

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Nazi Germany Project

Germany, 1930's to 1940's

O. H. 235

KARL KONRAD

Interviewed

by

Steven R. Ard

on

July 12, 1981

KARL KONRAD

Karl Konrad was born in Jaad, Rumania, on March 1, 1909. His father, Michel, returned to his saddler business after fighting in World War I. Upon completion of his basic education, Konrad spent three years learning the cutlery trade. Eventually he had his own shop, and employed twenty men.

He served in the Romanian Army in the early 1930's. He was recalled to the service when World War II was imminent. Because of an agreement with Germany, all Germans from Romania were transferred to the German Army. At first, he was stationed in Yugoslavia where guerrilla raids were devastating, then he was ordered to the Russian front in Hungary. The war ended for Konrad after he was sent to Dachau for more training in gun repair, because there he was captured by the Americans. He spent the remainder of the war in prisoner of war camps until July of 1946.

Karl Konrad married his wife, Martha, on June 13, 1943. They had two children, Reinhold, now deceased, and Karl. After coming to the United States, he worked for the Sheet and Tube Company from 1952 until 1959, and part-time in a body repair shop. In 1960 he opened his own body shop, and retired in 1974. Konrad attends the Honterus Lutheran Church, and has been a member of the Saxon Club in Youngstown since 1952.

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INTERVIEWEE: KARL KONRAD

INTERVIEWER: Steven R. Ard

SUBJECT: Life in Nazi Germany, Impressment into German Army.

DATE: July 12, 1981

A: This is an interview with Karl Konrad for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Germany during the 1930's and 1940's by Steven R. Ard at the Saxon Club in Youngstown, 710 South Meridian Road, on July 12, 1981, at approximately 4 o'clock p.m.

Karl, do you want to begin by telling me when and where you were born?

K: My name is Karl Konrad. I was born on March 1, 1909 in Jaad, Romania.

A: Do you want to tell me a little bit about what it was like growing up in Romania?

K: I can remember World War I when my father went in the war. I was five years old. Sure, it was tough. There wasn't much food. In 1918 my father came back. He was a saddle maker. Afterwards, he had it a little bit better, but the first years, and the war times were real tough.

A: Did your father talk about the war?

K: I cannot say much about the war because I was too young at this time. I went to school six years, and then I went to learn my trade. I finished my gradeschools in 1922. When I was 21 years old, I went into the service, two years in the Romanian Service, 1922 to 1939. In 1939 the Second World War started. When the war started

I had to go back into the service again in Romania until 1943. In 1943 I went into the German Army until 1945. I became a prisoner of war.

A: Going back to as you are kind of growing up in Romania, were you aware of, politically, things that were going on?

K: In Romania they have so many parties that there was, every three months, another government. I remember that 1929 and 1930 were the Depression years because over there it slowed down too. The government got changed almost every three months.

A: Did you belong to a political party there?

K: No.

A: Did you follow any of the elections?

K: No.

A: How come?

K: I was not interested. When there were elections there was just a yes vote and a no vote. When you went to the election, you had a little identification card. The girl asked you, "Are you Mr. Konrad?" I said, "Yes." Boom, they type it down, yes. I voted already.

A: You mean it wasn't a very fair election?

K: No.

A: Did you only vote once?

K: No, I voted more times, but sometimes I was not interested in it.

A: When you went into the Romanian Army can you tell me a little bit about what that was like? Do you remember your training?

K: The training was tough. The food was not too good. The clothing was not too good. Six months later I became corporal, and a year later sergeant. I was discharged as a sergeant in the Romanian Army.

A: Can you tell me a little bit about the 1930's in Romania? You said that it wasn't really a depression, but it was a slow down.

K: It was a slow down. I made money in 1929. I made 28 or 29 lei, that means money, an hour. Then I made only 3 or 4 lei an hour. Everything dropped down a bit. There was no work, and everybody was happy to get it.

A: What kind of work were you doing out there?

K: I was a cutler.

A: Can you tell me a little bit about the cutlery business?

K: In the cutlery business we made all kinds of knives, scissors, and other tools that everybody needs.

A: Was this a small shop where you made everything by hand?

K: Everything was made by hand. I had my own shop, and I employed twenty men. Most of it they made by hand.

A: Can you tell me a little bit about making a knife, or a pair of scissors? How hard is that?

K: You have to press it out, grind it, polish it, and make a handle on it.

A: Was it hard to get the steel?

K: No. There was steel.

A: We're talking about making cutlery, and this is in the 1930's, right?

K: Yes, the 1930's.

A: You really didn't have any problem getting steel?

K: No. Not at all.

A: Was it local steel you were using?

K: No. It all came from Germany.

A: All from Germany?

K: Germany.

A: You said you were discharged from the Romanian Army, did you not renew your enlistment?

K: No. Romania and Germany had an agreement. All Germans

from Romania had to go into the German Army. They discharged you from the Romanian Army, and enlisted you in the German Army. We came to Vienna. We spent three days in Vienna, and they shipped us down to Yugoslavia. I stayed the entire time in Yugoslavia. In January, 1945, they sent me back to Germany, to school. After that, on May 1, I was captured and was made a prisoner of war.

