

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
KURT G. PECHMANN
Private, German Army, World War II
1996

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Pechmann, Kurt G, (b. 1922). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 3 sound cassettes (ca. 165 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Recordings: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 165 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Kurt G. Pechmann, a Madison, Wisconsin resident, discusses his experiences during World War II in the German Army's 7th Regiment, 62nd Infantry Division and in Prisoner of War camps in Illinois and Wisconsin. Pechmann was born in Kuhnern, a German town in Silesia (now Poland). Pechmann states he received an eighth grade education and attended trade school to become a stonecutter. As a boy, Pechmann describes participating in the Hitler Youth, which he characterizes as "nothing but the Boy Scouts." Pechmann touches upon Nazi government propaganda and how the public saw no alternative viewpoints. At age nineteen, Pechmann was drafted into the Arbeitsdienst, a semi-military labor force, where he dug ditches, reinforced riverbanks, and repaired roads. Pechmann explains that this training prepared the laborers for the military. Six months later, he was drafted into the German Army. Pechmann comments that he spent seven months in basic training in Saint-Avold, Alsace-Lorraine (now France). He describes at length his training for the ski patrol and mentions that his trainer, Kurt Reich, had won the gold medal in skiing in the 1936 Olympics. Pechmann also outlines the various types of machine guns and rifles used by the German Army. Pechmann analyzes relations between officers and enlisted men, addressing class divisions within the German Army. He feels regular G.I.s were treated "like dirt" and explains that soldiers with high school or college educations automatically became officers while working-class men had to show bravery on the front to advance in rank. Pechmann portrays enlisted men as having more respect for a working-class soldier who worked himself up the chain of command than for officers from the upper classes. In 1941, Pechmann's regiment was shipped from Alsace-Lorraine to Kharkov (now Ukraine) on the Russian front. Pechmann describes harrowing weather conditions and surprise nocturnal attacks. He recalls how the Russians' frightening battle-cry caused confusion and a friendly-fire situation. Pechmann goes into detail about German soldiers' views of the Russian, British, and American armies. He feels the German troops respected the Russian Army's toughness but held the British and Americans in higher regard for their strategic and technological prowess. Pechmann supports the idea that the German Army was not prepared to survive the harsh Russian winter. He tells how he contracted frostbite in 1942 and spent several months in a hospital in Krakow (Poland). He details the hospital conditions and the treatment that saved his feet from amputation. After his recovery, Pechmann was eventually reassigned to the Italian front in 1943. Pechmann contrasts the guerilla warfare in Cassino (Italy) with the trench-like warfare in Russia. Pechmann tells more than one story of Russian and British attacks on German Red Cross workers, ambulances, and hospitals. In poetic language, Pechmann vividly describes an incident in Italy where a British soldier was blown up by an antipersonnel mine near an apple tree

that Pechmann himself had narrowly avoided stepping on two days earlier. Pechmann discusses in detail his capture by the British on November 6, 1943. He describes his various emotions and recounts the dialog between himself and the British captain who interrogated him. During an exchange Pechmann emphasizes repeatedly, Captain Hauptman asked him if he was a convinced Nazi, and Pechmann replied: “What would you do if you hear nothing but one-sided propaganda from the German government...you have to be convinced.” Pechmann says the British captain accepted this answer and never mistreated him. A few days later, Pechmann was handed over to the American army and shipped from Naples (Italy) to Norfolk (Virginia). He describes poor hygiene conditions and attacks from German U-boats during the voyage. Once they reached America, Pechmann states he and other prisoners were astonished by the high standard of living they observed. Pechmann was sent to Camp Ellis (Illinois) and later Hoopeston (Illinois). He portrays his treatment in the POW camps positively, focusing on the clean barracks, the “German-friendly” guards, and the high-quality food. Pechmann describes being amused and surprised when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an apology to the POWs after a flood on the Mississippi River delayed delivery of their rations. Pechmann touches upon American propaganda, saying the POWs were shown newsreels about Axis losses in hopes of demoralizing them. Pechmann highlights many aspects of life in the POW camp. In their free time, the prisoners participated in soccer leagues, musical groups, and card games like Skat. He indicates their resourcefulness, describing how he hoarded castaway socks and how the POWs built a shortwave radio to keep abreast of the news. Pechmann reveals that two prisoners successfully escaped from Camp Ellis through the toilets. However, he states he never attempted escape due to his comfortable living conditions and his fear of being court-martialed by the Nazis. Throughout their imprisonment, the POWs worked at factories and farms across Illinois and Wisconsin. Pechmann illustrates positive interactions between the POWs and German-American civilians. One farmer in Lodi (Wisconsin) was so impressed with the POWs’ efficient work that he served them all a large feast. When the war ended, Pechmann was sent back to Europe and handed off to the French Army who forced him into farm labor. Pechmann feels this violated the Geneva Convention (because prisoners were to be returned to their home country) and speaks of his harsh treatment at the hands of a French farmer. Pechmann explains that in 1948, when he finally returned to his girlfriend in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse (Germany), he had already decided to immigrate to America. He describes how the commissioner of the American civilian government helped him get his visa to come to the United States. Pechmann explains that he and his wife immigrated to Lodi (Wisconsin) in 1952 and were sponsored by the friendly farmer Pechmann had worked for as a POW. Later, Pechmann moved to Madison (Wisconsin) and started his own granite-cutting business. He mentions that he and his wife took English classes at Madison Area Technical College. Pechmann speaks with pride about numerous war memorials he helped create. In 1986, Pechmann repaired (for free) a war memorial in Forest Hill Cemetery that had been vandalized. As it was the day before Memorial Day, his story attracted media attention. Pechmann recalls receiving recognition from the Madison Veterans Council and the Wisconsin Officer’s Club, and a letter from President Ronald Reagan. As a result of this publicity, Pechmann was commissioned to fix or design several Wisconsin Veterans monuments. He talks most proudly about designing the Southeast Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans Memorial in

Milwaukee. In addition, Pechmann mentions working on a Vietnam Veterans monument in Monticello (Wisconsin), a monument for the Wisconsin Congressional Medal of Honor Winners (at the welcome center on Interstate 90-94) and the Wisconsin Korean War Veterans Memorial in Plover (Wisconsin).

Biographical Sketch:

Pechmann (b. March 1, 1922), was born in Kuhnern in Silesia, Germany (now Poland). He was drafted into the German Army in 1941 and served on the Russian front during World War II. He was captured by the British Army in 1943 and held in American POW camps in Illinois and Wisconsin until the war was over. In 1952, Pechmann and his wife immigrated to the United States, settling first in Lodi then in Madison (Wisconsin). A granite-cutter by trade, Pechmann has been active in creating memorials and monuments throughout Wisconsin honoring American veterans.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996.

Transcribed by Nathan King, 2003.

Abstract by Darcy Gervasio, 2008.

Interview Transcript:

Mark: Today's date is April the 24th, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Kurt Pechmann, of Madison, Wisconsin – a veteran of the German Army during the Second World War. Good morning. Thanks for coming in.

Pechmann: Good morning, and thank you for having me here.

Mark: It's a beautiful day outside, and we're sitting here in the basement.

Pechmann: [laughs]

Mark: Won't keep you too long here.

Pechmann: We should be out, I think, enjoying the warm weather.

Mark: I suppose we should start at the top, as they say, and why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised, and what you were doing prior to the beginning of World War II.

Pechmann: Well, I was born in Kuhnern, K-u-h-n-e-r-n, in [sounds like Schlesien-German name of Silesia] just like Dane County, in 1922.

Mark: And this is in Silesia?

Pechmann: This is in Silesia. This part was Russia cut off and gave to Poland, now, though, actually, I cannot go home anymore. After my schooling – I went through eight grade schooling – I learned my trade as a granite cutter, learned three years in the Schloen Quarry in the plant – three years as a granite cutter. After that, I went for three years to a technical college and there to get my degree in steinmetz [stonemason or stonecutter] – which was the top of the line, then, from there you go then three more year through school – or two more year through school – and become a master. But I didn't go that far because the war came, and I had to go in the army. I got drafted in the labor service, Arbeitsdienst, which is a semi-military organization. You go with pick and shovel for digging ditches, and doing roadwork and also stripping out creeks and rivers and so on.

Mark: And this was 1941?

Pechmann: That one was in 1941, correct.

Mark: So you were 19 years old?

