

Oral Memoirs  
of  
Herman “Hank” Josephs

An Interview  
Conducted by  
Stephen M. Sloan  
October 22, 2011

Collection: Special

Project: Texas Liberators of World War II Concentration Camps

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2. Arrangements made for interview(s)
3. Recording of interview(s)
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Interview History

The recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) were processed in the offices of the Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

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Project Detail

The Texas Liberators Project was an oral history project sponsored by the Texas Holocaust and Genocide Commission from August 2011 to December 2013. The project consisted of nineteen interviews with veterans of the Second World War currently living in Texas who liberated or witnessed Nazi concentration camps in the spring of 1945. Copies of the interviews were distributed to the veterans themselves, along with their children. Additionally, the interviews were deposited in the archives of the Holocaust museums in Dallas, El Paso, Houston, and San Antonio. The interviews were also deposited in the Library of Congress as part of the Veterans History Project initiative.

The Texas Holocaust and Genocide Commission, coalesced by Senate Bill 482, was established to ensure that resources are available to students, educators, and the general public regarding the Holocaust and other genocides.

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Herman “Hank” Josephs  
Oral History Memoir  
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Stephen M. Sloan  
October 22, 2011  
Corpus Christi, Texas  
Also present: Ruth Josephs and Robert DeBoard

Project: Texas Liberators of World War II Concentration Camps

SLOAN: This is Stephen Sloan. The date is October 22, 2011. I’m with Mr. Herman “Hank” Josephs at his home in Corpus Christi, Texas. This is an interview for the Texas Holocaust and Genocide Commission’s Texas Liberators Project. Thank you, Mr. Josephs, for sitting down with me to visit today.

JOSEPHS: It’s a pleasure remembering. It’s so sad that if we don’t remember it we’ll forget it.

SLOAN: Yes, sir.

JOSEPHS: So I remember the Holocaust, which means remembrance, so we remember the indignity suffered by so many different peoples—deaths and starvation and beatings and surgical instances.

SLOAN: Well, I appreciate you taking the time to remember, and this will help others remember, as you share your memories. And I know you’ve been doing that with your family. So this is doing it in a larger sense with others.

JOSEPHS: Well, I have a confession to make. The first forty years I was married, I didn’t say a word about it. It was too horrible to dredge up my memory. But then I—in twenty-oh-one [2001], I wrote my autobiography so my kids would know what their father had gone through. And I have four children, a boy and three girls. And so I wanted them to know what I thought, where I was, where I’ve been, my situation, so that they would know.

SLOAN: Yeah. Well, let’s—I’d like to start out, if I could, at the beginning. I know you were born in San Antonio in 1925, but if you could tell me a little bit about the Josephs family, your family background, and that sort of thing.

JOSEPHS: Well, oddly enough, my father was so overwhelmed by the fact that his wife had had twins, a boy and a girl. I was the boy, and my twin sister was a beautiful girl. She's not extant at the moment, God bless her, but she married a wonderful guy. My mother came with her four siblings to the United States in 1922, and I helped them celebrate their fiftieth anniversary here in this country at the St. Anthony Hotel in San Antonio. So I had a bunch of uncles and aunts, and I admired them all. They pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and were very successful. My father was in the dry-goods business, and he had a hard time making a living. But he believed in going where the money was, so he came to—first to Ingleside, then Refugio, then Kilgore, Texas, and then Corpus Christi, to the Saxet Field, which is Texas spelled backwards. So he came where the oil was, because that's where the money was. And he—we never missed a meal, and I'm very grateful.

I had a wonderful father, a wonderful mother. I was very fortunate. My father was an incurable romantic, as I am, and my mother was a businesswoman. She loved business, and she was very successful. She paid her bills on the first of the month like a clock. And she had been in charge of their grocery store in Zhitomir, which is near Kiev in Ukraine, in Russia. And she was twelve years old. When everybody else was out playing or going to synagogue, she was working. So my—that was my mother's benefit of life, was that she was the manager of their little grocery store that they had, where people were so poor, they used to come in and they used to buy one *kopek* of butter or a piece of bread. A *kopek*'s like a penny. So when she married my dad, who was very romantic—they had met at a synagogue picnic, and they fell in love. And he wrote her poetry in Romanian. He was from Bucharest, Romania. His name was Josepovich originally. And wrote her poetry in Romanian, sang to her, and eventually married her. And I'm a product of that. I'm a progeny of that marriage, luckily. I'm lucky I had a well-educated father. He loved to read. Read all of the romantic writers of his time. And—that didn't prepare me for World War II.

SLOAN: Yeah.

JOSEPHS: So when I was sixteen years old, I started college. So I'd had two years in college by the time I was drafted at age eighteen, and first thing I knew, I was sent overseas. You know, after three months in the service, I was not prepared for what faced me, but all I knew was, Thou shalt not kill. And they stuck a rifle in my hand and said, Thou shall kill thy enemy. So we went to an unknown enemy, and we killed them.

