

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Germany After World War II

Personal Experience  
O.H. 890

ROBERT F. HELD  
Interviewed  
by  
Stephen Evanson  
on  
March 9, 1981

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Germany After World War II

INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT F. HELD  
INTERVIEWER: Stephen Evanson  
SUBJECT: Marshall Plan, reconstruction of Germany,  
wars proceeding World War II  
DATE: March 9, 1981

E: This is an interview with Robert F. Held for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Germany after World War II, by Steve Evanson, on March 9, 1981.

Mr. Held, what do you remember about your parents and your family?

H: I came from a family of four. I am the oldest. I have one brother and two sisters. My father died in 1970. My mother is still alive; she is 76 years old.

E: Did your whole family work during that time?

H: My father worked when I was younger. My mother started working during the war. We were already in school at the time she started working.

E: There had to be no group effort to work?

H: No.

E: Do you remember what your father did for a living?

H: Yes, he had a milk route. When I was very small I can remember he used to have his own dairy.

E: Where was that at?

H: In Freemont, Ohio. He had this dairy and it was a very small operation; he only had one or two people working for him.

E: Did they use trucks?

H: Yes, he had a truck. The one man bottled it in the garage. My dad went out and delivered it.

E: During that time of the Depression, do you remember what you ate, what type of food?

H: We had it pretty well made during the Depression because my father was never out of work. In fact, he had so much work that he used to work seven days a week. He didn't make a lot of money, but we never wanted for anything. We always had plenty because he worked.

E: This was his own business?

H: Yes. He had the small dairy for a number of years and then he sold it out. Then, he went to work for the gentleman that he sold it to. As I was growing up, he was actually working for someone else.

E: Can you tell us something about your childhood, perhaps maybe some activities you did as a child?

H: Just the normal things. I was brought up in a small town, which is different than being in a city. At one time, we lived in a rural area; that's probably the part that I remember best, when I was 10 or 11 years old.

E: People lived off the land?

H: There were farmers all around us. This was just a little village of about 100 people. My dad would go into town to work. We had a lot of fun then, because there was a creek we used to swim in.

E: During that time and at that location, what were some of the trends? What were some of the nice things to have during the Depression?

H: I heard of the soup lines and people being out of work, and some of the really rough things, but in a small town, you didn't see that. I went to a parochial school, I can remember that.

E: What was the name of that school?

- H: St. Joseph's. We used to have to pay our book bill; that was always the big thing.
- E: Were there certain kinds of trends, perhaps fancy cars or types of clothes?
- H: Those things really didn't come along until the beginning of the war. When the war started, people started making more money. Then they started spending more. At the time I was brought up, unless you came from a wealthy family, you didn't have things like cars. The only car we ever had was the family car. The young people never drove cars. The big thing was riding a bike to school. I graduated in 1944, and there were just a couple kids who drove cars. Along the whole side of the building there would be bike racks with hundreds and hundreds of bikes.
- E: Do you remember the first place you were employed at?
- H: That was the big thing, most of us got jobs. During my younger years, I would work during the summer for a dollar a day. We were weeding dill. They would have these rows of dill and we would go out and pull the weeds out of the dill. We picked tomatoes, also. The Heinz Company was there. We would go out in the fall and pick tomatoes. When I was in high school, I started out working for the A & P; I used to be a stockboy at the A & P. I was about 16 then. That was during school; I used to get out early and go to work. We used to buy our own clothes.
- E: After you graduated, did you look for a job?
- H: I got out of high school in 1944 and the war was just towards the end. I decided that I wanted the city; I didn't like the small town. I always dreamed of the city. A week after I graduated, I took off for Cleveland. I had an aunt that lived there, so I went there and stayed with her. It wasn't very difficult to get a job because there was a big man shortage; most of the men were in the service. The result of it was that employers needed help. I worked in the bomber plant in Cleveland.
- E: During that time, though, right before graduation, did you have any feelings of joining the service?
- H: Not really. In fact, I was afraid, to be honest about it.
- E: Because of what they were publicizing?
- H: Yes. You're always afraid of getting killed. You didn't know what to expect.

E: I want to lead up to before you went in the service.

H: I went to Cleveland and had to make my living. My aunt had a little pull; she knew the man that worked at the employment office of this plant. She told me where to go and to ask for him. I went there and talked to him, and I ended up getting a job. I worked there for a while and then, I had various other jobs in Cleveland. Finally, I was drafted in 1949.

E: Apparently, employment was pretty popular then?

H: Yes, because of the war.

E: What inspired you to join the service in 1949?

H: I was drafted. I was in between jobs and had called the draft board, and they told me when I would probably be drafted. I took it for granted and went ahead and prepared. I didn't have anybody to turn back to; I had to pay my own way. When it got down to when I was supposed to be receiving this call, I didn't get anything. I called the draft board and she said they had a small quota this month and it didn't include me. The month before, they had told me I was the top man or the second man down or something. At that time, I had already worked it into my mind that I would be going. She had told me that they had a couple of volunteers, so I said I would like to volunteer, also. She said, "Fine," and put my name at the top of the list, and I went.