Pechmann: 19 years old, yeah. I worked in the labor service for about six months. And from there, I got the notice right away to go to the Infantry Regiment 7. I got two days home because the whole camp got sick with influenza, and we had to - we couldn't go home anymore, actually. We were supposed to go direct to the garrison that was in Saint-Avold in Alsace-Lorraine. And I got two days leave anyhow, yet, because the labor camp was about 40, 50 miles away from my hometown. So I got there, and then from there we went right away in the train with some other school buddies of mine, and went to Alsace-Lorraine to the infantry regiment there. There, we got trained for about four, five months in infantry service. And from there, we came over Yawa (??), that is a little town, too, yet, past - we drove by train - past my place where I used to learn my trade as a granite cutter, and then all the way over through Poland over to Kharkov, and to the Russian front line. And as soon as we traveled past the German border, our command had more than 1,200 men transported - a whole battalion - 1,200 men - we got orders, "Load your rifles, and put your safety on, though." As soon as we got out of German territory, we had to load our rifles and put the safety on, see, because we traveled by railroad, and those were not Pullman wagons, either, those were regular - oh, what should I say - cattle cars, or - similar to cattle cars, and loaded with straw, and there were 40 men to one wagon. [unintelligible] the doors open, and our rifles pointed toward Chow Tide 4 (??), guerillas and partisans then for the 40 persons. Because when we came to Russia, the German Army - and maybe the Russians, I don't know, I wasn't there when it happened - they cut about 200 yards, right and left, along the railroad tracks, they cut every tree down, every bush down so the guerillas they had no place to hide. And I think there, it happened to our train - we had to switch on the other side of Poland when we turned into Russia. We had to switch railroad trains, because the trains- the engines and everything - had to be Russian - engines, engineers on it - and the tracks are wider in Russia than in Germany, see, so we had to switch somewhere along the line, there. And that - he was not too German-friendly either, because when we went, he was jerking the train - going back and forth, back and forth, but we were traveling, see. And all at once our train - I was in it - we had horses and everything else - just slowed down. And out in the middle in nowhere, we were standing on an open stretch - nothing there - until about several hours later they came and picked us up because the coupling broke at the head of the train, and while we were standing there, the other train pulled ahead until it came to the station by the rest of the gang, see, so they came back and forth again. So we went, then, all the way up to Kharkov. And in Kharkov, it was a little bit on the nasty side already, because you don't know yet if you are in enemy's territory. You don't know what will happen no matter - are they friendly? - or nothing. Even that we'd talk to the people there, they talked fluently German. Civilians!

- Mark: The Russians, you mean.
- Pechmann: Russians – they talked fluently German. Before the Communists took over, they had to promise the sky to those people and those became then, with other words, Russian-friendly, and then became later in the Russian thing, but who were actually Germans, see. Because the Russian government promise them the blue sky, see, which will never happen. So, those people talked to us – when we, the German Army were there – in fluent German, we talked about it, see.
- Mark: I'd like to go back a little bit.
- Pechmann: Sure. Go ahead.
- Mark: Some of the days even before the war started. You're probably a little young to remember the Weimar Republic.
- Pechmann: Yeah, I am too young for that, yeah. Yeah, I heard it through the school, see, but if I could I would go – not too much in politics – but a little bit describe it out there, because that's where Hitler came in power.
- Mark: Mm-hmm. So, I was gonna ask next – as you were growing up, you were just a typical kid growing up?
- Pechmann: Yeah, mm-hmm, sure, sure, sure.
- Mark: As a young German boy, could you see the war coming? And of course, the war started in 1939 for the Germans.
- Pechmann: No, no, no. See, I gave some other interviews already, too, and a matter of fact, when I became a P.O.W. the British captain asked me, "Pechmann, Gefreiter Pechmann, are you a convinced Nazi?" He hit me up, like with a hammer, before the head, I said "YES," without lying. I asked then, right away, back, too, "What would you do? What would you answer if you heard nothing but one-sided propoganda?" You don't even know the other one exists, except everything what the German radio gives you. They talk to you, "Germany is the only one that is right. The rest of them, Americans, Russians, the French, they are wrong." You hear only one-sided propoganda. You have to be convinced there is nothing better than our own territory, our own land. That's the way it was.
- Mark: So, in your schooling, and your trade schooling, that sort of thing, was there Nazi propoganda in that? There's the concept of white [unintelligible]. That the coordination of all social –

Pechmann: I'm – honestly about it – I was in the Hitler Youth. But that was nothing but the same as the Boy Scouts here. Because I wasn't [unintelligible], either. Nothing but the Boy Scouts. We *never, ever* pledged our allegiance to the flag in Germany. Never, *ever*. Later on, when I became in the army, before we went on the front lines, then we pledged our allegiance. Then, if you pledge that *burns* right into your heart, and you do anything for your flag, no matter what. Even – you'd die for it, see. That is, to me, what a pledge means. Put everything into it, not that you rattle it down like anything else and nobody pays attention to it. You don't even think about it when you pledge, you know, say the Lord's Prayer, you have to think about it in order to get it right down. And then, in Germany, nobody ever did the pledge before. Even in school, we never had the Hitler flag, or the German flag in our school. Never, *ever*. We said, every morning, we said our prayer. Every boy or every girl had a different prayer every morning in school. Even at this age, Hitler didn't want any religion. It was not so. He wanted – that's what we were taught, see. Hitler wanted you to keep church and state separate. Church, keep your nose out of politics. We don't inter-mix with church either, the school, or the party, whatever this is, see. So that's what it was. So, we never, ever had any Nazi influence in our lives. And then later on, when we joined, well if it was nothing else, it was the Weimar Republic. They were a Communist sort of regime, for a short time, and the Communists had sewn the foot (??). And we need some excitement. There was – from World War I, there was one group that was the Stalhoem (??) that was a military organization, just like any weapons organization here. They had the Stalhoem (??) and another youth group there. And we wanted some different ones, because we didn't want to belong that one there. Then came Hitler out, and they brought the Hitler Youth out. So I wanted to do – we had been camping, we made campfires, we were singing some German songs – that was our Hitler Youth. Never did we do anything about – well sure we did “Heil, Hitler!” – we had to, see, because it was our thing, see, if the – it was exciting, too, because no one could afford at that time a full, complete Boy Scout uniform. Though, what we had – we had a shirt, and the waistband, your armband, and that was our Hitler Youth.

Mark: So, when the war started in 1939 –

Pechmann: Yeah.

Mark: - you were about 16 by this time.

Pechmann: Yeah. Yeah. I was still learning my trade then, yeah.

Mark: You know, in terms of your everyday life of the everyday German, how did – did things change at all, once the war started?

Pechmann: Well, we got a little bit scared, because I still remember I had my brother's motorcycle. He had a little 200 cc., [unintelligible] whatever it was, and I drove with my buddy down to the neighbor town, Telvishust (??) when the war in Poland started. I went to this neighbor town – there was an old factory there – a old clay factory that made bricks and so on. The chimney was razed down because it was a landmark for artillery and for airplanes and so on – they put that one down. All the windows were painted black in the factory. The factory was empty, but it was stored full of army materiel. Wagons, and ammo, and everything. It was a storage area, see. And we came there because we saw – and this is a way from my home town – and this was maybe 60, 80, 100, 120 miles, we saw lightning in the far distance, going up, and that was when the shells burst – artillery shells. But didn't hear the thunder, but we saw the lightning when you see the long distances. And there we came in, and, "Oh my gosh, where did all this stuff come from?" We were wondering. They were standing outside there. We couldn't go near it. There came the horses, they hitched the horses to the wagons – the transport wagons from the army that was all new to me. I'd never seen it before. It was all light – pitch dark, you see – just a little light there around the – and then we knew it come serious, see. But the – then again – you heard the German propaganda again, "Poland started it." What do you believe? Naturally we believe that the enemy was the Russians and the Poles, see, and that whoever was in connection with them. That was what our belief was at that time.

Mark: So, 1941 you were drafted? Spent some time in the Arbeitsdienst?

Pechmann: Arbeitsdienst, yeah.

Mark: Specifically, what sort of things were you doing? Repairing roads, and that sort of thing? What sort of training was involved with that? Was it military training?

Pechmann: Uh, no, it was semi-military. We had to march just like in the army, see. We had instead of the rifle, we had a spade. And that spade had to be polished like a teaspoon. You worked with it during the daytime, in the evening you sit down and you polishing that – special rubbing stone and cabrunum (??) stone, and powder there, and – not steel wool because steel wool would [unintelligible] practically – so rubbing stones. And that you could almost shave yourself in the regular spade. And they used that same spade for our parade, too. And that was a pretty sight when you turned that spade to a certain degree, and the sun hits the shiny spade, and that effect when you've got 240 guys standing all at once, it looks like a mirror turning there. That was a pretty sight. But of course, those spades, just like any regular spade here, they were heavy. So what did we do? We took some old pieces of glass, broken bottles, and we shaved the handle

down so the handle was about that thick. Of course it wasn't any more the full strength for digging ditches and so on, but it was so nice and handy – fit in your hand, see. And we were building along the Oder River, along the side rivers, and along the tributaries. We straightened ditches out, and reinforced them – put stakes down along the edges inside the water, had to go with our big boots in the water, put stakes down and then make mesh out of willow branches to reinforce it so it doesn't wash out and so on like they do here – put rocks on it so the banks don't wash out. That's what we did, usually in – most of the time.

Mark: And you went from this to the army. Was it a typical path for a young German man such as yourself, or did a lot of people go right into the army?

Pechmann: No, normally they are staying home maybe a whole half a year or a year yet before they get into the army. But, see, at that time, Germany needed the soldiers on the east front, on the Russian front. We probably would have been more at home also, yet, but we had – they called it the “ruhr” [dysentery] – it's like cholera or something like that, see. Nobody could leave the camp. Nobody could leave the camp, though everybody – we were staying instead of staying 6 months, we were probably staying 7 months in camp, see. And that extra month, instead [of] going home, we had to – we couldn't even go home then, see, because everybody was just plain sick. The whole camp was tossed out because one or two guys had it and then spread [it] out. And after that one then, we went into the army.

Mark: Now, in the Arbeitsdienst, did you – were you in that with young men you had grown up with? I mean, this was a community type of thing. You knew people –

Pechmann: Oh, yeah, my whole group there was people with – from my hometown – and there were there from other towns also, some other ones. But our group was in one room there – how many? 14, 16 guys in one room? Or 10, 12 men, something like that, see. And actually it was a good buildup later on for the military, because you saw right away when we later on came into the military service, we needed only half the training to go into the regular army infantry as those guys who never went into the labor service, because we know how to march, we know how to pay attention, we know how to parade and all those things, but we never had to learn, then, otherwise, you see.

Mark: And so when you went into the army, did you also go into the army with people you knew, and people you'd grown up, and that sort of thing?

Pechmann: Yes, yep. Our whole group who were discharged from the labor service there, in order to get that one unit over there – to the infantry there – to

Saint-Avoid. Of course, some of them were butchers by trade – they came right away in the kitchen. Other ones were shoemakers – they came over to the artillery, because they are to repair the harnesses – leather harnesses – and so on. But the rest of them – my best buddy was a barber – he was with me in the same room. We had a good time together. We were both together on the Russian front, also. But the rest of them all [pounding the table] – and then there were farmers – farmer boys in our hometown. They were separated also right away to the artillery, see, because of the horses and with livestock, see. But the rest of them were granite cutters, barbers, and mechanics – they were separated too, already. But we were about, in my unit, 5, 6 guys – and that was [unintelligible] from my hometown, see. So there were some other stonecutters there, and regular laborers –

Mark: Into the regular infantry.

Pechmann: Yeah, yeah, the regular infantry, yeah.

Mark: So, when it came to your training, how long did your training period last, and what sorts of things were you doing?

Pechmann: Well, in Saint-Avoid, our master sergeant – he was back from Russia already. Kurt Reich. He was in the 1936 Olympics, a ski medalist. He got the gold medal in long stretches. I was then trained--first of all, when I got in there, I was a good shooter with a rifle, so they picked me out to be a sharpshooter. And that didn't last too long anymore because firing from close range I was excellent. Later on they found out I'm colorblind. That doesn't work. [laughs]

Mark: It does not.

Pechmann: So I became – like I said the master sergeant – he instructed us in skis because they needed all kinds of ski patrols over in the Russian front, see.

Mark: Now was it understood that you were going to be going to Russia?

Pechmann: Yep. Oh yeah, that was understood. Oh yeah. We were training for Russia.

Mark: There were other theaters of war. There was Africa and that sort of thing. I mean, you knew where you were –

Pechmann: No, Africa wasn't in the theater. It was Russia that was first, to begin with. See, Africa came later. But the Russian front – it was the first one – because they needed all kinds of ski patrols and stuff so we were trained in – not everybody – oh, I'd would say there were about 40, 60 guys from

our 240 men – there were 40, 60 guys who were trained on nothing but skiing, skiing, skiing. Through the night, and watch out if – you have to watch out – how far can you see that light? If somebody lights a cigarette in the pitch dark, nothing around you, and holds a lighted cigarette out in front, how far can you see that cigarette? You are surprised. Quarter mile you see the lighted cigarette when everything is dark. But then again, sometimes after all it's right under your nose and you don't see this. It depends on the weather conditions – fog and so on, see. But the noise – how far that noise traveled. So we had to be careful. And then we got trained in skiing there with – completely covered in white. We had our white – we called it tand (??) and fuge (??) – it was just like a bedsheet. Like the Ku Klux Klan only dressed in completely white, see. So, the rifle and everything was completely white so you blend in right with everything. And when we were on the Russian front there, you fire along, all at once a flag goes up. You freeze on the spot, no matter what position you are in. Because – you don't even move – it could look like a man. No, it looks like a tree stump. It looks like anything else, see. That is when you freeze until everything goes down again. And he was a excellent skier. We skied on—the whole ground there-- trained on a big lake that was frozen up in Alsace-Lorraine and it was a funny feeling. Yeah, in the middle of the lake, you don't know how deep the thing is.

Mark: Mm-hmm.

Pechmann: All at once, 90 degrees. You jump up and [pounds the table] come down, the whole group and the whole group. The whole lake went up and down – the ice. So that felt kind of funny, too.

Mark: And this training lasted how long?

Pechmann: That only about 4 months. Infantry that was not skiing – that was throwing hand grenades, sharpshooting, and that's all live ammo, too, see. So that lasted about four months, including maybe six, eight weeks of skiing.

Mark: Now, as I've talked to American veterans – basic training is kind of a time when people from different parts of the country all get together with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and those sorts of things. It's a little different in Germany, but Germany is a pretty diverse country, too. You've got the different regional dialects, you've got the Protestants and the Catholics. I'm curious to know in basic training if there was a similar sort of mixing of people from different parts of the country and how people got along.

Pechmann: That happened later on. To begin with, when we got drafted, that was strictly from our own territory – the people, see. If they are Lutherans or

Catholics or whatever was there no matter what religion, there was no problem. We had no problem. They were from that town – they were from that city, they were from that town – we had no problem whatsoever, and we got very well along together. Later on, then, when we went on the front and back in the [unintelligible] or the hospitals, that was a different story. Then they came from every unit together, see. But they still got along together. I never, ever recall that we had any fights or nagging about “Oh, we are better than you,” or “You are better than them.” Never, ever did we have any problems there.

Mark: So you went from Alsace-Lorraine –

Pechmann: Alsace-Lorraine, Saint-Avoid, mm-hmm.

Mark: - through Germany again. And this is when you went to Russia.

Pechmann: Yeah.

Mark: Part of the 7th Infantry Division?

Pechmann: Yeah.

Mark: Now was this also –

Pechmann: [interrupts] Uh, Infantry *Regiment*. Infantry regiment. It was the sixty –

Mark: 62nd –

Pechmann: 62nd Infantry Division, yeah.

Mark: I guess you pretty much described your travels into Russia. When you got up to the front – let’s just pick where we left off there. When you got to the front, to where the actual fighting was, what did you expect? What were you told to expect? And how did those expectations turn out?

Pechmann: What we expected was you better keep your head down and your feet down and your heels down in case somebody shoots you because you could get killed. But when we got out of Kharkov – in Kharkov, we left the trains there. We were staying all night in an old school. And from there, the next day, that was mostly by night we were walked – marching there – 120 men along there – and of course loaded, safety on, see. Don’t make any noise. And then we were marching through the winter months. I don’t know how many days we walked there over towards the Don River. The Russian River Don makes that big bow, that big bend, and Stalingrad is on the end, and we marched all the way up to the Don River here, see. Our engagements first was – oh, there we came in a little town,