SLOAN: Yeah, yeah. Well, do you know why your parents immigrated from—

JOSEPHS: Well, my mother immigrated from Russia because of the senseless slaughter which the Russians put on the Jews. It was bad to be Jewish in a Catholic country, so they had to get out of Russia. So they left in 1922. My mother and her mother and her two sisters and brother left Russia and came to Warsaw. From Warsaw they came to Brest in France, took a boat to Galveston—not Galveston, Ellis Island, and they came into the United States through Ellis Island. "Give me your poor, your hungry." And it was a new world for them. And my uncle had come here twelve years before, Uncle Aaron, and he had a house for them when they got here. He'd been here twelve years, had a house for

them, stocked with linens and canned goods, and that's a really benevolent son. He was a wonderful man, one of my idols as I grew up, Uncle Aaron.

SLOAN: Well, I know you probably have memories of the Depression. How did your family do during the Depression?

JOSEPHS: Well, fortunately we had a good contact with Uncle Aaron, who had made money. He was in the finance business on DeLaRosa Street in San Antonio. And Dad borrowed money from him to start a (clock chimes)—a dry-goods store in Refugio, Texas, which was swimming in a puddle of oil. So they were—they did pretty well due to Depression. They followed the oil.

SLOAN: Well, as you mention the places that you lived, Kilgore, of course, ending up in Corpus, they were following the oil, where the oil money was.

JOSEPHS: Exactly. Due to the Depression, we always had pork chops and sweet—and potatoes and meringue—lemon meringue pie for dinner, so we never starved to death. Oddly enough, my sister and I were twins, and the superintendent at the school there in Kilgore said, "Pick out a boy and a—two kids from your class," he said to the third grade teacher, "and I'm going to put them in the third grade. There are too many people in the second grade." So she picked me and another little girl named Marguerite. I'll never forget Marguerite, pretty little girl. And I guess I answered all the questions, so I was always a grade ahead of my sister. And I don't think she was nervous—she was jealous, I don't think, but I wondered sometimes. But she had her friends and I had my friends.

When I was thirteen years old, my father suddenly announced, "I'm going to have to have my leg amputated." Because I think he had sugar diabetes, and he smoked too much and didn't take care of himself. He had a leg amputated, so that made me the driver of the car. So I became—at thirteen, I became a danger to the populace driving a car, because I was hell on wheels.

SLOAN: What was the family car in 1938?

JOSEPHS: It was a '36 Ford V-8, and I'll never forget the song:

Oh, give me a date in a Ford V-8,  
[And a] rumble seat for two,  
And I'll make wahoo, wahoo, waaa-hoo.

That was a hundred years ago. (Sloan laughs) And I felt pretty responsible. I took my mother and father to work every day. And took them there and they opened the store at eight o'clock, stayed until six. I had to take them and pick them up, and that was my duty—and go to school and make good grades.

SLOAN: Were you a good student?

JOSEPHS: I was a smart student, a good student. Lazy a little bit, but a pretty good student. I was on the track team at Miller High School, which was the only high school in town at the time. So I was on the track team. I ran pretty fast. I did everything pretty fast.

SLOAN: You had a lot of independence for a thirteen-year-old, to have the use of the car and everything like that.

JOSEPHS: Yeah, and I never had a wreck. I made other people have wrecks but I didn't have a wreck. I dodged in and out of traffic. (Sloan laughs) I was pretty fast. I enjoyed the power.

SLOAN: Well, you mentioned going to college at sixteen. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

JOSEPHS: Well, I joined a fraternity. They came, a rush party, to Corpus Christi, and a bunch of guys from various cities in Texas came and rushed us to join their fraternity, which was Alpha Epsilon Pi. So I became an AEPi, and that gave me instant recognition into society. And (door shuts audibly) what do we have?

SLOAN: I think we've got a loose door back there. (to DeBoard) You mind going and shutting that?

DeBOARD: Yeah.

SLOAN: Yeah, Robert DeBoard is with us here. He's our videographer, and he's our door-shutter. So he's going to go shut that door for us. So you rushed this fraternity. Now, what college?

JOSEPHS: University of Texas at Austin. And I was an AEPi. And met lots of girls, which was my want at ages sixteen, seventeen. I found a beautiful little girl from Dallas. Her name was Jackie LeSeur(??) and fell in love with her, naturally. And we were in love with each other. Went dancing on the drag, and every night, until I finally received a letter from Uncle Sam saying you're hereby drafted, having reached the age of eighteen. So I'd had a—I was a student prince for two years, year and a half, until I was drafted into the service.

SLOAN: Had you followed much of the war, or had your family kind of paid attention to what was going on?

JOSEPHS: The war was a million miles away. It could have been on the moon. But we didn't hear much about it. It wasn't in the paper much, and we really didn't care much. We had a very carefree life. I worked every Saturday for an army navy store—made a dollar an hour, which was a lot of money then. I made fifteen dollars over a weekend, working Saturday and Sunday, enough to pay for my cleaning bill and Coke date with my girlfriend. But those were the days, really glorious—carefree.