E: Was this the Army?

H: Yes.

E: How did your family feel about your enlistment?

H: They really didn't have too much to say about it because I was not living at home.

E: After entering the service, did you receive any kind of training or anything?

H: Yes, I went through my basic training at Fort Knox. That used to be where they sent the people from Ohio.

E: At that time, did you think of the service as a career?

H: Not really. I got in and they put me in a personnel office, and I rather liked it. What determines whether you like the service or not depends on the people you work for and the job you get. It just so happened that I got into a good set-up. They were going to release

me early so I turned around and enlisted. After I had left basic training, I was down in Fort Hood, Texas. They were getting ready to go to Germany.

E: What was the name of your division?

H: Second Armor Division. I was in division artillery; that was one of the major commands. They drained the division and took a lot of people to Korea. The division was sitting there short of a lot of people. They beefed up the division then and sent it to Germany.

E: Do you know the date you left the United States?

H: I think it was in June of 1950. It took us seven days to get to Germany; we went by boat.

E: Where in Germany did you arrive?

H: Bremerhaven, that is the name of the port city.

E: So you knew what was ahead of you?

H: Yes. There was no war going on at that time. The war was already over. The general told us that our mission was to keep the Russians out of Western Europe.

E: After arriving in Germany, can you tell us about some of the people you met?

H: I was assigned to Baumholder, a big artillery range. After the war, Germany was broken up into sections, like zones. At the time we got over there, they had just decided to mix the zones. Prior to that, the Americans went to just the American zone. When you went to those zones, you could almost tell the economy of the country of the zone by the way the people were. This was right after the war, and Germany was beat to a pulp. When you went to the English or French zone, they were always a little depressed because they didn't have the money that the Americans did, and you could really tell the difference. When we went there, they decided to mix the zones, so we moved into the French zone. We were the first Americans in the French zone. The French still controlled the post, but they built new barracks and we had their old barracks which they had to recondition.

E: Was this during the period of the Marshall Plan?

H: No. The Marshall Plan was right after the war. It was a plan instituted by General Marshall because the German government was down and there was just nothing. They gave food and what have you to the people, in

other words, to sort of get them started, or they would starve. They were not able to take care of themselves.

E: What were some of the places that you were assigned to?

H: The name of the town that I was assigned to was Baumholder.

E: What was that town like?

H: We used to call it "slumholder" because it had so much mud. It was a little town and it had all the old cobblestone streets. We were in the big range up there with the artillery, the big guns and tanks. It was so muddy it was unbelievable. With the vehicles running back and forth, there was about three inches of mud on the street.

E: Was there still a lot of hostility toward the Americans?

H: There was a little bit, but not that much. In fact, most of them rather liked us, especially since the French had been there and they used the people as much as they could. They didn't get very much out of the French. When the Americans came along, they rather liked us because of the fact that we gave them more. Some of the men that later took their families over, hired some of these women as maids to work in their houses. The women said they liked us so much better because we were humane. The French wanted them to work seven days a week with no time off. We treated them more like they were humans.

E: While in Germany, what did you do socially?

H: I had a good time. With the rank that I had--I was a sergeant--I was allowed to bring my car over. Right around a military post, particularly overseas, the people don't normally like the troops. There are too many of them in one place, and they drink and stuff. I had a group of selective friends and we would go 25, 30 miles from the post to a town, and we really had a good time. We were a rarity because there weren't any other Americans around. We knew how to behave ourselves and the people liked us, and we liked the people. We really had a good time.

The one town I used to go to is called Koblenz. After I had been there about a month, Special Service arranged a tour. It didn't cost us anything. They provided the bus. One person was a tour guide and we went to this town, Uhrbar, and stayed at a hotel. It was the time when the grapes were coming and there were a lot of festivities.

E: During that time, did you hear of any secret clubs going on? I understand there was a lot of Nazi hunting going on at that time.

H: I never saw anything like that.

E: Did you see the people starting to feel like they were a renaissance?

H: They're very industrious people. Koblenz was leveled, and the first thing they did was to go in and clean a lot of that up. When I was there, you could get through the streets all right, but you could go to sections of the town and it might be boarded up.

E: Did you see any type of Hitler sympathizer's?

H: No. They didn't really like Hitler anymore at that time. They realized what he had done then. If they were leaning towards Hitler, they would have never admitted it.

E: How long did you remain in Germany?

H: I was there for three years.

E: Were you mobile or in a particular town?

H: I was at Baumholder all the time. I used to travel around since I had a car. A couple of times, I took vacations, also. I took leaves and we drove through other countries, too. I was through Paris and all through France, Belgium.

E: Did you find the reconstruction going on there, too? Did you notice any change in the people?

H: Those countries had the war, but it wasn't as much as they had it in Germany. There were certain areas that were hit, but it was pretty well cleaned up by that time.