Nepocritaya or Peschanoye, was the town where we were staying in. And that is – we were reinforcing there - those people – because there was hardly any Germans left there, see. Because in '41-'42 about 75, 80% of all the German casualties were frozen parts of their feet, knees, elbows, fingers, ears, chin, nose, and everything else, see. And it was cold. It was about [negative] 42° centigrade cold, which is about in the 80° below zero mark here, see. So roughly, give or take a few degrees. You don't count anymore when it's that cold. We were stationed then in a farmhouse. The whole group – we were covered up then in different groups then – the wind was howling out there. About three feet of snow, and if you are out in the cold, you didn't even know anymore how cold it is, and how the wind is blowing. I just have to think here a little bit, you know. We were staying in that room there. The Russians did it also – it was a civilian home. The old man was there – oh, he was maybe 60, 70, 80 years old, and then his daughter, the old fellow's wife, and his daughter, maybe two, three, little kids. All the young Russians were gone. You couldn't wash yourself because there was no water there. And the next day we had to attack – reinforce another one because the German unit when we reported there – they got kicked back by the Russians, see. So they came back someplace there and we had to reinforce and take them along again, and go in the town where they came from, see. We were supposed to occupy there, see. And that was all no-man's land, you see, you don't see anybody there. You see a dark shadow behind the house, or somebody behind the tree and so on. And we were there, oh, maybe three, four hours, nothing happens. So we figured those guys were there again, so we left again, and we came back to our quarters here. “Oh my gosh, what were they doing here?” Those guys we were supposed to bring there, they were back in our quarters eating our food and stuff while we were staying out and freezing our butt off out there, see. So those guys, well, “Come on, hurry up, you go back to your spot again, where you're supposed to go,” see. And that is when I seen our German tanks – there were 6 tanks, a company of tanks. I don't know what – Mark IV? It was not Mark IV, but it was a pretty big tank. See, when our town – as a matter of fact, I should have brought those pictures along. I've got some pictures at home in this very same town. They were shooting there. You see the bullets fly – tracer bullets. A straight shot, and they missed a tank – a Russian tank – by just maybe two feet, see. This is maybe two miles across, across the valley there, see. Anyway, the Russians there, and there's nothing worse if you'd be on the front line you hear all at once there, from anywhere, [emulating with a crescendo effect] “Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!” The Russians attacking. The Russians attacking. “Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!” You don't know where they are, see. It was in the dark already – it was getting kind of dark already. That is when you get a funny feeling, see. Right away, right to begin with, when I went in on the front lines, as a young guy you were not scared at all. Not at all. But, second time around again, that was a different story. Here the Russians attacked

us, and then we went back. And our tank commander, he wanted us to “Stop! Stop right there!” “Well, for heaven’s sakes, why should we stop if you guys pulling back?” Why should we stay in front of the tanks? The tanks leave first, and then we go. But those were days – they are burned in. And of course, you shoot, you aim at somebody. I don’t know if you hit him or not. That is what the war is all about, see, because you want to keep the guy away from your own hide. The same thing with them over there, see.

Mark: Now, this is the dead of winter.

Pechmann: The dead of winter, yeah. I wasn’t in summertime out there. Well, just in fall, see, when the mud was that high and you jump down and can’t go anyplace else, see, and the tanks couldn’t even move anymore. And then, in wintertime, it was so ice – I see that one guy there, that one tank – three of them making an attack on a side hill there. And it was so frozen and so icy, that guy was sliding – instead of going straight forward, he goes sliding sideways down the hill and came down in the gully, and he didn’t tip over, see, but I bet you hit your head in there, see. That’s one thing I wouldn’t want to be in – a tank. No way. And I’ve seen – it happened right in the very same sector – all at once a bunch of guys – 150, 200, 300 guys – coming towards our territory here.

Mark: Russians.

Pechmann: *We thought* they were Russians. We thought they were Russians. This was another group of Germans. It was a little different territory, again. The Russians attacked them, and then they were fleeing, see. And then that’s just like you lose all sense of security. If somebody hollers the “Hooray! Hooray! Hooray,” you run, see, and nothing will stop you, see, except your own tanks. But those guys who were being attacked and came towards our lines, still maybe a mile and a half, two miles away, on the hillside, but don’t forget that where we were there were hardly any trees and brushes. It was all flat, rolling land. They came down the hillside over there, and of course as the alarm sounded in our unit, everybody went out – there was machine guns and rifles – you find a place where you sit, and you let loose, see. Shooting at those running people that are coming towards you, see. And all at once, those guys wake up over there – they’re being shot at, see – all at once went the white flare up, see. That’s our own men we were shooting at. I don’t know if I hit anyone – they were too far away, see. So, then they stopped there, they came here, and then later on they had to go back again to the same territory. But, a funny thing too, yet, I had my heavy winter stuff on and it was a little farm community with 6, 8, 10 homes in it, and I was laying behind everything. It was white with snow. I was laying behind a mound, and later on I found out it was a mestegermate (??).

Mark: What was that?

Pechmann: [laughs] It was a manure pile. I was laying on it. [laughs] [unintelligible exclamation] You see, they don't have the toilets like we have here. Everything goes out on a pile, see, and thank God we had plenty of snow so that I could clean myself. It was, ha! I had not a grey uniform, or more brown, or something like this.

Mark: See, now, I was going to ask about what sort of equipment you had. Because one of the sort of legendary stories of World War II was that German soldiers went into Russia in the summer of '41, and they didn't expect to have to fight all through the winter. And when the winter came, they weren't prepared for the winter cold. In your experience, was that true? And how did you cope with it?

Pechmann: Exactly. That was exactly. We just had our regular – well our thermal winter uniform wasn't that much, because on the front line you had to have a woolen uniform on, see. In summertime it's a little bit lighter, see. But we had to go in the wintertime over there, so we were dressed in the regular heavy-duty uniform which was not enough to keep the cold winter out, see. So each one had overcoat, we had the regular uniform, extra set of pants and shirts, and then we didn't have socks. We had – we called them “fuslabem” (??). You have your boot on it, and then you have – oh, socks we had too, pardon me, we had three pair socks – the fuslabem, this was like an oversized hanky. That's a heavy not wool, but cotton piece. You fold it in toward the front, over to the right, and left, and then you slip the thing right in your boot. And that is a – it seems kind of funny, but they are comfortable and they do not slip like, you think, oh, they might roll over. No they don't. The problem with me was – it was the way with the whole German Army at that time – when the cold winter came, we were not prepared. The Russians – they knew what was coming from past experiences. Civilians or military, they had the felt goods. Everything was felt. But we didn't. After the damage was done in the German Army, we got that material. But the problem with me was when I went into Russia, our uniforms, our boots, everything was brand new. Right from the store, right from the factory. Brand new. So the boots – we greased them really well because that was – the pores, the holes – so we filled everything up. We practically dipped them in grease, see, to keep them water tight. The problem with me was, yes, they were watertight, but later on, if you don't have anything – all the time in the cold weather out there – wind, rain, and so on, those pores open up, too. And then one mistake I made when I froze my feet, I was too tight in it. Because nobody ever told us, “Do not put your shoes on, or boots on, too tight,” because as soon as you're tight, then you have no movement inside. And by the time the water, the frost gets into it, yeah, it's just like if you pour water in your

boot and freeze it. The same as your boot in it. And my feet got black to the knuckles, just like my socks [showing Van Ells his sock]. Pitch black. And I spent six months in the hospital, lost part of my toes. But that was an experience I don't wish on anybody. Because when I went into the hospital, there was a room, he cut the boot open in the back, peeled it open like a banana, and said "Good night, you go home." That was it.

Mark: So you spent – what was it? The fall of '41 –

Pechmann: Yep.

Mark: And most of the winter of '42 before you froze your feet?

Pechmann: Yeah, I froze my feet in March the following year.

Mark: Of '42.

Pechmann: '42 I froze my feet in March.

Mark: So that's still quite a bit of time on the Russian front. I'm interested in the morale of the German Army on the Russian front. Was morale high? Was it good? And what kept you guys fighting, I guess?

Pechmann: Well what kept you fighting over there was first of all the pledge of allegiance to the flag because before we went on the Russian front – never, ever before – when you leave the garrison to go to the front line, your whole battalion, 1,200 men stand out in the yard, there's one guy in front with the commanding officer – Major, or General, or Lieutenant, or whatever it is there – mostly they were Colonels, anyhow – and one of them was holding the Bible, and the other one holding the flag. So we have – you hold one hand on the Bible – that's just one guy, and he speaks for the rest of them, see. One hand on the flag, one hand on the Bible, "I swear to God," and of course to the flag, and then you say your pledge of allegiance. Then he repeats it, the whole unit repeats it, and that is when you pledge your allegiance, right there. Never afterwards. Never before, never afterwards. You said one time before you go on the front line. That was right after we got through with our training. You got sworn in. You pledge it, then after that one you get maybe a three day leave, or a one week leave, or two weeks leave. Then you go home, and then you go [making a whooshing sound] "Choo!" – front line. But that is the only time we ever had to swear to the flag. And that one was burned into anybody's heart, and we would go through thick and thin in order to fulfill this pledge. The morale was good. Nobody ever – of course, nobody likes being shot at – but you had to do a job, and so you did it.

Mark: I've got a couple other Russia-related questions.

Pechmann: Yeah.

Mark: You mentioned partisans and how they have cleared the tracks.

Pechmann: Yeah.

Mark: Did you have much problem with that sort of thing?