A: What was your assignment in Yugoslavia?

K: I repaired the machine guns, arms, and things like that.

A: Who was the German Army fighting now?

K: The German Army was good fighters. There's no question about that. It was really tough in Yugoslavia with the guerrillas because they attacked us at night and disappeared by daylight.

A: Did you ever come under attack by the guerrillas?

K: Almost every day.

A: Almost every day? Can you tell me about that?

K: One night, about in 1944 in November, I don't remember the exact date, when we were in a small village, they attacked us still. There were about sixty soldiers missing, 45 dead, and about 50 injured. They took everything we had from the kitchen, the horses, and everything. In daylight, they disappeared.

A: They were pretty strong in a sense that they could come in and cause that much damage at one time?

K: Yes. Germany became weaker and weaker everyday because they were too spread out. Maybe there were two or three divisions in Yugoslavia. That was not much manpower.

A: When they pulled out of Yugoslavia, you went back to Germany?

K: No. They pulled us out, and they put us on the Russian front in Hungary. After that, they sent me back to Germany to train me more about gun repair.

A: You repaired guns on the Russian front in Hungary as well?

K: Yes.

- A: When you came back to Germany, where did they send you, to what city? Do you remember?
- K: It was Dachau. Over there was the school for bakeries, for all trades. I was there three months before the Americans came in, and took me prisoner. I was a prisoner of war until 1946. In July I got my discharge papers. In 1952 I came to the United States.
- A: When the Americans took you prisoner, where did they send you? Did they hold you there?
- K: Every month they sent us to another camp. I was in Uhlm. I was in Heidelberg. I was in France, and Babenhauser in Germany. We were all over.
- A: Can you describe the prisoner of war camps that you were held in? What was it like? Were they large camps?
- K: Large camps, yes. In Heidelberg there were 120 thousand soldiers prisoners.
- A: How were you treated?
- K: All right.
- A: How was the food?
- K: In the beginning it was not too good but later on it was enough to survive.
- A: What was the attitude of the men; the morale, now that they were taken prisoner? Towards the end of the war, were they glad to be prisoners?
- K: Everybody was glad that the war was over. We knew it, months ahead, that Germany was going to lose the war.
- A: Let's talk a little bit about the camps once more. What kind of living quarters did they put you in?
- K: Tents. In the beginning, sure, it was bad. We had straw on the ground. After, we had some bunk beds, and so on. It was half decent. What can you expect when you're a prisoner? They cannot give you a TV, or radio, or something like that.
- A: You talked about Heidelberg. How did they organize that camp? I mean you had 120 thousand men there, at least.

- K: Yes. They had to teach us all. They had one man take charge of so many people, about 100, and others keep so many, and so on.
- A: How did the Americans communicate with you in terms of what you were supposed to do, and when you were supposed to do it?
- K: We did nothing. We got our food in the morning, three times a day, and we just walked around. We had nothing to do. There was an interpreter.
- A: Were there officers there with you?
- K: No, for the officers, there were different places. I don't know where.
- A: Was there any type of organization set up among the men, saying this person was in charge of doing something?
- K: Yes.
- A: How did you pick that person?
- K: I became one too. They picked me out one time. One guy had to go to the hospital. He said, "Karl, would you take over the company. I will be back in two days." In a company there are 120 men. I was stuck with them for a couple of months.
- A: What kind of problems did you have to take in?
- K: I had to go and get the food in the morning for the 120 men, and for dinner, and supper. I was allowed to take one man to change the clothes. One man a day was allowed to go for a haircut, one man every day.
- A: Where did you go to change clothes, and get a haircut?
- K: There were warehouses.
- A: Inside the camp?
- K: Yes. They give you pants if you say you need it. You tell the man over there, you need a pair of pants, or you need a shirt, or you need shoes. They give you shoes.
- A: Did you speak English, or did you have to have an interpreter?

K: I had an interpreter. I did not speak English when I came here.

A: You learned English after arriving here in the country?

K: Yes, that's right.

A: After the war was finally over, and they released you, when was that again?

K: June or July of 1946. After that I started working in a machine factory.

A: Where at?

K: In Frankfurt. I worked there until 1948. In 1948 I went to Bad Tolz. That's close to Munich. There was more food. My wife was in Russia for 26 months in a labor camp. She came back in 1947. She was just bones and skin. I went to look for another job and a little bit more food. After the war, Germany had almost nothing. In 1948 they changed the money. After that there was everything you needed.

A: Do you suppose there was a shortage of food and other things because of the money?

K: Yes, and the black market.

A: Did you buy on the black market, and sell on it?

K: Yes, I bought bread on the black market.

A: How much would a loaf of bread be on the black market?

K: On the black market it was 35 marks. The regular price, everything was frozen, was 35 pfenigs. You had to go on the black market. I was lucky. I got a package from the United States with a pound of coffee. I sold the coffee. I got so much for the coffee, I bought ten loaves of bread.