SLOAN: So what—how did you feel when you were drafted? I think I know the answer to this, but what was your reaction when you were drafted? (both speaking)



JOSEPHS: Well, I felt that I was really put upon by the government. I felt that it was so unfair, my being taken away from my panacea, my lovely campus. I didn't care so much about the studies. My favorite course was geology, which I enjoyed very much because it taught me a whole bunch. I learned all about cumulonimbus, and so on and so forth, but it's the days, after all these years, my college education. As I said, I write my daughters a letter a week, cursive. I don't curse too much, but when my first child was born I promised myself I would no longer use curse words, and we used a lot of them in the service.

SLOAN: I would imagine, yeah.

JOSEPHS: Some kids from New Jersey, their every second word was a curse word. That was a new thing for me.

SLOAN: Well, take me through induction and all that—kind of your early experience when you—because you—I mean, you weren't in ROTC or anything like that, so this was—(both speaking)

JOSEPHS: No, I was in nothing like that.

SLOAN: —this was your first exposure to the military, so—

JOSEPHS: I was inducted at Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, 1944, in February, and I was sent to Camp Maxey, up near Weatherford, Texas, and went through basic training there—six-week basic. And we shipped over to England—Liverpool, landed in Liverpool, England. And we were training to invade Normandy. We didn't know it, but we were. And we trained, and it was so cold there it would freeze your head off up in Liverpool—near Liverpool. Nottingham was where we were. And the wind just whistled through those tents like there was nothing there. And there was a little stove in the center of the tent. It was an eight-man tent. And the wind just whistled through there, and there was a charcoal fire going, but that didn't help much. Couldn't take a shower, because the showers were outside, and it was cold, cold, cold, as only England can get cold. That's what I said then. Of course, it was colder in Belgium.

So from England, we took off from Bournemouth after a couple of months of training there. And we boarded a ship and—on June the fifth, 1944, we boarded a ship and took off for the French coast, and we landed and invaded Normandy, Omaha Beach. Followed the Second Ranger Battalion in. So we were the first ones on the beach, actually. And a sergeant friend of mine, a good friend of mine—he was the only Jewish fellow in my company. He got hit by bullets the moment we hit the beach. He said, "Don't worry, Tex. I'll get you up the beach. It's a walk in the park." It was the first time I'd heard that, too. So he got shredded. He got shot by—you know, a dozen bullets entered his body. He was dead. I laid down in back of him and heard the bullets thud into him. And when they stopped to reload, during the silence I got up and took off for the—the hill, which was about fifty feet high, of sand, where the Germans were, and pillboxes. And there were sand traps and barbed wire and land mines, so I was damn lucky to get up there. And a company of engineers had put a bunch of TNT boxes in where the sand was the

shallowest, and they blew it up to smithereens. And we went through there and into where the Germans were. And we killed them. We had fire-blowers and machine guns and we were—you either kill or be killed.

SLOAN: Yeah.

JOSEPHS: And it was the quick or the dead. I told my guys to lay down and—so the snipers wouldn't hit them. And some of them got up, and some of them got killed.

SLOAN: Now, you were in the Ninety-Ninth Infantry Division.

JOSEPHS: Yeah, Indianhead at the time. I was in the Ninety-Ninth Infantry Division, headquarters company, 393rd Infantry. And we went up and we followed—we were transferred to the Twenty-Ninth Infantry because of our specialty, which was communications, which helped headquarters keep in touch with the rifle companies. So I was a switchboard operator and climbed telephone poles or trees to lay wire. Well, at age eighteen I was pretty wiry, you'll pardon the expression, pretty good at climbing trees. Of course, the trouble with that was a sniper could get you up in a tree and they were—my buddy Bob got hit by a sniper when he was up a tree, and I helped him down. The tree was icy. And I helped him down. He came back six weeks later. But I—I went through that—the Battle of the Bulge even, pretty much unscathed.

SLOAN: I'd like to go back a little bit if I could and have you—even in your basic training, what were some things that stood out, memories that stand out to you from basic?

JOSEPHS: Well, the heat at Weatherford was terrible. It was September and the—whatever month it was—February, March, April—the heat was terrible. A lot of guys got heat prostration from carrying a thirty-pound pack on their back. And it was rough. My introduction to the service was not very good. There were a lot of sand fleas and much heat and not enough water. And it was just desert. That's where we were.

SLOAN: Yeah. Well, I know there had to have been a lot of discussion going on about where you were going to go.

JOSEPHS: Well, there was speculation. Of course we had to go through basic. They shot bullets over our heads as we walked—as we went through barbed wire, and it was really rough on a lot of guys. A lot of guys were overweight and they had a hard time making it, but we made it.