Pechmann: Oh, Germany had a lot of problems with those. On that stretch alone, there were over – at that time when I went in there - that's what they told us, I didn't see it – we had seen some tracks damaged, thrown away, some railroad cars and engines – over 60 railroad engines on that stretch from there to [unintelligible] to Kharkov there were laying in the ditch. Over 60 of them! And they could hit any time at night – blowing bridges up. The first ones when they did too much damage was a regular train, engine in front, going in, see. Then all at once they blow 'em up, but the engine was lost, see. I don't know how many casualties they had. Later on, the Germans got smarter – they put four or five flat cars in front of the engine loaded with rocks and dirt and so on, so those first ones blow up first, right, but they save the engine. They might ruin the tracks, the bridges, whatever it is, but the engines are safe. Because the main part of the train, anyhow. So they did a lot of damage, oh yes, just in our territory alone, there.

Mark: But in terms of large-scale combat operations when you're engaging a large Russian force –

Pechmann: The guerillas or the partisans? You mean the partisans?

Mark: Yeah.

Pechmann: Well they did there spot, there spot, there spot. See, they spreading out just like fireworks, see, when sparks are flying, see. But they're not a big unit, see. They are hit and run guys. They are blowing a bridge up there, or blowing something up there. Later on, when I came back in the hospital – when they shipped me back when I froze my feet – the night before – that I'm still scared about that. I'm lucky that nothing happened to me. The night before, they were always – the sanitätswagens we called it – the Red Cross like here, see. Well you see on the road with 6, 8, 10 guys in it traveling from that stretch to the first hospital, maybe 20, 30 miles away, see. They blew that one night, six sanitäts up, loaded with wounded soldiers. Because those sanitäts had no hand grenades, they had no rifles, they had no machine guns on that to protect. They had the red cross on it. Even the Russians don't believe in the red cross – they have the half moon, see. My – with the red cross – the guerillas and the

partisans couldn't care less. They blew 'em up. Still the burned out sanitäts, the sanitätswagens were laying there when we went on the stretcher. You see in Russia, they don't have the roads like they do here or in Germany. Wherever there is room, they go and drive. And there was only – I never was on – later on the second time, I was on it – but the first time, they made the road along the railroad tracks. In summertime, it's dusty, rainy, muddy, in wintertime, it's solid frozen. If it's too muddy, then alright to drive next, on that side, or go on the other side of the road – the railroad tracks – and make your own road there again, see, that's the way it is still today. I see on TV on Channel 21 that film was taken maybe 4, 5 years ago, and mud roads. No paved roads. In the territory I was, I seen it there, see.

Mark: I also have a question about any free time you might have had. If you weren't actually engaged in combat, if you were behind the lines taking a rest period or something like that, what did you and other soldiers do to occupy yourselves? I've talked to American soldiers, and there's drinking and gambling sometimes a lot of boredom sometimes. What was your situation?

Pechmann: While you are on the front line, there is no such a thing. Unless you go on leave, and that is only when you are either wounded or you come back to your mainland Germany. But while you are on the Russian front, I never, ever seen anybody that had houses where you could go in or bars or something like that. There was no such a thing.

Mark: No, if you're sitting in the barracks –

Pechmann: No, we had no barracks. We had no barracks. We were staying – on the Russian front we were staying either in old schoolhouses or [unintelligible] were the big farms there – were staying in there, or in Kharkov at that time we were in the old gymnasium, the old high school, see. And normally you head out in no-man's land in a little farm town and that is where you stay in the farmhouse there. You couldn't even – in wintertime it was a little bit better yet because in summertime you had the water, but you are not supposed to drink your water out of system because it could be contaminated, could be poisoned, who knows. So what we used for water was snow, melting snow down, see. And there was no – you had your – we'd been fighting, you'd sit around, play a little bit of cards, and kill the time by looking around and staying inside where it's warm. Because the German Army wouldn't bring you back to Kharkov or to further back to Germany just to have a little bit of relaxation. There was no such thing. No, you stay right there, so you are always ready and handy, unless you go on leave.

Mark: Did you get an opportunity to stay in touch with people back home? For example, did you get a chance to write home to your folks, or something?

Pechmann: Yeah, we could write regular – [shuffling in papers] well, that was brief, see, that was a – you could write only what you want, so long as it was true. Because you write the truth anyhow – you wouldn't put anything in it that wasn't true, see, and so on. Well, we are here, and the territory that will censor anyhow to them, because the mail was censored. They cut it out, or they black it out, see, but otherwise you could write as much as you wanted to, see.

Mark: But was there much time for that sort of thing?

Pechmann: Well, you do that in the evening when there was no fighting, or while you're sitting around, and then sit no matter where you are – write it on the wall or on your table, or on your lap, or whatever. Just write a few notes down, then bring it in. That was free to the – there was no postage to be paid by the army, by the private soldiers, see, so it was all free. Of course, telephone calls was out, there was no telephones anyhow, see, so.

Mark: Now, in terms of the German Army, I'm interested in the sort of distance between officers and enlisted men. In the American Armies, I guess is rather notorious for officers and enlisted people being fairly familiar with each other. I don't get the impression that that was the case in the German Army.

Pechmann: Not at all.

Mark: Officers are gods, is my impression.

Pechmann: You betcha. You're dirt. You, as a regular G.I., you are dirt in the German Army. And I remember yet in training, one lieutenant, he was in Russia already before, and he came back and he was our company commander, he said "Only idiots get hurt in the war! Keep your heels down!" He had to say it because he got shot in the heel. [laughs] He was our commander in training, who says "Only idiots get hurt in the war," see, because you have to keep your head down, make your self as small as you possibly can. And then he had his heels sticking up – instead of laying down, he had them up, and he got shot in the heels, see. So, we had a laugh that time. But normally, like you said, officers in Germany Army are gods, see. Because in the German Army, if you are drafted, you graduate from high school. You are being drafted, you go to four weeks training, you automatically become a lieutenant. While, if you go through sixth, eighth grade, tenth grade, whatever, there's no high school, you learn the trade, you're being drafted, and you work yourself up in the army. You'll never be more than a master sergeant, or staff sergeant, see.

You'll never be an officer unless you prove yourself on the front line that you are – and many of them did it, too – became officer material through bravery and on the front, see. And, uh, you know what I'm talking about. But otherwise, the regular guy gets only up to private, corporal, sergeant, master sergeant, so on, see. But otherwise, they have no more than that. And the funny part too, my next door neighbor – he was a blacksmith – a master blacksmith – the son of a blacksmith. He went into the army, he went to the artillery and came out a master sergeant because he had his own business, see. He was in the artillery, so he became automatically a master sergeant. While if he wasn't his own business there, he would've gradually had to work his self up to private and so on and so forth, see.

Mark: So, in the German Army, one's rank had a lot to do with one's station in life, I guess you would say. Your educational level had a lot to do with whether or not you became an officer –

Pechmann: Definitely, yep, yep, yep.

Mark: And there wasn't much flexibility there?

Pechmann: Nope, because either you had money or you had no money, see. And usually those who went to officer's corps were either sons of doctors, dentists, attorneys, teacher. We had one fellow in my hometown, he was the son of a teacher and when he went in he was a four weeks training and he came out right away a lieutenant, see. From high school on, of course, you could advance, and that, too, again, if you went to the university. If you go to the university, then you automatically become an officer, see, so.

Mark: Now, would it have been possible for a high school graduate to have become an enlisted person? Or did they always become officers?

Pechmann: No, no, they could be enlisted. Oh, definitely. Oh, sure you could be. But naturally, they wanted to be – right away, see – something better and higher up right away, see. Because then they're looking down at you, "Oh, what's that? You're a little private only? Look at this, I'm a lieutenant, even that you grew up with." That is – that was the bad part about it, because they putting their nose up too high and everything, and that is why they actually never were liked. I'd rather be under the command of a fellow, and I have been, who grew up like me, went through the ranks in the army, he proved himself to become an officer, and then he became my commander on the front line. Because he knew what it is to grow from the bottom up, instead of those guys up there.

Mark: And for a young enlisted man that was important?

Pechmann: Very important. I would trust my life anytime to him because he had the experience, but not little snob who goes into the army and becomes a lieutenant right away. I have no confidence in him, but that other fellow, right away. Most – I would say 95% of the German Army felt that way.

Mark: See, that was the next thing I was gonna ask. Was the enlisted man's confidence in –

Pechmann: Oh, definitely. I would rather go with one guy who made sergeant or lieutenant there on the front line – he was just like a mother bee with the rest of the workers around him, see, that's the same thing, definitely.