My wife came, so I had to do something to feed her. We received the food on food stamps. You got so much meat, or so much fish a week, not by day, but just by week.

A: Did the government try to stop the black market activity, or did they just let it go on?

K: After the war there was not a real government. They tried, but what can you do? The people who are hungry

will do anything.

A: You say the problem of the black market seemed to be solved when they changed the money?

K: Yes, the inflation ended when they changed the money. Nobody knew. It came on the radio that you will go to the bank, and you will pick up 80 marks. Eighty marks were issued per head. They gave you it no matter if you had a baby or others in the household. You go and pick up so much, no matter how much other money you had, new money from the government. They gave you the money, and you had to live on that. Now, even with a job, nobody had much money. Right away everything dropped.

A: Why do you suppose they didn't change the money before that? Do you have any idea?

K: I have no idea. Everything was frozen in Germany. They froze it after the war. No matter which store you went to it was all the same price. I was one of the highest paid in the factory.

A: What did you do in the factory?

K: I was a machine fitter. The highest pay was one mark and forty-five pennies an hour. That was the highest you could make. The labor was making around one mark and fifteen. That was the difference between here and there. A skilled worker makes twenty dollars an hour, the laborer is still making just three, three and a half when we got a raise.

Everybody just got the same, not a percentage, but, say, ten pennies. Laborers had to buy bread, and the others too had to buy bread. It has to be the same mark. With a percentage you have to figure out your wage. In a year it almost doubles. The small man still got just a few pennies.

When we had a steel strike, in 1959, I got a five cent raise with a percentage. Whoever had a high job, got a forty or fifty cent raise.

A: This is when you were at Sheet and Tube?

K: Sheet and Tube. In a couple of years, whoever got the high pay, his raise doubled almost. The laborer, all the time, gets a few pennies.

A: After the war did you work in the machine shop the whole time; or did you go on to another job?

K: Yes. I was in Frankfurt, and then in 1948 I went to Bad Tolz, close to Munich. I worked as a cutler again. I was there until 1952 when I came over to the United States.

A: Why did you come over here?

K: That's a good question. We had no apartment to live in. We had just a small room for four people. I had my uncle here. He made the papers out. I turned the papers in, and we went to the CIA. They questioned me for two hours, and everything. I got the okay, and I came over.

A: Why did you have to go to the CIA?

K: I can't tell you. It was the FBI, or whoever. I don't know. They question everybody. They asked where you were, what rank you had, and if you fought against America. I never fought against Americans. Most of the time I was in Yugoslavia.

In the factory we were treated really good. That was a big difference from the German factory. Over there you were a name, not just a number. Here in the USA you're just a number. Every morning the superintendent or the engineer came in the morning and said, "Good morning Mr. so and so. How are you today? Have you any complaints?" I said, "No." He went to the other guy. This was every day. That was the difference between here and there. I don't know how it was in the other German factories, but where I worked it was A-1. There were 700 employees. They changed machines with foreign countries for meat, for butter, and for clothes. The company, when they changed, they gave us butter. They gave it to everybody, free, about half of a pound for every worker. The company was half union and half nonunion. In the company there was no difference whether you were a union man or not. I never belonged to the union until I came to the United States. I was never in a union.

A: What do you think about American unions?

K: I think that the American union made the mess that we have today. When there isn't money, they give you a raise. They'll put it on the product. After three years, they come up with a new contract asking for money. They put it on the product, and it goes up, and up, and up. They never pull the line. They don't say that is too much, that's enough. How much is

enough? It never was enough. I told them to say I don't want a raise because as soon as we get a raise, we have to pay double in the store. They always said, "You're a company man."

A: Did you ever see any of the Nazi leaders like Adolph Hitler at any of the gatherings or political meetings?

K: No.

A: Did you ever hear him on the radio?

K: I heard him on the radio. Yes, I heard Hitler on the radio. I heard Goebbels on the radio. Of these two, I mostly heard Goebbels. Don't ask me now what they said.

A: When you heard them, what were your impressions of these men?

K: I will tell you the truth. I never belonged to a party. Today I don't believe everything the politicians say. I didn't believe everything Hitler and Goebbels said. These politicians can tell you lots and lots of things, and they never keep it. It was the same thing in Romania. They promised you so much, and in three months they took so much money, and they went to Switzerland. Another guy comes, and he has to run the country, and he does the same thing, and another one does the same thing. That's why I don't believe everything I hear, not even what they say today in the paper. I don't believe everything.

A: When you were serving in the Romanian Army and then later in the German Army, what did the soldiers with you think about Hitler or some of the other leaders? Did you talk about them?

K: No.

A: There was never any discussion about what they were trying to do in terms of what they wanted the Army to accomplish?

K: No. I tell you the truth. We didn't know anything that was going on. We heard later on from the concentration camps, and so on. We didn't know anything that existed. Everything was so secret. We didn't know. We found out after the war things about the Jews that we didn't know. I was in a city where there was a concentration camp too, but that was separate. When I came over there the first time, I heard about the concentration camps, and what was going on over there. Who knows? In the German Army they keep everything so secret, you don't know anything.