SLOAN: So can you take me through that landing on Normandy? You're on the transport going in. I mean, what's going through your mind as you're—

JOSEPHS: Well, I was on an LST—landing ship, troops—and there were landing ship, troops behind us and in front of us. Some of them were hit directly by the shells and they went under—never got a chance to get on the beach. But fortunately, our landing ship was not hit. Some of the guys had convulsions. They were throwing up, they were so nervous. But the sergeant said, "Let's go. Let's get ready, men." So we locked and loaded

and they let us off at about a foot or two of water, and we walked—slogged up the beach. And that’s where my sergeant got hit. He lay there in a pool of blood. The blood, in fact—the froth of the waves carried the—were red from the blood of the soldiers who were trying to get on the beach.

SLOAN: So you said y’all advanced. You cleaned out a German pillbox?

JOSEPHS: Yeah. That’s the first thing we did, cleaned out a German pillbox. Some of the Germans tried to escape. They went—came out of the pillbox and we shot them. That was my first experience with shooting a German.

SLOAN: It’s a long way from Austin, Texas.

JOSEPHS: A long way from reality. It was reality. Life or death. We thought we were ready until we landed and ended up in Belgium, near a little town—or close to Aachen. And that’s where we—they hit us with the Battle of the Bulge. I woke up one morning and got out of my tent about daybreak and someone was shooting at us with two German tanks, big tanks. They were shooting at the trees above our heads, and the tree’s limbs just lopped off from the shells. And that was the first we knew that there was the Battle of the Bulge. I got hit with a little piece of shrapnel in the chest. And my major, the regimental commander, he got hit in the leg, and I had to half carry him, half drag him back to the—back to the OP, observation post. And there was an aid station there, and we got him bandaged up, and got—my wound had healed up pretty quickly. It coagulated. It was so cold that my blood coagulated very quickly.

SLOAN: Yeah, you were talking about, you didn’t know cold until you got to Belgium. Can you talk a little bit about the cold and conditions?

JOSEPHS: That was the worst winter that they’d had in fifty years. It didn’t get below zero for a month. And we were living in foxholes, which got to be pretty wet because it was raining and/or snowing and/or sleeting. And it was really miserable. My toes got so cold from the wet and the cold that I got trench foot, which means frozen toes. And when I—at the time they wanted to cut my toes off, I said, “No, not this child.” So they didn’t. And I—fortunately, when it gets to be too cold, my feet bother me a little bit.

SLOAN: But you’ve still got your toes.

JOSEPHS: Still got my toes. When they say, “*A sus pies*,” that means “on your toes,” I’m on my toes.

SLOAN: So that was your first experience also with trench warfare—

JOSEPHS: With what?

SLOAN: Trench warfare, where you were digging in to a position at the Bulge.

JOSEPHS: No, my first experience was when we landed on the beach. We went through bushes and trees and things like that, and there were Germans behind, it seemed like,

every bush. And we shot them as we went. They were using fourteen-year-old boys. That's how far down the list that they had gotten. They were using boys for—to kill people.

SLOAN: And so did you have any interaction with the French people while you were in France?

JOSEPHS: Only when I was given a two-day leave from our encampment in Belgium. I took a Red Ball truck down to Paris, and I met a beautiful French girl. And I was going to go up to her and said, "I'm a lonely Texan in the service, away far from home and loved ones." She spoke English. Her name was Charmaine, as I remember. She says, "I speak English." She spoke five languages, and she was reading a book as I approached her. And we became good friends. Naturally, I fell in love with her.

And when I got back—it started raining when I started to go back. It rained for two days and two nights. I couldn't get back. And I went back to where we were encamped in Belgium. And I said, "Sarge, I'm sorry I'm late, but it rained for two days and two nights." And he said, "What did you do?" I said, "Well, I met a beautiful girl." Well, he liked that. He said, "Well, I ought to get you for AWOL," away without leave. But he says, "I'll just take away your stripes." And he did. We were friends. And he was forty or fifty, pretty old for me. But he was a grizzled old sergeant. He was—had five stripes, three above and two below, and he was a first sergeant. Nice guy.

SLOAN: So did you adapt well to military life?

JOSEPHS: Not a bit, never did. Never did like it. Never did adapt to it. I did what I had to do, but I was happiest when I was sent to the cook's tent. He had D-bars, which were chocolate bars, which I enjoyed chocolate a whole bunch, and could get all I wanted to eat. Peeled potatoes, but that was—at least nobody was shooting at me. Sounds pretty interesting, but it wasn't.

SLOAN: Well, I know morale—what was morale like during the Battle for the Bulge?

JOSEPHS: Well, we were pretty much disabled, I must say. They shot—about a third of our regiment was taken out by a German—Germans capturing us or killing us. And it—morale was pretty low. But we were desperate, and we fought them all at the town where we were. I forget the name of the—

SLOAN: Have you been back?

JOSEPHS: Nope. Not to Belgium. I've been to Israel, Morocco, Spain, Italy, England, but not—not—to France [Belgium]. I went to—took my wife to France. She had never been to Paris. I took her to Paris for our fiftieth anniversary, and we enjoyed the heck out of that. Climbed the Eiffel Tower. It was a wonderful experience. A very romantic city, especially on our fiftieth anniversary.

SLOAN: Yes, I would imagine so.

JOSEPHS: Well, it's hard to imagine—being in love with a woman for fifty years.

SLOAN: That's a special woman. Well, you are such a romantic to tell—as you hear the places that you've been to visit. So it makes sense that you would go to Italy, and Paris, and Morocco, these sorts of places. You've got a romantic spirit.

JOSEPHS: Yup, I sure do. I write—I write poetry. Write my children poetry, even to my son. I said, “They said you couldn't do it, but you did it.” He got through medical school, which was very hard for him, because he went to Monterrey, Mexico, and the medical school. And they taught only in Spanish. He had to learn Spanish in six weeks, and he did. And he passed the course, speaks very—Spanish very well. He's a smart fellow. I was very proud of him. He's a good man. I was his scout master when he was a Boy Scout, and he got to be an Eagle Scout. I was very proud of that. His mother and his grandmother presented him with the Eagle Badge, and that's quite an accomplishment.

SLOAN: Well, we were talking about the Battle of the Bulge. When did you get a sense that the momentum was—you talked about how bad morale was—when things started to change?

JOSEPHS: We were at—Malmedy is the name of the town in Belgium. And we fought off the German guys in their tanks and their automobiles, and fought them off with an overwhelming show of ammunition and desperation. It was either live or die. A lot of guys died defending our flag, but we defended it.

SLOAN: Well, I know you were a communications specialist. Were you able to maintain good communications?

JOSEPHS: Not at that time.

SLOAN: Not at that time.

JOSEPHS: I mean, communications were shot to heck. There was no way to lay wire in that mess. Had to depend on walkie-talkies, which had just come into being, and they were not terribly dependable.

SLOAN: So once y'all moved forward from that position in Belgium, where did the Ninety-Ninth go?

JOSEPHS: Well, they'd broken us up so much that we were sent to a replacement depot, called a repple depple, and I was transferred to the Second Infantry Division, the Indianhead Division. And I remained a communications expert. And we were sent—with [General] Patton's ferocity, we fought our way into Frankfurt-Am-Main, and down through Aschaffenburg, and on down to Bavaria, which you read. So it's a beautiful country.

SLOAN: Yeah, what were your impressions of the country once you got into Germany?

JOSEPHS: Well, it was very green. They grow a lot of trees there. And they have beautiful highways. *Autobahns* are beautiful. You can go a hundred miles an hour. There's no speed limit.

SLOAN: Well, I would love to hear you—this story that you shared with me, I would love to hear you share it in your own words so we can record it, if you wouldn't mind. Talking a little bit about—you can begin with the jeep ride that you describe here with your friends.

JOSEPHS: Well, do you want me to tell you that it was a beautiful day for a ride? We were atop the Bavarian mountains looking down at little villages, which gleamed in the sun. People were sweeping up the cobblestones. And we were told to go down and check on a little town near München, Munich, called Dachau. And we were on our way to Dachau to find out what was going on there. And we got there and the first thing we saw when we got to—to Dachau was a sign over the entrance which says "Work Will Make You Free," "*Arbeit Macht Frei*." So we went through the gate there with three—about three dozen cabins. They had about fifty men each, I guess. And some trucks and some places we felt were gashouses, where people were gassed. And we shot a few Germans on their way—they were escaping. I had—by that time, I'd confiscated a tommy submachine gun, which is a powerful weapon, and I let them have it, all that I saw. To this day, I still don't buy anything German, made in Germany. I hated them so badly. And I'm afraid they're going to do it again.

I looked at the prisoners in their striped garb, so filthy and decimated. One of them moved, and I went over to him and he said, "*Bist a Yid?*" Are you Jewish? I said, "*Ich bin a Yid*." I am Jewish. And then I told him, "*Alles geet. Alles geet*." I speak a little Yiddish, which is pig-German. And—"Alles geet. Alles geet." All is good. All is good. And I opened my C rations and fed him a little soup—made a little soup for him. And he died two hours later in my arms. And I asked him what his name was. He said, "*Meine namen ist Herman*." "*Ich*." My name is Herman, too. So I had tears in my eyes, and I cry every time I think about it. This poor guy, he was about forty years old and weighed about fifty pounds, maybe. And that's how much he had been maltreated.

That's a hell of a load for a young fellow, nineteen years old. It was May of 1945. And we went—or late April. And that was when we went to Dachau. I had no idea that people—there were—so many people were in prison. Pentecostal people, priests, politicians, especially Jews had—behind bars, behind barbed wire, and treated like animals—worse than animals. There were beds there that—boards I might say. Hard boards they slept on. They were so tired when they got through working them that they just collapsed, I figured. So big, that's a hard load for a young fellow.