Mark: I had one last thing that I thought of off-hand that I want to talk about, and that was the German soldier's view of the Russians. How they fought, how effective were they? You mentioned the sort of battle cry that they had, that was –

Pechmann: Yeah, well we had to “Hooray hooray hooray!” to demoralize the enemy, because at night, or whenever you attack, if the hundred, two-hundred guys holler “Hooray, hooray, hooray!” that is a – it takes the pep out of you, see. What will be next, see? It takes the pep right out of you. The German soldier, on the average, respected the Russian soldier for being rough, tough, and ruthless. Like the German Army, the Russians – they go through thick and thin no matter what. Understandable – they defending their own homeland. They do anything to get rid of those other guys who came from – that don't belong there, see. And we respected the Russians. Not as much as we respected the Americans. There's a different breed, again – the Americans and the British later on. The Russians were uncivilized. They did not have the upbringing like the Germans had, or like the Americans or the British or the French had. It is a different culture, see. And they didn't have the training like we did. They were just rough and tough and do your job and that's it. That was the Russians, yeah. But in general, we had respect for them because the Russians wouldn't stop for anything. They wouldn't stop for anything in order to get you down.

Mark: In terms of the weapons they were using and that sort of thing, what did you find most effective in their fighting techniques?

Pechmann: In theirs, or in ours?

Mark: In – well, both.

Pechmann: Well, we had, of course, our 98. 98 was 7.9 mm Mauser that was a good thing. The German Army had machine guns – heavy machine guns, light machine guns, rifle, all one ammo – one caliber. One caliber, and that was

a good thing, too, except you go to bigger weapons for air force and so on. We could interchange – matter of fact, we stole ammo from the back – they had the tanks, they had 6, 8, 10 cases of – big boxes like that – ammo on back of their tanks with machine gun ammo in it. Well, we took those because – but should we carry ‘em? Might as well go get ‘em. We stole ‘em at night off the thing and filled our supplies up there, see. So, good thing too, because if you carry 60 rounds of – later on 100 rounds or so – in your pocket, that stuff hangs down. Ammo is heavy, see. Not the empty shell, but the bullets on it, see. But our most – best weapon, infantrywise, was the Mauser, the 7.9mm Mauser, and it was a light machine gun, and the heavy machine gun. Both machine guns were identical. You could have the 38, the model 38 that was put out in 1938 [he probably means MG-34], or the 42. Both of them were shooting the same ammo. The 38 – machine gun 38 – was firing about 800 rounds a minute – that one had single fire and continuous fire – while the machine gewehr 42, MG-42, had repeat fire only, see, and that one was shooting 1,400 rounds a minute. And those were at that time the most respected weapons in World War II in Russia, see, first in France and later in Russia. But when you see the tracers, there’s just one string of light going. [Pechmann emulates the sound of the MG-42] “Prrrrt!” Matter of fact, you’d pull the trigger and let loose 15, 20 shots go on, see. And the only difference between light machine gun and heavy machine gun, both of ‘em you could shoot from the hip when you take the 38, the light machine gun, has a bipod in front. You fold it back when you are marching and when you lay down you have them down away from it. So did the 42, the later model, the heavy machine gun. But either one of them you could put on a sled (??) we called it, like a tripod. And then you could make out of the light one or the heavy one, make a heavy machine gun. Both of them firing 800 or 1,400 shots a minute. Then you set the sight, the up and down elevation, and the sight elevation, see, then you pull your trigger and that thing goes back and forth, see. The light machine gun – I don’t know if you’ve got ‘em here or not, in the museum.

Mark: I’m not sure. [There is at this time (2003) an MG-34 on display in the museum]

Pechmann: I’d want to find out if you’ve got or not, because I was trained on both of them, see. So, and then there’s, especially when you wanted to shoot with a machine gun, begrensomchiessen (??) we called it. A unit is going here forward, a unit is going here forward, you don’t want to shoot into their territory, you set your sight limits on it, see, so the gun only goes from here to here, see. So you don’t shoot into the territory over there, see, that is was this sled is about. The same thing with the up and down, also. So, in case you shoot above it, so those other guys could work on the valleys down below, so you overshoot ‘em, see, so.

- Mark: In terms of the Russians, what were, as an infantry soldier, what did you find most fearsome?
- Pechmann: You couldn't trust 'em. You don't know what happens in case you ever get captured. See, but, they had machine pistols that was a rifle. They had a big plate up on top with, I don't know, 60, 80 rounds on it on top, and those were – officers and sergeants had those. The regular infantrymen had just old time rifles, probably what we would throw away or what we used maybe before World War I, probably. The old time, crudely made weapons they had. And the uniforms – when they had the P.O.Ws there, the Russian prisoners there – they had just a band around, and they had a little bag on the side. Like a gunny sack, a miniature gunny sack on the side that had a slice of bread in it, and maybe a chunk of cheese in it, then ammo in it, and that was it. That's while we were way over there. Then they had the felt boots on, and the felt hats, and the heavy coats on them, see. But we had our brotbeutel (??), that was a little knapsack, we had our canteen on the back, and then we had our ammo on our belt like this, see.
- Mark: Now, as you read about the war later on, the Russians gained the reputation for using a lot of artillery. But you were there pretty early in the war. Was there much of that sort of thing?
- Pechmann: You see, later on, the Russians were not so well-equipped to begin with. Because later on they got all the goodie-goodies from the United States. Later on – the Russians – they had very limited use of artillery. That is why the Germans went too fast right away to Russia too, see, because they didn't have that resistance what they had before, see. And then later on, the Russians had 'em, the Germans had 'em too then, we called it in Germany stalinorgel (??). That is what the Russians had. Those were gun barrels with rockets in it, and they were shooting what – 24, 36? [emulates the sound, a high pitched hoot] “Woo! Woo! Woo! Woo!” You could fill your breeches when you hear those things go. Oh, those were gruesome. And those were – later on I seen 'em being fired – not in our territory so much, but later on, the second time I went in there, they were gruesome. But the Germans had just like stovepipes, six or eight of them in a round circle, they were going individually off the thing, and they were effective [probably referring to the nebelwerfer]. The Russians had more stoves because they had more territory to shoot at, see.
- Mark: Now, as you mentioned, you were in Russia twice. So you froze your feet, you spent some time in a hospital –
- Pechmann: Six months, yeah.
- Mark: - and then went back?

Pechmann: Mm-hmm.

Mark: Let's describe the hospital situation.

Pechmann: The hospital – the first time I came to the hospital there – I came from Russia in the convoy that was 4, 6, or 8 sanitätswagen [ambulances] – we came to Kharkov, and that is where I was in an old – well, there was no school – this was a gymnasium, old school. The rooms were all filled. That was the first hospital, makeshift hospital [recording breaks off] – I was in there laying on straw on the floor, because everything was loaded up, see. Everything was loaded up. And you sit – you are laying there with your feet up, nothing on it, black. Stink to high heaven. Because, if you've ever smelled rotten meat – and at that time, we were about, well, 75% of the casualties of the German Army had frozen parts of their feet, and so on, and so forth. And there I was maybe two days, and while I was there, I wrote a card home to my mother, "I froze my feet, I will be home in Germany someplace." I don't know if she ever got that card. Then I wrote a letter, a card, to my brother – a felt post brief (??) to my brother, who was in Russia also. I was figuring he was in, up in the little northern part. He was a transport. He drove a 10-ton ammo truck. I thought he was further up north. I was later on, in Germany, in the hospital, I got a letter from him. He was looking for me in that very same hospital there, because his unit was very suddenly coming down here, looking for me. And he was on his way to Stalingrad also, see, so he was looking for me there. And I wasn't there anymore. I was gone already. I was back home – no, matter of fact, to Krakow, I went from there. But that is when they used to put a pinkish powder on my feet and wrapped it up with gauze. We didn't have any regular bandages – we had 'em but we had to save 'em for the more seriously wounded ones – the heavy gauze bandages, see. You had to cut 'em up and throw 'em away because of all the blood, and all those things, so.

Mark: So you went back to Germany to a hospital?

Pechmann: No, I went from there – I went from Kharkov to Krakow.

Mark: Krakow.

Pechmann: Krakow I spent most of the time. I would say about four months I spent in Krakow. You couldn't walk. The only way you could walk on your – because – that's probably something an old shoe could go there – because you couldn't go – on your balls in front and back, and on your heels. And most of the time we were just laying around, having either a walker or crutches, or in a wheelchair, see.

