

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH IRWIN GORDON

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SANDRA STEWART HOLYOAK

and

SEA JIN LEE

and

ASHLEY PERRI

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

NOVEMBER 5, 2003

TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Sea Jin Lee: This begins an interview with Dr. Irwin Gordon on November 5, 2003, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Sea Jin Lee ...

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Sandra Stewart Holyoak ...

Ashley Perri: Ashley Perri ...

Irwin Gordon: ... And Irwin Gordon.

SH: Dr. Gordon, thank you so much for taking time today to come and sit with us and our thanks to Mrs. Gordon, too, that you are here with us this morning.

IG: My chauffer. [laughter]

SH: Your chauffer. To begin the interview, I would like for you to tell us where and when you were born, and then, tell us a bit about your family, please.

IG: Okay. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1924, moved to Elizabeth, New Jersey, when I was about eight years old. I have two brothers. I'm the eldest of the three. ... By the way, we are all Rutgers alumni. I came to Rutgers by way of the GI Bill of Rights. I was in Ceramics. Their building is now [the] School of Social Work, I think. ... Of course, they've really expanded since then, but, anyway, my other two brothers were both here on scholarship, one for basketball, and he did quite well for himself, and the other in swimming, other sports. So, we had great experiences ... with Rutgers. I took a summer class with Professor [Stanley E.] Brasefield and, on returning the blue books, the exam books, he made the statement, "You men will never be drafted," with very strong conviction, and we wondered, "What does he know that we don't know?" Then, he followed that up with, "You're too dumb." Well, ... we were disappointed that we would be drafted, [laughter] but, nevertheless, we laughed at it and continued on with the class.

SH: What year was this?

IG: 1943.

SH: Let us back up a little bit and talk about your growing up years. You began your schooling in Brooklyn.

IG: Elementary school, yes, yes, and, as I say, we moved to Elizabeth ... when I was probably in the third grade or something.

SH: Can you tell us a bit about your father or your mother's background?

IG: Surely. My mother was born in Philadelphia. My father was an immigrant, by way of Ellis Island, and he came over with the better part of his family. He was, I think, six years old at the time, lived on the Lower Eastside of New York. He used to sell newspapers on the street, he told

me, ... [to] raise some money. What else can I say? ... Both my mother and father each had about five or so siblings, so, I have a lot of cousins.

SH: Where did your father immigrate from?

IG: Eastern Europe, from a place called Grodno Gubernia, [now in Belarus], and I've since met someone who came from an adjacent town. When he got to Ellis Island, the immigration official either couldn't say his name or confused it and that's where Gordon comes from, from that Grodno, G-R-O-D-N-O, and so, that's the way it went. ... What else can I say? [laughter]

SH: Do you know how your mother and father met?

IG: That's a very good one. I have a beautiful wedding picture of the whole family, but I don't know how they were introduced to one another. ... No, I really don't.

SH: Did your mother's family also immigrate?

IG: I don't know where they had come from, but I know she was born in Philly, in Philadelphia.

SH: What did your father do? What was his trade or profession?

IG: He was in business with his two brothers in ... what, in those days, was called cloak-and-suit. It was women's clothing, dresses, coats, and so, that worked fine for quite a while.

SH: How did the Depression affect them?

IG: It's a very good question. It turns out that a brother of my mother's had ... a wholesale plumbing supply store in Elizabeth and the business my father was in couldn't support three families. They decided that, given that he could go to work in Elizabeth, he did and we moved to a five-family apartment house, very small. Times were really difficult. My father would get paid twice a week, as cash came into the business, and my mother used to maintain the apartment building. There was a neighbor across the hall, came in with a radio, asked us to hold it for them while a welfare or relief worker would come and interview them. If they saw a radio, they'd feel they were doing too well. So, after the interview was over, we returned their radio to them. ... As I say, my mother maintained the building, cleaned the halls and [did things] like that. [I] went to public school, junior high, Grover Cleveland, and, finally, Jefferson High School. It was, at that time, ... all boys. There was an equivalent high school for girls, called Battin High School, and I learned about Rutgers through a cousin, who also told me about the Ceramics Department, and so, this was, of course, after the war. That's how I came to come to Rutgers.

SH: What year did you graduate from high school?

IG: '42, I think. ...

SH: In your high school classes or in discussions at home, was there any talk of what was going on in Europe with Hitler?

IG: No, ... not to my recollection. I took Latin. [laughter] I don't suppose they teach that anymore.

SH: When you were in high school, did you and your family think that you would go on to college?

IG: ... Yes, yes, although, I must say, I was the first in the family to do so. The rest were in the garment trade.

SH: Do you remember where you were when you first heard about Pearl Harbor?

IG: I was with a friend, at his house, and couldn't believe what we heard.

SH: Did you understand the impact of that report?

IG: Not what ... it would produce, but what an awful act that was. I mean, here, we were living at peace and, suddenly, some country tried to put an end to us.

SH: What about the discussions in your family about politics? What about Franklin Roosevelt and his policies?

IG: I think he was a hero, I think so. ... Maybe I didn't pay attention, but there wasn't very much political discussion.

SH: As a young man, did you participate in Boy Scouts or any youth activities?

IG: No, but I was the chairman of the Boy Scout troop that my son was in. [laughter] I saw to it that he went. Yes, he was in the Boy Scouts.

SH: Did you have little jobs after school as a young man?

IG: I worked at a garage next-door to this plumbing supply place for a while and, after that, ... I don't remember having any other [jobs]. Oh, well, I thought I'd go to work for a company, oh, this is awful, whether it was General Motors or whatever it was, but I was advised that I couldn't get such a job, because of my religion. They wouldn't hire me.

SH: Really? You were told that.

IG: Yes, not to even try. So, I didn't try. It's not to say, had I tried, they'd have been wrong, but I didn't try.

SH: Did the company itself tell you that or friends?

IG: No, friends, yes, yes. I worked at the plumbing supply place, where my father did, for a little while. By that time, I don't remember any jobs ... beyond that, as a high school student, and, before you know it, it was time to go to college.

SH: Had you registered for the draft before you graduated from high school? Your birthday is in November, correct?

AP: November 27, 1924.

IG: Yes, you had to register, but I don't remember the sequence.