SLOAN: Well, when they—when you were—when you got orders to go over to Dachau, what were the—why were they sending you there, or what did they know about it then?

JOSEPHS: Well, I was part of I&R, intelligence and reconnaissance. And they sent us down there to check and see what was going on. They knew about concentration camps, but we didn't. So then they sent us to investigate what was going on as far as

concentration camps was concerned, and we found out quickly. It was a horrible experience. We had been through four battles already, and we thought we were immune from being shocked, but that was quite a shock. Blew—blew my mind. Had no idea such a thing existed.

SLOAN: Do you remember the moment when you knew this was something different?

JOSEPHS: Well, when I entered the concentration camp. I figured when they said *Arbeit Macht Frei*—means “Work Makes You Free”—I said, “That’s funny. That’s odd because it’s not true.” But they made the people believe it. And they—they gassed them. They killed them, lots of them. And I kept thinking, there’s so many wonderful lives wasted. Composers, artists, scientists were killed just because Hitler said, “We—we—all non-Aryans, we want to kill them.” And he was hell on wheels. Non-Aryans—you’re a non-Aryan, you weren’t—the perfect race. The Germans thought they were. He inculcated that in them. *Que más?* Have any other questions?

SLOAN: I do. I do. I just—you know, it’s hard to imagine what you saw and what you experienced.

JOSEPHS: I didn’t believe it myself. That’s why I didn’t talk about it for forty years. Lizzy will tell you, my wife, I just didn’t mention it. Although my sister, she came home from a date one time, when I was back in the States. She came in the front door, and I was dreaming that the Germans were invading. Had a P-38 cocked and ready, and she walked through the door. I was about to shoot her. I was really *verklemt*. In Jewish that means I was disorganized. She says, “Stop, Hank. Don’t—” you know. It was dark. It was about one o’clock. I had been sleeping and the Germans were after me.

SLOAN: Well, when you got to the camp, were there other US troops there?

JOSEPHS: Just we, at the moment, were there. The Seventh Infantry came later—a little later, but they were—they freed the camp literally. We were the first ones in.

SLOAN: Were there—was there still a German—as far as military?

JOSEPHS: There were some—a contingent of Germans, and we shot them, all that we could see.

SLOAN: How much resistance was there that was still there at the camp?

JOSEPHS: They were fleeing. We shot them as they ran.

SLOAN: So you mentioned you stayed with Herman for this period of time and comforted him. And then what did you do in the camp?

JOSEPHS: Oh, by then it was ready—it was getting dark. We were ready to leave, so we took off for Munich and joined our fellows in Munich, what there was of them, as I remember.

SLOAN: Did you—while you were there that afternoon that you were there, you did get a chance to look around the camp.

JOSEPHS: Yes, we did, as I said. We saw about three dozen barracks and a few automobiles and gas chambers. And we knew what they were for. There were people lying in the gas chambers, dead. And they had a ravine—ravine there and they had piled the bodies in the ravine and put lye on them. So it was rather horrible. Yeah, we had been through a hell of a lot, and then we had to go through that. How much can one take?

SLOAN: But as you said, it was very different than a battlefield.

JOSEPHS: Very different. We were very proud to have killed the Germans as they were leaving because they were the promulgators of much torture. And how can one man be that way toward another man and call himself a human being? That's more of an animal than a human being.

SLOAN: Well, once you rejoined your group in Munich, do you remember how you explained what you saw to them?

JOSEPHS: I told them about the concentration camp, how we had found it with the barbed wire around it and a ditch with water in it to keep people from getting out. And from there we went to Czechoslovakia, to Raczetzany, near the Austrian border.

SLOAN: Is that where you heard the news of the surrender?

JOSEPHS: Yes, on May the eighth, at Raczetzany, near Pilsen. Good beer.

SLOAN: Did you drink some Pilsen beer that day?

JOSEPHS: Yeah. (Sloan laughs) It was hot, and I got drunk. I don't drink beer but I drank a half a bottle and that shook me up. I don't drink to this day.

SLOAN: That was a happy day, though.

JOSEPHS: It sure was. Happy to be with my men, and happy to join the Russians, who were comrades at the moment.

SLOAN: Yeah, talk a little bit about meeting the Russians.

JOSEPHS: Well, we met the Russians and learned a few Russian words like *dobry vecher*, that's "good afternoon," and *comrade*. *Ya tebya lublu*, "I love you." I learned that from my mother, who spoke Russian.

SLOAN: Was the—interaction with the Russians was very friendly?

JOSEPHS: We were very friendly. They had vodka to drink and they loved to drink, the Russians. And there was Old Blood and Guts, with his pearl-handled .45s, and he was



saying, Give me enough tanks, and I'll go to Moscow. He hated the Russians. And they took over Czechoslovakia, whether we liked it or not.

SLOAN: What was your impression of Patton?