E: While you were in Germany those three years, could you tell us anything that I might have left out?

H: I got married over there.

E: What year did you get married?

H: 1954. You couldn't get married until a month before you left. A lot of them just lived together consequently.



E: Can you tell us how you met your wife? Was she a native German?

H: Yes, she lived in Idar-Oberstein. I met her through a friend.

E: In 1954, you decided to return to America.

H: Yes.

E: After arriving back in the United States, did you sort of miss Germany at all?

H: Yes. Of course, it was a different world then, because I had just gotten married before I came back. I was assigned in Texas at Fort Bliss.

E: How long did you remain in the service?

H: I spent 22 years in the service. I retired in 1971.

E: Did you specialize?

H: I was in the personnel office all the time. That's how I came to Youngstown; I was with the ROTC at Youngstown University. Before that, I was at Fort Bliss for almost six years. Then, I was able to get into a unit that was going to Italy. I went from there to Italy and spent three years in Italy. After my three-year tour in Italy was up, I applied for ROTC duty and I ended up in Youngstown. That was in 1964. I have been here pretty much since, except that I went to Korea and to Vietnam. I was also on recruiting duty for a year.

E: You were in Vietnam?

H: Yes.

E: Did you see active duty?

H: Yes, I was assigned over there. I worked in the personnel office over there. I was on the post called Long Bien.

E: When did you first arrive there?

H: I went to Korea in 1967 and came back in 1968. The tour was about 13 months in Korea. You couldn't take family. Then, I went on recruiting duty for a year and they sent me to Vietnam. I came back in 1970 and retired in the first part of 1971.

E: When you went to Vietnam, what was the first reaction you got? What was the talk about?

H: It was hotter than hell, that was the first reaction. I left here before Christmas and I was dressed with the wool uniform on. You get off of that plane and you just can't imagine how hot it is over there.

E: Was there a lot of activity going on?

H: It was winding down when I got there. You're a little apprehensive when you get there and they brief you. You hear the mortars in the background and that doesn't help matters much. You get over that very fast. It takes you about a month to get used to the heat.

E: What was your job?

H: I worked in the office.

E: At least you refrained from carrying any kind of gun?

H: I didn't really get out in the field. Sometimes, I would go on trips. I was in a headquarters unit and sometimes I would go with the courier just to go out. When you're over there, you worked long hours. We worked seven days a week. We went to the office at 7:00 in the morning and stayed there until 6:00 at night; that was the normal day. We would take an hour off for lunch. The only break you had was on Sunday morning; you didn't have to go to work until 8:00. You got an extra hour. You also only had to work until 4:00 on Sunday afternoon. Big deal!

E: Do you remember who your commander was that was in charge of the office?

H: I was the personnel sergeant and there was a warrant officer by the name of . . . I forget.

E: You never had to keep track of dead bodies or wounded?

H: No. We would get casualties and we would have to process the paper work on the casualties, but that's all. We never got involved with the body itself. They had a mortuary team that handled the bodies.

E: How did you feel when you got over?

H: It's rather frightening. Every little noise during the night you would wake up. Everything is a combat situation; you were slapping these buildings and they had sandbags all around them. That's all you saw. You could hear the pounding of the guns and what have you. Once in a while you could see fights. They changed the method of fighting the war completely from the Second World War to that war. They used the helicopters a lot

and sometimes we would witness those things, particularly at night. Every so many rounds they would fire tracers . . . they're a shell that you can see at night. Those Vietnamese must have been tremendous fighters to put up with that, because they had practically nothing to fight with compared to what we had.

E: I guess from the terrain it was really a jungle war?

H: When they had finally built a fence around the post they had guard towers. They also had bunkers all along there, and there used to be guards walking there 24 hours a day. Just off the post at one time it was all thicket, a lot of green undergrowth, but they had gotten rid of that with bulldozers. The Vietnamese tunneled underneath; they were just like rats.

E: Was it a religious war?

H: It's hard to say. They had been fighting back and forth for years and years. I think it would probably go on for years and years. I don't think it will ever end. The people themselves, we had some people working for us, and they seemed to be pretty decent people.

E: Did they have any nationalistic ideas?

H: No. When they fight the wars over there, families go right along with the husbands. Soldiers would be professional soldiers. They take the families right along with them out on the front.

E: The only people we ever saw were the old men, old women, and the young women. The women do most of the manual labor there.

E: There must have been starvation and that?

H: Yes, I went to Saigon a couple of times, and you used to see a lot of people there. You saw the rich and you could tell the rich; they had beautiful homes. The poor people didn't have anything. There was a lot of begging going on.

E: Is there anything else you would like to add that we didn't cover?

H: As far as the Army was concerned?

E: Yes, how did it treat you?

H: Very well. I enjoyed my years. I saw a lot in the world. I'm the collector type, so I've got a lot of souvenirs I've collected from all over.

E: Out of all that moving around, where do you like it the best?

H: From the time I got married, I really didn't travel that much.

E: Thank you.

H: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW