I read, "the kid lives in the projects." I mean, nothing seems to get better, and I'm ... talking about fifty years of this stuff. I mean, when is this going to stop? I know there's lack of land. Where do you build? ... If you provide private homes for these people, ... instead of building up where you could support so many more families, but, in the long run, is it better for those families or is it better to build outward, with one-family homes or maybe two-family homes, and be very selective in who you put in those homes? I mean, the men's group that I belong to are very active in Habitat for Humanity, and that's a terrific program, because we build homes in Paterson, and throughout Bergen County. We build them in Newark, and, when you apply for a home ... in Habitat, first of all, ... there's a committee, and you have to meet certain requirements. ... When you move into that home, you're committed.

... For, I think, seven years, you have to maintain your property, you have to keep a neat house, you have to cut your lawn, you have to upkeep the house, you have to paint, and this is all in the rules. ... If you don't do that, then, you're evicted. You have to leave the premises, and Habitat for Humanity is a wonderful program and it's working out very well. So, why not have the same kind of conditions for whenever you build any home anywhere, but who am I? What do I know?

SH: Is that what keeps you busy now? To back up, when did you move to New Jersey from New York?

RP: We moved here in 1970, June 1970. It was the funniest thing. ... We had the three children in New York, living in this very small two-family house, and we had no backyard, of course, and the kids would play on the sidewalks and we had to be careful, because, again, I had the three daughters. ... They were only allowed to go from one end of the street to the other, ... one end of the sidewalk to the other. They weren't allowed in the street, naturally, and they weren't allowed to go around the corner, so that when Diane would come down the street, she could open up the door and see, "Oh, there's Lisa, there's Robin, there's Karen. Okay, everything's cool." So, my kids were kind of confined to their play area. Of course, we could take them up to the playground, which we often did, and then, we bought this house and my kids walked in and they were flabbergasted. They saw this backyard and they said, "Dad, can we go back there?" because what they remember is that they couldn't go into the backyard of our house, because the landlord wouldn't let them. So, remembering that, they would say to us, "Well, Mom, can we go in the back?" I said, "Kids, this is your yard. ... This is your property. Of course, you can go back there." Then, we had the basement downstairs, that they could run around. We didn't have this dining room here. ... Actually, this ended here. There was a wall that came down here. So, this is all we had. This was an expansion that we added many years later, after we got through with the college expenses and the weddings. [laughter]

SH: It is a lovely area. Are there any questions that we did not ask you or stories that you would like to share?

HA: I have one question. Have you kept in touch with any of your buddies from Germany?

RP: No, no. I had very nice relationships with my bunkmates and the people that ... soldiered with me, on maneuvers and things, but, when I got discharged, no, we went our separate ways, unlike many of the so-called "Greatest Generation." They kept in touch with a lot of the people ... that were in the same unit with them. I never did, no.

SH: Are there reunions for the groups that were in Germany then?

RP: I have never been invited to a reunion. I've never been to one. I've never been asked. I think, probably, [in] the peacetime Army, maybe those things don't exist. You know, the seriousness of combat and the war effort in the war, it's different. The mentality is different and you don't forget that.

SH: Did you stay in the Reserves?

RP: Well, it was automatic. I had to stay in the Reserves for another; I'm trying to remember [if] it was six years or eight years. It was automatic. You served two years active, and then, four years inactive, which meant I could be called back at any time for an emergency.

SH: Did you ever think that you might be?

RP: No, no, because the draft was still in effect. So, it was not an issue of manpower. You know, today, with the conflicts we have today, and we're in every part of the world, you have to rely on volunteers, and a lot of them aren't forthcoming anymore, because of the conflict, the Army Reserves are being depleted and the National Guard is being depleted. I mean, these are guys that, for whatever reasons, they joined the National Guard and the Army Reserves, maybe for education benefits, extra income, to provide for their families, supplement their income for their families, and then, all of a sudden, bang, they're in a conflict and, here they are, going active, which they never figured. ...

SH: When did you join the VFW?

RP: I joined the VFW ... shortly after I was discharged. In 1956, my oldest brother, who was in the Navy, was the commander of the post. So, me and my [brothers], all four boys, belong to the VFW. I'm a lifetime member of the VFW and I belong to a VFW post in the Bronx, which was the largest VFW post in New York State. I mean, we must have had six hundred members. I don't even think that exists anymore, and then, when I moved to Ridgewood, I joined the American Legion, only because there isn't a VFW post in Ridgewood; I mean, in the area, yes, but not in Ridgewood, and I didn't want to travel.

SH: What about your twin brother? Did he go in the military?

RP: My twin brother went in the Navy, like my oldest brother, Arnold. He went in the Navy and I went in the Army with ... my brother, Joe. So, we had two in the Army, two in the Navy. So, every time Army plays Navy, we have a little bet going, but Navy's been kicking our butt for several years now. [laughter] So, yes, he went in the Navy and he had a very nice experience. My brother, Albert, spent four years in the Navy. He's considered a Korean veteran, because, being in the Navy, they travelled to that part of the world. The government says I'm a Korean War veteran, because of the dates. They have these dates and I fall under that umbrella of the Korean War, but I never tell people I'm a Korean War veteran, because I just don't deserve to say that. I tell them, "I'm a Cold War veteran. I went the other way."

SH: Are there any stories that we did not ask you to tell that you want to put on record?

RP: No, I don't think so. ...

SH: We truly thank you for letting us come in to interview you.

RP: Oh, yes, oh, thank you.

HA: Thank you so much.

RP: No, I'm glad I was able to provide and give you some input and information. I hope I was helpful.

SH: You were.

RP: Yes, thank you very much, yes.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Sean Redican 4/8/09

Reviewed by Deborah Chang 4/8/09

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 4/15/09

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 4/17/09

Reviewed by Robert A. Paoli 6/24/09