- Mark: And I suspect there were a lot of young men such as yourself with the same basic problem, frozen feet.
- Pechmann: Definitely. Like I said before, about 75% of the casualties in the German Army from the Russian front were from frozen parts from the forehead, to your nose, to your ears, to your chin, to your cheeks, to your fingers, to your elbows, to your knees, down to your toes. And if you ever slept in a room with 20, 30 guys in one big room – in a ward, we called them – well, here we call them wards, they were all in one big group – frozen parts, if you ever smelled rotten meat. Burnt meat is bad, rotten meat is worse. The stink. The stink is just terrible. When I was there, they experience [experimented with] something different. They tried something different that worked. Before, I had some other guys who were right next to me in bed, there. Their feet were frozen like mine. The doctor came over, “It’s rotten, we cut it off.” Completely wrong. That was completely wrong. Because that guy is lost to the army, see, because he cut it off – that foot. Because you need your balls in front there and your toes to walk, see. He was lost to the – well, he could be a truck driver or so. But with me, they tried out – leave your feet dry on top – don’t put any bandage on it, on top of the bed. Just put your pink powder on it. Of course, we got shots – I don’t know if every needle I got in my army time, I would look like a porcupine if they were sticking out, see, because too many shots we got for tetanus and everything else. With me, they tried the dry healing process, and what was good, because the good meat – the inside is good, push the rotten meat away – scale away. When I was – later on after Krakow, I came to Dresden, I had ten toenails. And then, oh, there was a little left on my big toe, oh a little spot there yet – bone sticking out, see, because meat was gone. First, my right foot was worse than the left one, but it turned out the left one was worse. The bone was sticking out, the doctor came with his pencil, and says, “Pechmann, I believe they’re going to cut it off,” see. “I don’t want *that*.” Everything was dried up already, see, dry skin. So I went with a fingernail on the knees, the toes, wondered what that ten toes, with the toenails on it, like your wife has a thimble with the tail. I got a thimble where you are sewing with, see, those were the toes, all the way, with the toenails on it, black. Dried skin, see. That way the good meat pushed the rotten meat away, and that’s the way I saved my bones, my feet. Like that other fellow said, cut it off, gone, see. Today, I have no problem, except when it is real cold, see, then I have to be watching out.
- Mark: And you were obviously well enough to go back to the Russian front.
- Pechmann: Yeah, that’s when I went the second time in, see, so.
- Mark: Which had to have been in the fall?

Pechmann: Yeah, well we went –

Mark: Just in time for another cold season [chuckles].

Pechmann: Well, that was a different territory now, again. I froze my feet the first time. I came to a different unit. I came down now to the hundert-vier [104] – Panzergrenadier hundert-vier – in Neustadt and Landau – I was supposed to go down to Africa. Because we were the grudenfieder oppenstay (??). I went out to Italy and Africa. And while we were stationed – training we didn't need anymore – we got light khaki uniform to go to Africa. And while we were in beach – there was a big training camp and ship out camp beach along the Alsace-Lorraine border, the French Alsace-Lorraine border. We were stationed there, one transport in the dark, heavy, field gray uniforms going to Russia, and we are in the light khaki uniforms going down to Africa. We sent the same week. The transport numbers got mixed up. Those in field gray went down to Italy on the Brenner Pass down there. They got caught and then shipped around to the east, see. But we went, in our light khaki uniforms, we went to the east. We went to Kiev. And then the commanding general said “Boys, you come just like God sent you to me. I won't let you go. I won't let you go back home again.” And then he made it that only those guys with frozen parts of their body who couldn't stand out another long Russian winter were allowed to go back. And from those 500 men, I was one of the 180 men who were allowed to go back in again, because I would never make another winter in Russia there. Because it was October already when I came to – no, it was earlier than that – September – on the Russian front, and it was cold already then. And we had to, “Alright, you claim you have something frozen on your feet, let me see it.” Didn't take long. The shoes came off and I put my frozen feet, standing on top of those ice cold railroad tracks – it was out in the track on the railroad out in no man's land – doesn't take long – those feet are black because the cold steel below them. “Alright. Over there. You're going back home.” We went on the train. It was about four weeks again before we came down through Russia, through Poland, through Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, down to Italy. Then in Italy, we came all the way down to Cassino. We came through Rome, Pisa – I saw Pisa – we saw the Italian government – the Axis – then we went over to the allies. That was why we went down there. Then I saw when they shipped all kinds of Italian prisoners of war – they took them prisoners then because there was no Italian Army anymore, they shipped them over there to Germany for labor camps and so forth.

Mark: So, you got to Italy then. It was the fall of '42. A much different front, I would imagine, different fighting environment, and a different enemy to fight.

Pechmann: Well, how can you say, a civilized enemy?

- Mark: I was going to ask – the Italian theater was a sort of odd mix of all different armies anyway. But the main adversaries there were the Americans and the British.
- Pechmann: Well, the German Army never, ever considered Italian soldiers a good soldier. Never did. It was entirely different with the British and with the French and with the American soldiers. American soldiers were new to us, too. British were yet from the Frankreich, from France, those were a different breed of people entirely different than the Russians or the Italians. Italians were – every German soldier would say “Of course, you find good Italian soldiers – individuals. Fanatics. But in general, they are chickens.” They are not good fighting men, except the Italians with a knife in the mouth or something, see. But on the front line, they are not good soldiers. No German soldier will deny it. You cannot trust them. They are two-faced. While a British and Americans, entirely different, see.
- Mark: Well, see, I’m interested what you thought of the British, and, well, particularly the Americans [chuckles], before you got into the fighting, and perhaps how that outlook changed as you actually began to –
- Pechmann: Well, again this has something to do with the propaganda.
- Mark: Sure. Well, that’s what I’m interested in. I’m interested in what you were expecting and what you actually found.
- Pechmann: We respected the British probably more than the Americans at that time, because we had more experience fighting the British than the Americans.
- Mark: As I understand it, the image of the American was that they were sort of fat and lazy, soft and –
- Pechmann: No. No. Not at all. We figured the Americans is a good soldier – now that comes from my heart, again, now, too, here – they were good soldiers – they were not as good as the British – but they were very good soldiers because they had the materiel behind them. If I got the materiel behind me, I can be a good soldier. And of course I’ve seen American soldiers. They were *top notch guys*, even if they didn’t have the equipment. But the American equipment did it in World War II. They did it. Because if we shot one round, they shot a hundred rounds, see. And if we had one tank, they had, oh my gosh, a whole countryside full of tanks, see. So, if you’ve got the equipment you can be a good soldier – if you’ve got something to fall back on, see. True. But in general, both of them are good soldiers. Of course, the British had more experience, and they were highly, highly respected by the German Army. Oh definitely, oh yeah.

- Mark: So you got to Italy. It was the Fall of '42. How long was it before you were captured?
- Pechmann: It was later than '42, wasn't it? I came in there in '43 already. '43 I came down to Italy. Because on the way down we came – there was one episode there when we came down by train – a transport – we were about 1,200 men again there – 1,000, 1,200 men, whatever they could drum up in Germany – we were past Rome, and we had to pull on the sideline. There was a little switching depot there, for freight trains. We had to wait for one train to come down here. He had the right of way to go all the way straight on the line – all the way up to Rome. While we were waiting there, at night, pitch dark, we heard that train whistle blow miles and miles away, coming out the mountains there, coming down here, we didn't know what happened. And we were standing on the side, pitch dark, and the doors opened. Some of them were outside, some of them were inside. And that train, what came down here was – we were here, one there, and one there – on the second track over, he came in, and full steam – the whistle was blowing. Later on, we found out why. Because saboteurs, or guerillas, cut the brake lines on the train! And the train was fully loaded with – I don't know how many – with wounded, and with vacationers in it going on furlough. The train – a full train load takes, when he's in full speed, two miles from the time he hits the brakes till he gets to stop. Two miles on full speed. And he came at full speed, plowing on a train that was parked on the road, because that's why he was tooting his horn, you see. We didn't know what happened, and start cursing (?) – we jumped out of our wagons there, down in the ditch. It was dark. It was down maybe 3, 4, 5, 8 feet down there. Some of them broke their legs jumping on top each other there, see, because it was dark. You didn't know what happened there, see. On the train that came down that it was, what we heard, not one guy was hurt in it. The engine and the train were standing – keep standing on the tracks – but the train that was standing there got hit. [laughs] Three, four wagons piled on top each other. And the reed and everything, and the grain were floating out, you see, but there was nothing on the train. Later on we heard that guerillas cut the brake lines, see. That's why he was warning us, "Clear the track, clear the track!" See, so, that was it. From there we came we left the station then went up to near Cassino. And there we got unloaded in Cassino. When we came into Cassino, I saw other Germans took the monks from the Mount Cassino, Monte Cassino, and transport them up to – keep 'em safe – and up to Rome, see. To Pisa and Rome. And I will say they were well behaved. Nothing was out of order – everything was orderly. They were on the open tracks there, and then the monks – there was a unit with ropes on it – they transport them up the road there, see, over [unintelligible]. But then we came – in daytime we marched toward the front line then towards Roccamonfina in Caserta, Campania [Caserta province in Campania

region of Italy] was the territory. And while we were going there, we were in a olive plantation, with olive trees and so on, resting. It was the daytime, but a hundred-twenty men, we were sitting among these olive trees, all at once, we saw five British Spitfires – fighter-bombers – coming over Cassino. We were on a little side hill in Cassino – Cassino was below it. The abbey was on the other hillside, on the other side there. And right down in the middle of the valley, in the town, was a hospital – a German hospital – with great big red crosses on the roof. It was a nice, warm, sunny day, and all at once, we were sitting here, three of the fighter-bombers went out and turned around, then bombed the red cross, the hospital there. I think still today – I still hear those guys, the nurses, and the assistant shusten (??), and those soldiers who were sitting out in the sun, sunning themselves, screaming bloody murder. They came around, bombed it, they came around again, and bombed it a second time, while two of them just circled around. Then they all grouped up again and went away. That I see today. That is what I will say, they always say that Germany – I haven't seen it – but that, what I've seen, is more nice. We could not shoot up there because – we were not allowed to shoot because we didn't want to give our position away, and what kind of rifles, to the –

Mark: Spitfire.