JOSEPHS: Braggadocio. He was onstage all the time. He enjoyed it very much. Should have been an actor, because that's the way he was. He didn't even know he was fully himself, but he enjoyed being Charlemagne and Napoleon all rolled into one. He was one of the wealthiest generals in the service. He came from a very wealthy family. And he could afford anything. But he was a great leader. He sure helped out, I think. He loved to see his name in the paper. Patton Does It Again.

SLOAN: Yeah, I've heard veterans say that George C. Scott did a good job.

JOSEPHS: He did a good job.

SLOAN: Very true, yeah.

JOSEPHS: Well, he got an Oscar for it.

SLOAN: I wanted to ask about the Dachau experience again. Did it change how you thought about what you were doing or the meaning of what you were doing? That you were able to participate?

JOSEPHS: Well, it was just part of the—the war, as far as I was concerned, people being imprisoned. I knew people were in prison during the war at the, as POWs. And these were all POWs, except that it was deadly. They—they gassed them, they killed them. If they couldn't use them they were shot or killed one way or the other. I felt bad because they would—had we arrived a day earlier, we may have saved a few lives. But we arrived when we did, and that was that.

SLOAN: Did you have any knowledge there that the camps—as you said, there were a variety of people in the camps, but that people of the Jewish faith were especially targeted with the camps? Did you know that at the time?

JOSEPHS: No, I had no idea. In fact, it was the first thing that we knew, was when we entered the camp and we saw who was there. All kinds of people, Gypsies. They'd had all their—Gypsies love gold, and they had everything confiscated from them that was gold, that was worth anything. The Germans took everything. The real non-Aryans. The super race. It's like our governor, Perry, thinks he's a member of the super race. Of course, we don't like him much.

SLOAN: Well, the surrender occurs on the eighth. The party with the Russians is going on. I know you had to be homesick.

JOSEPHS: Oh yeah, I was homesick all the time. It was great news that the Axis had crumbled, and that peace was declared.

SLOAN: So where did you go after that?

JOSEPHS: Went to Czechoslovakia. And they'd been chasing me all over, trying to tell me about my father being ill. And we went—from there we went by truck to Le Havre—in France—harbor, and got on a ship and went back to Boston, to Myles Standish, Camp Myles Standish. Now Fort Myles Standish, right outside of Boston. First thing I did was call my sister. The Red Cross allowed us one phone call, so I called my sister. She said, "They buried Dad three days ago," which was bad news for me. I'd wanted to see him at least. And I came home on sick leave and was let out of the service in October, I think.

SLOAN: After the Japanese surrender?

JOSEPHS: Right.

SLOAN: So you didn't have enough points at that point to get out?

JOSEPHS: I did.

SLOAN: You did have enough points?

JOSEPHS: Yeah. I had a few decorations.

SLOAN: What decorations did you have?

JOSEPHS: Well, I had the Purple Heart. I had the Bronze Star, that's a lot of points, and a few others.

SLOAN: Was your Purple Heart from your shrapnel injury that you had in Belgium?

JOSEPHS: Yeah. Yeah, they examined me when I brought the major in.

SLOAN: Any lasting problems with that—that injury?

JOSEPHS: Nope. In fact, I'd had open heart surgery since then, and—just a lucky guy. Twice lucky, three times lucky. Married the most wonderful woman.

SLOAN: Well, you're overly blessed. That's true.

JOSEPHS: Made lots of money, put it away. Like I told my children, it's not how much you make, but how much you keep. (Sloan laughs) And that's very important.

SLOAN: Well, when we were talking earlier, you took over—you took your father's place in the—was it a dry-goods store or a pawn shop?

JOSEPHS: I've changed it into a pawn shop.

SLOAN: You changed it in to a pawn shop.

JOSEPHS: Because the—our sergeant would lend the guys five bucks on their watches, their service watches, and when they got paid two weeks later, they'd pay him back ten dollars. I said, "That's a hell of a deal." So I said, "I want in on that deal." So we went in the pawn shop business, lending a dime at a time.

SLOAN: And as you were telling me, it worked out for you.

JOSEPHS: Well, in my ignorance, I was lucky. Whether to be lucky or smart, it's better to be lucky.

SLOAN: And this was a business that your mother was involved in as well.

JOSEPHS: Absolutely. She was a keystone.

SLOAN: Are there some stories that stand out to you from your long career in the pawn business?

JOSEPHS: Well, one that my wife hates is the one in which a guy walked in and said, "I want to borrow five bucks on my eye." Had a prosthetic eye. Pulled it out of his head. He had gotten it in the service. He says, "I want five dollars; I need a bottle of wine." I loaned him five dollars on the wine. Some people came in later—he never did come back. People came in later and said, "What's the strangest thing you ever took in? I pull out the box with the eye in it. I said, "Here," and showed them the prosthetic eye, which was a beautiful brown eye with veins running through it. So we had some farmers come in and they had seen the eye, and they were looking for a wedding set. I told them, I said if they bought the wedding set, I'd give them the eye. So sure enough they bought a wedding set, I gave them the eye, and that was the last of that. That's a funny, funny story.

Had a—it was a Saturday night, cold in Corpus. And when it's cold in Corpus, it's cold. It was pretty cold. And a man was standing on a corner, Afro-American, with a bag of groceries he'd gotten from the H-E-B store two blocks up the street, when a Latin American guy came up behind him and slit his throat from ear to ear. Well, he came in the store, and he's bleeding and he's pointing to his neck. He was bleeding profusely. I sat him down in a chair and put a wet towel around his neck, and called the ambulance. Ambulance came and got him. Six weeks later a man walked in the store. It was a Saturday night again. Man walked in the store and in a husky voice he said, "I want to thank you for saving my life," in a husky voice. And there were stitches across his throat from ear to ear. Here was the guy, I'd saved his life. And that was a strange thing that happened. But I've had lots of strange things happen.

SLOAN: What's the best deal you ever made?

JOSEPHS: Best deal I ever made was a doctor friend of mine wanted to buy a diamond for an engagement ring for his wife. So I sold him a beautiful teardrop-shaped diamond, three and a half karats, for \$29,000. That was the best deal I ever made. Best deal I ever made, really, was I bought a Russian-cut diamond, round diamond. It was two karats, but very shallow. And I bought it for \$1,500, which is very reasonable for a one and a half

karat diamond. So I took in a ring from a guy, with a bunch of half karats in it, five half karats, two and two, and one fifty-pointer. So a guy walked in the store, he says, "I've got a ring here. I want to dress it up." He was an oil—he sold leases, oil leases. And he wanted a good looking ring. I said, "Well, I'll be glad to help you make up a ring." So I took the one karat, put it in the center of his horseshoe, and the half karats on the sides of the horseshoe. Charged him \$12,000, so I made about 300 percent on that. So that's—you know, imagination works a good deal in any business. So I imagined that. So I took my wife out for dinner that evening. (laughs) Told her to take an—take anything she wanted.

SLOAN: Well, I'd like to ask—you know, we had talked about what you knew was going on at the time there, with the liberation. But as you look back on it and I know you've thought about it a lot since then, what has it meant for you to know that that's part of your life story, that you participated, and you were a liberator?

JOSEPHS: Well, it made me very proud to be able to say that I helped liberate a concentration camp. It made me a little different from other people who did not have that privilege, so that's the way I felt about it. I felt very proud to have done it, to have held a guy in my arms until he passed away, see what war can do. It made me hate war. I'm a very peaceful guy anymore. Haven't killed anybody lately. There's no guarantee that I won't.

SLOAN: I'll watch my step.

JOSEPHS: I got a pistol ready.

SLOAN: (laughs) Well, what's it been like for you to—because you made a decision at some point that you did want to talk about it and you did want your children to know. Can you talk about why you made that decision?

JOSEPHS: Well, very few parents open up to their children, and I have four lovely kids that I adore. And I want them to know what their dad was like, so I wrote an autobiography of myself. Put a couple of poems of myself that I wrote and—among other things, my whole life, from inception practically, and sent each of them a copy, so they would have a genuine assertion as to their father's having been here. I hope you don't mind my using a big word.

SLOAN: I like that word. I'm going to write it down. (laughs)

JOSEPHS: But I have some bright children, and they're all normal, thank God. And that's the trouble with being an atheist. When they sneeze you can't say, God bless you.

SLOAN: I heard you say, "Thank God," in there.

JOSEPHS: Well, there are no atheists in foxholes.

SLOAN: That's right. Well, I'll ask that question since you've raised it. Through your faith—I mean, how did you think about that experience?

JOSEPHS: Well, I wanted my children to be good people, so we joined Temple Beth-El B'nai Israel Synagogue when our son was very young, six years old. And through the temple, I saw so many of my friends who were faithful believers in God that I became a believer, whether I wanted to or not. Being an agnostic all my life, I still innately—you can write that down, too. Innately I believe in God, the God—a pantheistic god. You know what that is?

SLOAN: Yes.

JOSEPHS: *Pantheism*, good word.

SLOAN: It is a good word. Well, Mr. Josephs, I want to thank you for your service. Robert and I both want to thank you for your service.

JOSEPHS: Thank you, gentlemen.

SLOAN: Is there something we should have asked you about that we didn't get a chance to talk about?

JOSEPHS: Well, I have a birthday next month. I'm going to be eighty-six. And I've lived so long, so luckily, I hope I make it, and my wife too. She's my partner. I've grown to really depend on her a whole bunch as the man of the house, since I can't do it anymore.

SLOAN: Well, she's a good partner. She's in the other room listening to us right now.

R. JOSEPHS: Every word. (Sloan laughs)

JOSEPHS: She's a wonderful woman.

R. JOSEPHS: Oh, come on.

SLOAN: (Laughs) All right, well, thank you again for sitting down with us.

*end of interview*