SH: Was it tough to find a job, knowing that you were going to probably be drafted at that time or in the near future?

IG: It could have had an impact, but they had no choice. Everyone was up for draft. ...

AP: Did you notice any of the effects of FDR's programs in the area of Elizabeth? Did you or anyone you know participate in any of those programs?

IG: I was unaware of them.

SH: The WPA or the CCC?

IG: Yes, it was a great thing. ... You know, on reflection, it was a great thing.

SH: None of your family participated.

IG: No, no, ... [they did not] have any part of it. I remember, as a child, there was a swimming pool down in Elizabeth Port and we'd take the bus down and my mother'd tell me to tell them I was only five years old or six years old or something, so that the bus ride would be free. Beyond that, I don't know. [laughter]

SH: We are trying to see how aware or unaware young people were of what was going on around them at that time.

IG: I think, for the most part, they weren't. They didn't pay attention to politics, no more than, I think, ... they do today.

SH: How did your family observe the holidays?

IG: The Jewish holidays? They did. They observed them. They went to synagogue and I was *bar mitzvah*-ed when I was thirteen and that's a *bar mitzvah* watch I got, from friends of my mother, [which I wear] to this day. [laughter] ...

SH: He is pointing to a watch on his wrist. Was your home a *kosher* home?

IG: Oh, yes, yes, yes. ... I remember, my great-grandmother would sleep over in the synagogue where she went, she was that observant, at a specific holiday. At Yom Kippur, my uncle that had the supply store had tickets to a big synagogue near where we were. He didn't use them, so, that's how we went to that place and that's about ... the size of it. After a while, we moved uptown, so-to-speak, from Elizabeth Avenue, where we lived, and we lived there for, yes, until I went to Rutgers, even after I started. ... I was a commuter my first year, and then, when I came back, I lived in a boarding house on ... Hamilton Street here. Yes, Mrs. B; her husband was the caretaker at the church, and so, there were three or four of us that lived in her rooming house.

SH: After graduating from high school, you came to Rutgers for the summer course.

IG: Yes, yes.

SH: You commuted. Had you already enrolled in the Ceramics program in the summer?

IG: Oh, yes. ... I enrolled in Ceramics at the outset.

SH: You said a cousin had talked to you about Rutgers. What are your first memories of Rutgers, when you first came down?

IG: Well, I was overwhelmed. I was a commuter and, unfortunately, I had engineering drawing on a Saturday morning, so, I had to come another day, but I thought it was everything I wanted.

SH: Had the curriculum changed to a quarter system at that point?

IG: Rather than semesters? I don't remember. I'm sorry.

SH: Did you have any interaction with the administration upon arrival or any time during your time before the war?

IG: I wasn't on the campus enough to do that. I didn't live at a fraternity. My brothers did, but I didn't. So, I'd just come to class and head back for the train.

SH: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

IG: No, I was drafted, yes.

SH: When were you told to report? When did you first know?

IG: It must have been early in '43, yes.

SH: Was it winter when you reported? Did you report to Fort Dix or to New York?

IG: Fort Dix, yes. They gave me a voucher for the bus to get to Fort Dix, yes, and then, for basic training, we went up to Fort Devens, in Massachusetts, yes.

SH: Just for the record, we should say that Dr. Gordon has a beautiful photograph album that he shared with us before the tape began, so, we will be using part of that in our references today.

AP: What were the conditions like at the training camp at Fort Devens?

IG: Oh, well, we learned ... how to use explosives. In fact, our major, [the] head of our outfit, was hit by a flying brick. We'd set this explosion off. ... There was a factory that we used as our base.

SH: At Dix, you took a battery of tests. From there, what were you assigned to?

IG: Well, I was studying engineering, so, they thought, "Well, put him in the engineers."
[laughter]

SH: You were assigned to the combat engineers.

IG: Yes, yes.

SH: At Fort Devens, you ...

IG: ... Did basic training there, that's right ... and, for field training, we went to West Virginia, for possibly a month. We lived in the field and got more used to what it would be like, and then, back [to Devens]. ...

SH: What specifically were you being trained to do?

IG: How to use explosives, how to build things. ... At one point, during the war, two of the fellows in my squad came to me. I was responsible for the chest carrying the explosives. They came to me and told me they wanted ... some TNT and I said, "Okay," never asking them why. They went to a bank and blew it up, blew the safe open and sent money home. [laughter] Those were American troops.

SH: Where did this incident take place?

IG: It must have been in France or Luxemburg, that part of the war.

SH: Were you also being trained for demolition?

IG: Yes, yes, rather than bank robbery. [laughter] ...

SH: In West Virginia, as we saw in the photographs, it was a pretty rough winter down there.

IG: Oh, yes, yes.

SH: Do you think this helped you ...

IG: Becoming used to acclimate you to any condition. You took on whatever life gave you and I guess that's being a soldier. That's the way it goes.

SH: When you were training, where were most of the men from?

IG: Our unit, ... our battalion, was comprised of men from the New Jersey/Pennsylvania area.

SH: Did you run into any other Rutgers men?

IG: No, no.

SH: What about anyone from Elizabeth?

IG: No.

SH: You were in Fort Devens, and then, you were down in West Virginia. Where did you go from there?

IG: Back to Fort Devens, when we were sent abroad.

SH: Where was your embarkation point?

IG: New York.

SH: Can you tell us about how you got loaded up? I think, for combat engineers, it is a little different.

IG: ... Well, we were treated no differently, in the sense that we were loaded on this troopship.

SH: What about your equipment and things like that?

IG: It was loaded up as well.

SH: On the same ship?

IG: Yes, I believe so and we arrived in England.

SH: Did you travel in convoy?

IG: In the ship? Yes, I would say so, yes.

SH: Do you remember the name of the ship you went over on?

IG: My memory isn't what it used to be, I'm sorry. [laughter]

SH: I was just curious.

IG: Yes, I did. ... We went to England, as I say, for about ... six weeks. ... This was around D-Day time, so, we were grateful for that, having been spared that. We did go across the Channel, from Southampton to the beach, came down on the side of the ship, on these rope ladders, you know, net ladders, and we went from there. It was about D-Day plus, oh, I don't know, almost two months after that, yes.

SH: When you were in England, were you still training?

IG: Yes, yes.

SH: Where were you stationed at that point? Were you in the Southampton area?

IG: No, it was inland. ... I don't really remember the town. ...

SH: Did you get into London at all?

IG: Oh, no, no. ... The record I have is that we were activated at Fort Devens and we arrived on August 26th from Fort Dix, as I say, and, by September, we were up to 523 enlisted men, basic training, the demolition charge set off [in] the construction of a bridge at Bondsville. That was the town. It wasn't life-threatening, but, nevertheless, you required hospitalization. We went to work at the post, building and improving the firing ranges and we built a mock village, I remember that, to be used in street fighting training and, in February, as I mentioned, we went to [the] West Virginia maneuver area at Elkins, West Virginia, [got our] base camp set up and so forth. We got involved with maneuvers with the 35th Infantry Division. [We were] ordered to a new station, and then, we left by motor convoy for Fort Dix and, four weeks later, we turned in our equipment, brought our records up and prepared for the trip across and, on June 6th, on D-Day, we were building a narrow-gauge railroad at Fort Dix. I wonder if it's still there. We arrived at Camp Kilmer before embarking in July. It was a fifteen-day trip, landed at Liverpool and entrained to Rugeley. That was the name of the area, in Staffordshire, of England. We were there for a short time. We then left for Southampton on August 3rd. Two days later, we left for France. So, it was D-Day +61 [that] we first landed at Omaha Beach. ...

SH: What kind of destruction did you see?

IG: Destruction?

SH: What did you see?

IG: Well, I was astonished that D-Day could have been successful, given the height of the, I'll call it, cliffs, with the entrenched artillery firing down at you, and then, the machine gun ranges there. I've since been back and it is a remarkable place, very somber to go back to the cemetery that's still there, and we went, from there, through St.-Mere-Eglise and (Montebourg?) was where we landed.

SH: Where were you assigned?

IG: Near Cherbourg, pardon?

SH: What unit, what battalion are you with at this point?

IG: Well, it was ... our engineer combat battalion. ... By that time, all of Normandy was in Allied hands. It was the Third Army.

SH: You were in the 179th ...

IG: Engineer Combat Battalion, assigned to the XX Corps in the Third Army, under Patton.

SH: Did you ever see Patton?

IG: ... Yes, once, I did, yes, with his pearl-handled pistol. ... So, then, it started the chase across France and (Shawclay?), I remember some of those towns, and then, crossing the River Seine. ... The effort was to catch up to the retreating Germans, and infantry was carried on any vehicle available, ... so that they didn't have to walk that distance. It was quite a thing, tanks, half-tracks, ... trucks.

SH: What did you travel in most often?

IG: We had our own trucks. Each squad had a truck. [If] it was a two-and-a-half-ton truck, I don't know, but it carried our chests with the supplies and our own equipment.

SH: Did you have a cook or any medics assigned to you?

IG: They were part of the ... battalion. We had Company A, medics. ... As we were going through France, it's amazing, ... well, it shouldn't be amazing, how we were greeted by the civilians.

SH: Really?

IG: Oh, yes, screaming and handing up wine to [GIs] on the trucks and, yes, we were very warmly welcomed and we would maintain whatever bridges that we came across, roads cleared, wound up near Verdun, and then, now, we're coming to the Siegfried Line. ... Of course, at that time, Southern France had a landing, Seventh Army, and [they] moved up to meet with the Third Army. The medics, you have to show appreciation for the medics. At one river crossing, I was coming back to shelter and there was a GI laying on the ground, his stomach, his intestines, his guts were exposed and he was reaching out and pleading, "Please, don't leave me." Some things, you don't forget; that was one of them.

SH: What happened? Do you know?

IG: No, I don't know what became of the fellow.

SH: Did the medics come?

IG: Oh, yes, yes. The medics were very good about that.

SH: Do you know what had happened to him?

IG: ... Oh, he had obviously been shot. Whether it was shrapnel or bullets, I don't really know that much. My mind was set on getting back and having the medics deal with him. ...

SH: As you were traveling, how far away from you was the front? How much fire are you under?

IG: Sometimes, well, except for river crossings, we were behind the lines by, possibly, three miles, something like that, and I do remember, the Germans had a very effective artillery piece called an ".88" and you knew the sound of that shell coming and they hit our truck, one of our trucks, and a few fellows were killed at that. So, you never knew how your day was going to turn out, to this day, and then, the first break was, ... we lived in this field at (Villeroy?), at this railroad station, and then, ... the Moselle River. ... It was in November that we went ... to Metz and we had, again, the mission of crossing two regiments at this fort and building a tread way bridge and ... we moved on. Our company, A, and B Company, we maintained the roads in the division and destroyed pillboxes that we would see, so that there wouldn't be another place to attack you from. The first step in Germany was in December and, again, ... we made a river crossing, an infantry battalion of the 90th Division.

SH: This would be in December of 1944.

IG: ... Yes. So, we made this landing and, the following day, we tried to construct a ferry, but the enemy fire was very strong, you know. Anything we did to help them [was destroyed]; ... we built four more sustainable bridges, a Bailey bridge. ...

SH: Can you explain for the tape what a Bailey bridge is?

IG: Yes, it consisted of steel girders, crisscross for the sides of it, and that formed the [sides]. You could build a single, a double, a triple Bailey bridge and [they] would go up, oh, I would say a single would be about a six feet tall section, and then, you'd lay planks on, ... put cross pieces in, lay planks and build approaches, ramps, to those bridges and they were quite impressive. ... We would put down a smokescreen and we had smoke generators, ... to keep you out of sight of the enemy, and then, we continued. We came to the Siegfried Line and ... another river. There were lots of rivers, the Saar River and, again, ... this was just before the Bulge, the Battle of the Bulge.

SH: How much resistance did you encounter at the Saar?

IG: By the local Germans, the civilians? none, none to my recollection.

SH: No sniper fire?

IG: No, none of that, nothing like Iraq now, [the Second Gulf War]. So, then, there was Fontainebleau. At one point, I was in a field hospital. It's a five-man tent and you're on cot beds and there were two men who had been released or recovered or rescued from a concentration camp. They're the skinniest, skinniest people you ever saw and, in fact, the field hospital staff would ask them to come outside. They wanted to take their pictures. ...

SH: Do you remember where this was?

IG: No, I really don't, but the ... thing I'll never forget is that the orderlies would bring your meal in on a tray and give it to you and get another and another, until everyone had their trays. Well, these two concentration camp survivors, I'll call them, would put their tray under their cot bed, as plain as day that it was there, but they didn't think about that, but they'd call the orderly back and tell him, "We didn't get any food." They couldn't believe that there would be food for them hereafter. So, some things stick with me. Then, we were in one river; we crossed the Danube. By this time, German resistance was collapsing. We just were concerned that they wouldn't continue the fight and, luckily, V-E Day came, but, as I say, there was one river after another and ... we crossed the Inn [River] and that's the boundary line between Germany and Austria and, as I think I mentioned, Hitler's birthplace was on the Austrian side of that and we built a road there, a plank road, on the Austrian side and that's [where] we saw the Alps for the first time. When the war ended, three days later, we were supervising [the] operation of the Austrian railroad, to evacuate prisoners and bring in supplies and that's pretty much our story. We have medics and we had a maintenance group, supply group, headquarters and service company, and then, it went A Company, B Company, C Company. I was in A Company, First Platoon, wow. [laughter] ... Over my period [in the service], ... of course, you enter as a private, became PFC, became a corporal and wound up a sergeant, by golly, ... at the end of it all. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

IG: I'm sorry, but we lost, [from] our outfit, almost thirty people that were killed.

SH: Would you say it was mostly from artillery?

IG: I would think so, not very much rifle fire, because we weren't often in rifle range.

SH: How often were there serious accidents in the work that you did, in the construction or demolition end of it?

IG: Not very many, to my recollection. We were well trained and, as far as building these bridges and clearing out things, ... we were well trained for that. ...

SL: How did you receive your Purple Heart?

IG: How did I? How was it given to me? It was just on the record, but there was no formal presentation. I do have the medal, no formal presentation in the field, anything like that. It just appeared on my record.

SH: Can you tell us about the incident?

IG: Well, the one time, it was in clearing away [debris]; clearing away the fallen trees that the Germans had cut down across the road to slow our advance and, unbeknownst to me, it was booby-trapped. ... I say I was very lucky, in that I caught a piece of that metal under my eye. It didn't get my eye. So, as I say, I was very lucky to have received that Purple Heart; lucky also in the sense that, in going home, that counted towards your points.

SH: There was another Purple Heart.

IG: Yes, that was artillery, a piece of shrapnel into my leg. ...

SH: Do you remember where you were for both of these incidents?

IG: Well, the one, I do. The booby-trap was at a place called Arpajon. I went back ... maybe two years ago to that site and tried to locate it exactly and we met a very pleasant man there. When we explained, we were asking him where this place would be and he took us under his wing and it was a good experience and I do believe I know the exact spot that it occurred. The other was in the field, with shrapnel, just artillery shrapnel, and so, I don't recall ... where that was. I'd have to look. I know the date it occurred and I could find out from here.

SH: When you were wounded like that, were you sent away from your battalion? How far back did you go?

IG: Well, the first time, the booby trap, ... I didn't lose a second's work. It was just one of those things, like you got a splinter or something. The other time, I think that's why I was in that field hospital.

AP: What were the conditions in the field hospital like?

IG: Well, as good as could be expected. They had all medical supplies. If you were badly wounded, they would send you back to an Army hospital, somewhat quite a ways back from the lines. I never did see Bob Hope, I'm sorry, [laughter] none of that. ...

SH: Did you see any USO shows?

IG: No, no, there were none that were that far advanced.

SH: Did you ever get any R&R in this time?

IG: No, no, I don't recall ever.

SH: Were there other citations that were given to you for your service?

IG: Well, ETO, European Theater of Operations, [Ribbon], never a Silver Star, no. I still have my Army uniform. I still can wear it.

SH: Congratulations.

IG: ... Last time there was a veteran's affairs gathering, ... I came in wearing that thing and the other fellows were there, they all weighed much more. They could never fit into theirs, they told me, and they congratulated me on being able to still wear it.

SH: As we do as well. I would like to use the photograph album to trigger some of these stories that you have shared with us, like the pastoral scene at the foot of the Alps.

IG: ... Yes.

SH: Did you take that photograph?

IG: ... I doubt it. I don't know where I got it from, but we had time at that place. The war was over by this time and there was a town, a small town, walked down the streets. ... I don't know what possessed me, here was an artist, had ... some pieces in the window. He had been evacuated from Munich, he and his wife, for their protection and he drew my picture. I have it in my living room, on the wall, yes.

SH: The things that people will do, right?

IG: Yes.

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

SL: Side B, tape one.

SH: Please, continue.

IG: I have this photograph album. I know it was against regulations, but I had a very small camera, about the size of a grapefruit, that I kept inside my field jacket, supported by my cartridge belt, and I have a number of photographs. One shows something I had never seen before; ... it was on our way to Southampton. It was a straw thatched roof on a house and I took a picture of it. It wasn't very big. I don't think it would amount to, maybe, a two hundred square feet house, but it did have a little covered entryway and two windows upstairs and it was, I would say, maybe, twenty feet-by-twenty feet, otherwise. I have a photograph of myself standing in Arpajon, following ... that booby-trapped road-clearing that we were doing and with this grin on my face only a nineteen-year-old could have at the time, under the circumstances, and blood down my cheek. There are photographs here of our squad, sitting around. We have a camouflage net over the truck. We're beside some hedgerows and we're all sitting around on our helmets as ... a seat and we've got a small fire. We're eating our rations. Up until that time,

I didn't like cheese. I would eat cream cheese, but now came the rations and I wound up with a tin of cheese, no one wanted it, so, that was my diet.

SH: Having come from a *kosher* home, how was it to eat Army food?

IG: Cheese was okay, I mean, ... Spam was one of the [staples]. That was the original name of the word. It was something that was unwanted by most of them, but I didn't eat that, just because I didn't like it. Some things I excused myself for, ... given the circumstance, but I had no choice. ... When we got our meals, that's what I ate.

SH: Were you able to observe the holidays? Were you ever given that opportunity?

IG: No, no, no such thing.

SH: No chaplains or rabbis in your unit?

IG: No. ... On washday, you use your helmet on the ground, put water in it and you rinsed out whatever you wanted to clean. You cleaned yourself with the water and soap. ... I have a photograph [of myself] wearing a fur jacket and standing there. The fur jacket, it was short-sleeved. We picked them up from a German supply place. I couldn't tell you exactly where, but they were used, it was my understanding, ... by German submarine troops for warmth in the submarine. I have a photograph outside the railroad station at (Villeroy?), where, again, this was now September or so, where we were bivouacked in the field around this railroad station. There was a very gracious stationmaster that would invite us, a few of us, to his house for coffee. It was ersatz coffee, probably chicory or something like that and our break at that place, this (Villeroy?), it shows that we were building bridge sections and this looks like a Bailey bridge section.

SH: One photograph says, "Our Landlord at ...

IG: (Gdansk?)."

SH: Were you using their house to bivouac in?

IG: Not their house, in their field, ... but I'm almost ashamed to tell you, these two guys were staying in a house, [the] people had left, and they'd go through the house and they were looking in all the drawers and one guy would open a drawer and the other guy would too and, meanwhile, the one fellow thought he'd had a quick way around this. The one fellow, he felt, was wasting his time opening the drawer and gave him the advantage to go right into it, see what he might want; didn't know it, but someone had defecated in the drawer. So, they came back downstairs and the one fellow's laughing. He thought it was hilarious and the guy says, "Shut up, shut up." That's what he got for his misbehavior. For the most part, though, we were always welcomed by people in France, not particularly negatively by the people in Germany, and, one observation, they couldn't get over that our trucks had pneumatic tires. They're used to these solid rubber wheels on their Army trucks and they would kick the thing ... and they'd point at it. There are a number of photographs here of bridges under construction, some photographs of ...

traveling through a town where the town itself is in ruins, both sides of the road, nothing but rubble, a few small parts of buildings still standing. It was an eye-opener, as I say.

SH: Where did the looting that you saw take place, in France more than in Germany?

IG: Well, once we got into Germany, we were moving fast again. So, I think it was in France. People had left ... their houses. They didn't want any part of the action of the war, being shot or anything by mistake, by accident, and there's a photograph here, "Entering Germany, by the Grace of God and the First Battalion, 319th Infantry of the 80th Division," and this was at a river crossing. Again, in the background, ... there are houses that are badly damaged. You could have photographs of German Army prisoners. ...

SH: How were they treated? What was their demeanor?

IG: They're well-behaved, because they didn't know what the outcome would be were they not. Outside this, we guarded, for a short time, this PW camp where they were bringing them back by the trainload and we had a field beside a station there where they were staying. The officers stayed inside the station [laughter] and ... their GIs stayed in this field and we were responsible for guarding the field.

SH: Did they try to talk with you or did you try to talk with them?

IG: Didn't try, didn't try. So many times, for example, the two concentration camp people, (where were my brains), not to try to talk to them, as best I could, but never tried, just looked at them in amazement.

SH: Do you remember where you were or at what stage of the war that you became aware of the fact that there were concentration camps and some of the atrocities?

IG: Well, not until that time, because the first two concentration camp inmates we saw, I saw them from the back of our truck, as we were driving, and they were these two very thin men in the striped pajamas that was their costume or their clothes and the fellows on our truck just looked, "Hey look at that," in amazement, hadn't heard about them at all.

SH: Really?

IG: Yes, yes. I think it was Eisenhower [who] went to one of the concentration camps that had been liberated and he wanted his picture taken, so that it would be proof that they existed. It was such an unbelievable existence. ... I have a photograph of a calliope, so-called. It consisted of, oh, approximately thirty or so or more tubes. These are rocket tubes that they would fire off. ... It was supported on a tank and transported that way and they could fire all of these rockets. It was awe-inspiring, I will say. Again, another junction of the Our and Sauer Rivers, the towns were demolished, as you went by. ... Again, we have some photos of bridges that we made and that were being used, again, as a Bailey bridge. This was a double.

SH: You named it after one of your mates.

IG: I called it the Walter (Nimitz?) Bridge, because that poor fellow was killed. It wasn't an official naming, but it was just what we called it.

SH: Had he been killed prior to building the bridge?

IG: Near there, yes, yes.

SH: From artillery fire?

IG: Yes, yes, and we drove through Luxemburg Gardens. We would acquire a sheep or a small animal, a calf, and butcher it for our own purposes, for our own meal, just as something to get away from the rations, the K rations, C rations and like that. [Here are] some photographs of a fellow who, at Muhlhausen, I guess, ... had gone into this house and he came out all dressed in civilian clothes, with a hat and a cane, as though he were on a date [laughter] and another one of these is a German Army tank surrounded, almost buried, in soil as an artillery piece and some of the fellows had acquired German Army hats, not helmets, but officer's hats and took their picture wearing it. They're wearing the uniforms with the hats and the jackets and overcoats with the swastika on the armbands and the one fellow is giving a salute, "*Heil, Hitler,*" salute kind of thing. Also, you'd come through this town and you'd find a civilian automobile and the guys would get in it and start racing it all over the place, up and down a hill and without any regard. [Here are] some photographs of downtown Braunau.

SH: The names that are listed as part of your group, are they all from the Northeast?

IG: Yes, yes, for the most part. ...

SH: Do you keep in contact with any of these men?

IG: Yes. One of them, ... Joe (Barco?), lives not far from where we do, speak with him every so often. He is a great gardener. He gave me some nice flowers. I still have them. The rest, I can't say that I do, (Gossley?), Blue, (Barco?), Stone, Mansky, Foster, Shorty, (Santoski?). That was Chap. I remember that part about it.

SH: We have got a man by the name of Czubas.

IG: Joe Czubas, C-Z-U-B-A-S. He died, I found out.

SH: There is a pontoon bridge in this photograph. Did you build that one as well?

IG: Yes, we did. It's the Inn River, I-N-N. It connects Germany and Austria. This particular one, I believe, was at Simbach, S-I-M-B-A-C-H. It's a pontoon bridge. A pontoon bridge is not as permanent, by far, as a Bailey bridge. A Bailey bridge is steel construction, coming in sections, and ... we'd have our trucks bring all these sections and we'd erect it and fasten it together, put flooring in. The pontoon bridge consists of these pontoons, rubber inflated, like, small boats, if you will, maybe six feet across, eight, ten feet wide, and you'd put the tread way

on it and this photograph shows ... armored personnel carriers crossing it with troops on it and jeeps. ... Behind it is a bridge that had been demolished. So, it was a good way to get around quickly, rather than have to rebuild one of those bridges and, also, another photograph showing infantry and I had labeled it, "Dry-footed Infantry." They're there walking across. We don't need an assault bridge and, of course, it wasn't an assault time. ... These were follow-up troops. See, this is a photograph showing a number of German prisoners; it looks as though we have impressed them to do some of this construction for us.

SH: They have shovels and things in their hands.

IG: Yes, yes, I don't know where they got this bicycle, but here's a photograph of these two fellows on a bicycle. I also have a photograph of a little girl, ... all dressed up, wearing a German Army aviator's cap. In the back of it, it reads, in German, "To remember Helga, who liked you so much," and the town was Gersthofen. It was March 10th of '45.

SH: She looks to be about three years old.

IG: Maybe, yes, yes, and I don't know whether her father was killed. If he wasn't, I think he'd have killed her mother for giving ... me that picture, but it's a beautiful little girl standing there.

SH: Had you stayed in this woman's home?

IG: No, not in the house, no. ... It must have been nearby.

SH: I wondered how you had gotten to know her.

IG: Yes. ... It was easy. We had some things, by this time, that we could give the kids, [like] candy or whatever. ... We also came to a stable, a horse stable, and another fellow and I got on these horses. I think, maybe, I'd been on a horse once before in my life. He was a good rider and he let me get ahead of him a little bit and, unbeknownst to me, he would whack the backend of my horse and the horse would take off and I'd scream and he'd laugh. [laughter] Oh, that was wonderful. ... The *autobahn* existed. It was in Germany. It was a superhighway in its time; pictures of building bridges, a Bailey bridge across the Danube, a view of Munich, when we were at the end of the war. ... I was given a jeep to go and see if we could get beer. [laughter] It was a great adventure.

SH: Did you succeed?

IG: Yes, somewhat, yes, but, again, the photograph of the street in Munich ... shows houses destroyed. There was a woman, a German civilian woman, and the war was still on and we were in this street and she came to me and insisted that I kill her. She had nothing to live for anymore.

SH: Was she speaking to you in English?

IG: ... No. She was telling me to shoot her and I didn't ask her why. Obviously, she was so upset, having lost, well, I'm sure, her house, maybe family or whatever. Some things don't go away.

SH: What did you do for her?

IG: I tried to calm her and I said, "No, no, it's okay," you know, but, no, I surely didn't shoot her [laughter] and Mittenwald was the last town that we were at and, from there, we went back. The unit was broken up. I was assigned to the 2828th, that is, two thousand, eight hundred-and-twenty-eighth, Engineer Combat Battalion. There's a photograph of their emblem and they served in Africa, Sicily, Salerno, Anzio, Southern France and Germany and you were assigned according to points for your return home and it was in December that I got to go home. I had some points for Purple Hearts and for service in time and whatever and the ship was [cramped]; we were stacked in, down ... below deck. The bunks were maybe four or five high, getting as many of us back as possible, and the weather was terrible. I lost my appetite, got seasick, [laughter] but it was great to get back.

SH: Where did you leave from?

IG: Going back, from France; ... well, I can't really say.

SH: I wondered if you came back from Marseilles or if you went north to the cigarette camps.

IG: I think they were the cigarette camps, [now] that you mention it, ... yes, from Le Havre. I think so, yes. Years ago, I could have remembered the name of the ship, but not today. [laughter]

SH: After the war ended and you were part of the occupation forces, what was your job? What did you have to do at that point? The war ended in April.

IG: V-E Day? Yes, ... it ended in May, May 5th. We were in Austria by this time and there was ... not very much.

SH: Were you in charge of rebuilding?

IG: We were supervising ... [the] operation of the Austrian railroads, to evacuate prisoners and bring in supplies, much like they're trying to rebuild now in Iraq.

SH: You have an example of an exam here. You were taking courses.

IG: Oh, yes.

SH: Where did you take your courses?

IG: In the field.

SH: All the time that you were moving forward or was this after the war?

IG: Well, I did it once and this was calculus. It was in ten parts and there's a rubber stamp on it, telling me this is a question paper, the whole thing, prepared especially for International Correspondence Schools published by International Textbook Company and they're telling where they got the examples from and, "This volume is supplied for use in the study of a course in the United States Armed Forces Institute." ...

SH: Did you go to a school?

IG: No, I had it with me.

SH: Oh, you carried it with you the whole time.

IG: Yes, yes.

SH: I have heard that there were different universities that the Americans staffed with professors, to give the troops a chance to get college credit while they were part of the occupation forces. I thought maybe you were part of that program.

IG: No, no, unheard of to me.

SH: You had also jotted down some incidents that you talked about before we began the tape. If you would like to talk about those, please do so.

IG: A few of them, I will. We came to a tannery that was being operated by slave labor.

SH: This was in Germany.

IG: Yes, yes, and the fellow came to me, one of the laborers, and asked, would I want some wine? Well, obviously, he knew the answer and I gave him the answer, "Yes, certainly." He had enough for our squad. He said, "Okay, come with me," and we went indoors and there was a German soldier, or a guard at this installation, and he was laying on the floor, he'd been shot, the fellow gave him an awful kick and I tried to [say], "Come on, now, stop it," but I did let him take the fellow's shoes off, his boots, army boots, and we went down into the living quarters for the management of this tannery and there was one huge China cabinet full of crystal, china of all kinds, and he tipped the thing over and I'll never forget the sound that that made and, finally, he did come up with some wine, [laughter] but he wanted to get even first and I could understand that. At another place, there was, again, slave labor. They were preparing, sewing armbands. There were armbands for almost every job that Germany could think of and, every morning, there'd be a line-up of the German management of ... this place and they'd call the roll, I guess, and there was this young kid, maybe ten, twelve years old, and he'd go down the line and kick them as they stood at attention. They couldn't break ranks. They had to stand there and take it and our troops, our fellows in charge there, would try to get him to cut it out, "Come on, go away." He did follow with us in ... our unit and he became a helper in the kitchen, and so, we took him along and goodness knows where his family was or anything like that. ...

SH: What name did he go by? Did you guys give him a nickname?

IG: Oh, I don't know. I could see this from upstairs, where they were doing ... the sewing work. I could look down at that. ... Oh, some of these things; there were some things that I'm not very proud of that happened. There was a river crossing and our job after the crossing was to go back and gather up the boats and bring them back and we were standing on the far side and here was a German soldier laying, dead, and one of the fellows tries to pry his jaw open. I said, "What in the world are you doing?" He said, "I want to see if he's got any gold teeth," and the other fellow says, "Well, look what you did to him, now. You got mud all over his face," and he proceeded to urinate the mud off of that dead soldier's face. Strange stories, some that I can remember; came back after the war and ... I started going to Rutgers.

SH: You came back in December.

IG: Yes, it was December. ... A friend of mine came over to the house and he says, "Come on." ... I was taking a bath. He said, "I'll tell you what," he said, "we're having a New Year's Eve party at my house. Why don't you come?" I said, "Okay," and that's where I met my wife.

SH: Oh, really, that quickly.

IG: Yes, and it was a cousin of his. Her date cancelled. He was sick or whatever the reason, but she was there by herself, that is, without a date, and that's how I met her. We just celebrated our fifty-fifth anniversary.

SH: Congratulations. That is amazing.

IG: ... Of course, I started Rutgers as a commuter, at first, and that was before the war. ...

SH: You returned to school in February or January.

IG: Yes, yes.

SH: What was Rutgers like when you came back?

IG: Much smaller. This building [Van Dyck Hall] didn't exist. There was "Holy Hill," [now the New Brunswick Theological Seminary] so-to-speak, and William the Silent, [the statue of William of Orange in front of Van Dyck Hall] I believe. Is his statue still out there? ... but there was very little beyond that. They were just talking, I think, about the library that's here, [Alexander Library]. Zimmerli [Art Museum], I don't believe, was there yet, and so, ... well, it was bustling, because here came all these people back, yes. The GI Bill was a marvelous thing.

SH: Did you go back and see that professor?

IG: Brasefield? No, I didn't. He was an elderly man at the time, but I get the biggest kick out of that. We had taken this class.

SH: You came back to Rutgers in January of 1946.

IG: Yes.

SH: Did you continue in ceramics?

IG: Yes, yes.

SH: Where did you live at that point?

IG: Well, at first, I was a commuter and, finally, I went to a rooming house on Hamilton.

SH: Were there other GIs living there and going to school?

IG: Yes, yes, a few of us and it was very nice, Mrs. B, (Bullhauer?), I think was the name, yes.

SH: Do you remember any of your roommates?

IG: Oh, it will be a stretch, I will tell you. Sid Laster was one. ...

SH: Were any of your other roommates in the ceramics program? Did you have someone to study with?

IG: No, no. Well, we had the ordinary labs and things like that and lectures, but I do remember that ceramics, in those days, and pottery and whatever, it's entirely different. You wouldn't know what they were talking about nowadays and ... we were told to get catalogues about the equipment that's used in processing and I contacted this one company and I guess I must have written, because I came back to the rooming house and this salesman was there and he thought he had a lead, until he found out that I was a student. [laughter] So, that was the end of his sale.

SH: Were you involved in any activities here on campus when you came back?

IG: Only around the Ceramics Department. Keramos was an honor society in ceramics, a national honor society, and I went to their conferences. ... There were some in California and wherever, but that was ... much later, much more recent. ... After, I stayed on, went through my Master's program with the GI Bill and, also, got my PhD and it was a great invention, that GI Bill, I will tell you. After I graduated, I got my one and only job. I went to work for the RCA laboratories on Route 1 in Princeton and I was there for about thirty-five years. General Electric acquired the Laboratory, offered early retirement for those who would take it. They had given the whole place, the Laboratories, to SRI International as a research organization. SRI said, "Well, it's a little bit too big for us to handle." There were about thirteen hundred employees there, and so, they asked for volunteers to step down. I was there that long, it was time and [I have been retired] ever since. ...

SH: What was it like to come back and go to school with kids just out of high school?

IG: That's a good one. I was only exposed to them in a few classes, I took, I guess it was a chemistry lab and a physics lab, but, for the most part, I was only in the Ceramics Department and we became friends. We knew one another even before. As I say, I didn't belong to a fraternity, so, I didn't have very many friends on campus.

SH: Was there any tension at all between the GIs and the younger students?

IG: Oh, no, no, not at all.

SH: Who was your favorite professor?

IG: John Koenig, I guess. He, unfortunately, died. It was taken over by Mal McLaren. He did a very good job at running the department and I left at that time. [Robert Browning] Sosman was there. He was good. I had no quarrel with any of them.

SH: Great. Sea Jin, do you have any questions?

SL: No, everything was covered.

SH: Ashley?

AP: Yes, I have one. What was the morale like within your unit while you were overseas?

IG: It was never negative. We had a job [to do]. We got along well with one another and, no, I don't remember anything untoward that way. It was, no, quite good.

AP: Serving overseas for so long, did you correspond with your family?

IG: Yes, yes. ... I probably have some old letters; I have a recollection [that] it was by the; I forget what they called that mail at the time.

SH: V-mail?

IG: Possibly, but it was censored. I'm not sorry I was in it. I wouldn't recommend it, but, having done it, I had no problems.

SH: Were you exposed to any anti-Semitism among the US troops that you encountered?

IG: ... A very little bit. There were a few guys, and this occurred in West Virginia, when we were in this tent, and there were a couple of them who would make some nasty remarks and I'd just ignore them.

SH: You had talked about another person in your unit who had been teased.

IG: Oh, yes. Well, he was a company clerk for our A Company and he was a Jewish fellow. He had a rather prominent nose and the guys used to needle him, tease him about it, until he got very upset this one time, and he said, "If you don't like my nose, you can stick it up your ass." I know that's not what he meant, but he was that rattled that it just came out. [laughter] ... I know [of] one other similar thing, not having to do with the military, but where these two men were arguing, I know who they are, ... one was in defense of his grandchildren and the other said, "Oh, go on, your grandchildren, they wouldn't piss on your grave." He said, "Yes, they would." [laughter] ...

SH: In other words, we do say things we really should not.

IG: That's right. You don't think about ... it before you say it, but I'm very glad to have been asked to come.

SH: When did you marry Mrs. Gordon? You mentioned meeting her almost as soon as you got back from Europe.

IG: Oh, yes. Well, my mother was very insistent that I graduated from college before we got married and, okay, in 1948 is when we got married. It was great. We lived out at the Heights, on Payson Lane. I don't know that that exists anymore. I know the building doesn't exist anymore. We lived in these ... three-family units and you had your space heater in the living room and her father came to visit with us and he looked around, he said, "You're going to live here?" [laughter] but it was great. She worked in Elizabeth and we'd get a ride to the station. She would not come into town. We had two children there.

SH: Oh, did you?

IG: Yes. ... It was a wonderful place to live. The rent was twenty-seven dollars a month and, finally, I went to work and we didn't want to move. They had to press us to get out, which we finally did, and, as I say, since I was working at Princeton, that's where we moved to. ...

SH: Have you stayed active with Rutgers?

IG: Yes, yes.

SH: How do you think your experiences during the war affected the man you are today?

IG: I can only say it's part of growing up and all that encompasses. You get to live with people, different attitudes, different backgrounds, and you've just got to learn to get along with people. ... Again, it was an experience that, while I wouldn't go searching for it, it was a good experience.

AP: You said that, years and years after the war, you traveled back to the places where you had been during your service. How did you feel about that? How did that affect you? Did it bring back bad memories?

IG: Not bad memories at all, really, and, again, it was this one place. My daughter lives in London and she came and met us there, so, she was a very good interpreter. She speaks French quite well and we met this fellow. (There was a wedding going on at the time.) He took us around the town. I showed him this photograph of me standing there. From the background, he thought he knew exactly where it was. He took us there. We went to his house. He knew some elderly woman; she wasn't as old as I was, but he put it that way. ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

SL: This is tape two of an interview with Dr. Irwin Gordon, with Sea Jin Lee ...

SH: Sandra Stewart Holyoak ...

AP: Ashley Perri ...

IG: ... and Irwin Gordon.

SH: Ashley has a few more questions for you.

IG: Okay.

AP: You mentioned earlier that you had seen boxcars while overseas. Could you please explain that a little further?

IG: Yes. ... We had not been told what we might see. I had mentioned earlier about seeing these two concentration camp men walking on the street in their striped pajamas, skinny as rails. We had no idea who they were, what they were about. ... Well, not long after that, there was a place where there were people living in boxcars. These had been, I guess you'd call them now, DPs, displaced persons, and we were told not to talk to them, "Don't go near them." I think they said they were Communists, [laughter] of all things, and so, we didn't. We moved on from that place, but it was just that the information that we were given, of course, there's not much time to give information besides, "Watch your step," or whatever, was not very much. So, that's my recollection of that, that they were really displaced persons.

SH: Is that part of the non-fraternization order that went out?

IG: Oh, that's a good one. Yes, we were told not to fraternize, "Don't get involved with any of the locals, anytime, anyplace." In spite of it, there were a few incidents, you know, experiences, where I had photographed this; I was kneeling down at a crossroads. I meant, at some point in my life, to go back to that crossroad, bring that picture along, this was a three-year-old or so sitting on my knee, and wondering if whoever lived in that area could recognize that child and that would be fun, a good experience, but, beyond that, I had this photograph of this, again, three-year-old, maybe four-year-old, in a German Army Air Force cap and the note on the back was from her mother, in German, "To remember this child, she liked you so much." ... This starts to sound funny, i.e., that I'm always involved with three-year-old girls, but that's just a coincidence, I assure you.

SH: You talked about some of the things that you were not proud of that some of the men were involved with, but what about some of the things that were good, that were kind or generous? You talked about trying to give food and candy to some of the children.

IG: Yes, yes, they would do that. There was never ever any meanness on their part. I have one other recollection. I had this idea that I wanted a field commission. So, they said, "Okay, you've got to go get an exam," and they gave me a jeep with directions, where to go to this hospital and a place to eat, a restaurant, and I had my meal and there was a group of musicians playing all the while. It was a very nice restaurant and they were playing. They were playing Yiddish tunes that I recognized, but, again, where were my brains? I didn't go up and try to speak with them, but I remember it very well, yes.

SH: Were there any members of your family who were involved in the Zionist movement?

IG: No, no, not to my knowledge. They were always strong supporters of organizations, but there was no attempt to move back or move over to Israel.

AP: Did you realize the severity of what was going in the concentration camps while you were in Europe or was it not until after you came home?

IG: That's when you really realized how immense that problem was and just having seen a few people, without any description or discussion with them or even any discussion I would have with them, they couldn't possibly have conveyed the magnitude of the problem.

SH: Your unit was never involved in going into a camp.

IG: We didn't liberate any of them. No, that's right, *per se*.

AP: There are many debates about how the German population claims they did not know what was going on. How did you feel about that? Did you think it was their way of saying that they did not want to get involved?

IG: I think that's more like it.

AP: They knew what was going on.

IG: Those that lived nearby; well, how do you live in a town and, suddenly, all the Jewish population has disappeared and these are towns where there was a substantial population? Those that lived down near the concentration camps, near the crematoria, they could smell it. They knew something was going on. They had to know. You know what's going on in downtown New Brunswick. So, no, they had to know.

AP: Despite their claims.

IG: Yes, yes. It wasn't something that they'd be proud of, to admit that they knew, yes.

SH: If there is anything we have forgotten to ask you about, please feel free at this time to put it on tape.

IG: Well, I think I've told you everything that's come to my mind. I might think of it some other time, but, again, the highlights are here.

SH: We thank you so much for coming.

IG: It's been my pleasure.

SH: We also thank Mrs. Gordon for being your chauffeur. [laughter] This concludes the interview with Dr. Gordon. Thank you.

IG: Thank you.

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

Reviewed by Michael Tietjen 10/26/04
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 11/1/04
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/7/05
Reviewed by Irwin Gordon 7/27/05