Pechmann: Yeah. So, from there we marched to the front line. And I don't know – I went as far south as Naples. And from Naples, then, there were different units, and fighting our way back they had the British 8th Army against us there, see. And again, the materiel those guys had there, what they were throwing against us – oh my gosh.

Mark: Well, I was going to ask how the combat was different. For one thing, in Russia, it's fairly flat. Where in Italy, it's much more hilly. You mentioned the materiel discrepancies –

Pechmann: It was more hide and seek in Italy. More hide and seek because they had more places to hide behind, you see, in those hills, and the mountains and everything else.

Mark: As did you, you had more places to hide, too.

Pechmann: Oh, definitely. Oh, sure, definitely. We had no problem there, see, so. But again, in Italy, it was – when I got captured that night on November the 6th, 1943, around 11:00, our whole company was 28 men strong. And from those 28 men, there were about 15 fighting men, and the rest were Red Cross men in the company, the chef, the lieutenant, and the master sergeant, they were back in the dugout, while there were about 12, 14 men were out on the front line. We had one heavy machine gun, I was second machine gun out to the right machine gun. I had the ammo and the extra

belts with me. And the rest were riflemen. Then we had one rifle grenademan – he had a little rifle grenade you put on your rifle and put your little shiesbeche (??) on it, then you shoot a little grenade out of it, see. We had one of those, see. But we had about 5, 600 guys against us. Well, what do you do? At night, I got captured there. They covered us with three and a half, four hours with taumelfeuer (??). With tamelfeuer there's a *long delay* (??) after the other one. And I don't know how many guns they were shooting at us. That's how many gun, and every gun caliber.

And the day – two days before I got captured, nice sunny warm day like today, it was – oh, two, three, four weeks before that, we planted anti-tank mines, and anti-personnel mines. There was a little road going to – if you picture Devil's Lake, forget about the lake, that's all land. Then you go the steep rock walls there, that is where, on top was the German heavy machine gun, we were down where the lake is, and then the British came by there. And we, there was a road going through there – a little country road where the Italian farmers would go in the little vineyards there – and we planted anti-tank mines there and anti-personnel mines. And there was, oh, about 200 yards, everything was quiet around us. 200 yards ahead of us in our no-man's land there in front of our barbed wire fences there and minefields, a beautiful apple tree. All big yellow apples on it, [chortles] ho, ho, ho. I had a buddy of mine say "Come on, you want to have some?" You know, just like if you go on a Sunday walk, see, going across that thing. We were halfway through there. We'd never tasted an apple. Our commander back there was a master sergeant, he barked, "You idiots! Don't you know you're on your own minefield?!" We froze on the spot. [unintelligible—refers to his friend] jumped like a kangaroo. I believe he could out-jump a kangaroo, see. Nothing happened to him. Two days later, I see a British guy from the 8th Army there – they attacking us at night.

See, first of all, they covered us with – I was out in no man's land oh, maybe 60, 80, 100 yards ahead of our line here in a dugout that was a horseshoe shape hole. Oh, maybe, [indicating with hands] that deep – you could lay down, you couldn't be seen. In the middle, in the horseshoe you put your rifle or your machine gun there so you could shoot either way, so you could walk around in it, see. And the British attacked us all at once, and shot. I was a guard out there – the foreperson, they called it – to see, in other words, guarding, see, if someone comes up, so. And all at once, one shot, two shots, "Boop, boop, boop," all at once they started shooting. First, before I come any further here, day before I was in the dugout, a sandstone dugout [was] all it was. There's a corner here, maybe ten, fifteen feet of sandstone above us, and our entrance to the dugout facing the German side, not the front side. And the British artillery shooting some stuff and setting marks, setting points. Shoot one shot there with a

frag grenade, alright, that is so many degrees, so many yards away. Shoot one here, shoot one there, shoot one there, setting the point where they're really going to shoot, so they know, alright, you shoot that direction, that direction, that direction. One shell, while I was looking out there, when they started shooting there, way back over there was a shell landing, frag grenade, the smoke went up, smoke grenade. Didn't take long.

One there, one there, and one of them hit – they were shooting lower than, or closer – in the tree, right in the – a few yards away from our dugout there. That shell burst up, then one sliver went past me, took my coat pocket, here, the corner coat pocket, and since a guy was sitting back there, it hit him right in the leg – sliver about like this thumb. A little bit deeper, I wouldn't be here. Because I had two pockets – I had 5 or 6 pineapple grenades in my pocket, see. A little bit deeper and I would be blown up. And I had a cigarette case in my pocket, and that hit the same corner on the cigarette case, so I had to throw that thing away. But that was the only casualty we had, was that guy inside from the sliver there, in the whole bombardment there. The next day – well, we didn't think much of it, see – but when shooting comes everything get ready for it. The next day when I was on guard duty out in that horseshoe – foreperson there – they started out, and I would say for about three and a half, four hours, I fell asleep in that hole with all that bombardment there. And, I admit it, I wet my pants. Because, automatically as soon as I went down there, when the shelling started, I lifted my chin strap from my helmet, see, because otherwise if a thing explodes right next to you, it takes your head right along with it. So, and I laid down. You are surprised how small a fellow could get when he is in danger like that. You almost flat laid down, and I covered myself with ammo, with live ammo boxes, with machine gun ammo boxes, I covered my legs and so on, see. I had my helmet on. And then I fell asleep.

And then all at once it started. “Fsshew!” Everything was quiet. That is when you wake up. “What's the matter?” Because you don't know why, see. Later on we found out they had to let their guns cool down. British had their guns – they were so hot – so they let 'em cool down. And there's nothing worse than when you sit in that hole there and all at once they start out again, and “Floomp, floomp, floomp, floomp, floomp,” a shell bursts closeby. And then “Floomp, floomp, floomp, floomp, floomp,” that is the noise a that piece of shrapnel makes. If it's a bigger piece, how much noise it makes. I thought to myself, “My God, now what do they shoot now? Throwing kitchen sinks at you or what?” But that is when you pray. Oh, ho, I've prayed never so much in my life as when I was in that hole there. And everybody came there –my wife--well my girlfriend, my mother, my dad, and everybody else and they came there, all at once they came up there alive again, see. And I got out alive. Everything stopped. The shelling stopped.

Then after those three half, four hours, I don't know exactly how long it was – and all at once a guy from back in the dugout came then. “Kurt! Kurt! Are you hurt? Are you alive?” They figured I would be goulash. It takes just one grenade and then they would have pieces to be picked up there, see. Or bury me alive in that hole there. Not one scratch on it. And then those guys came back there. I got relieved – it was more than my two hours guard duty out there. I came back there, and they cried. They embraced me and they cried, and were happy that I was alive, see.

And after that round, the British came. First, we were shooting. Well, they were shooting and grenades were coming down the – actually I don't know what it is there. They came then – our heavy machine gun was firing down this way. We were firing with our rifles and our machine gun up this way, like in the rocks in Devil's Lake. But those guys came down along the road there. We had mines there, too – the little path. And those guys up in the mountains there making all kinds of noise with their rifle butts and their shovels and their spades and picks – they were bumping rocks, making noise to direct fire up to them to hide those guys who came underneath – there were six, eight guys who came underneath – we called it stosstrupp (?) – coming down here and cut it off. They came and sneaked up behind us, see, while we were directing fire up there, then all at once, I heard the pineapples rattle. Because the British pineapples are different from the Germans'. I don't know – similar to the Americans. There was that lever that snapped open, then when the thing goes it makes a clicking noise, see. But the Germans, they had that little button they pulled out, there was nothing that would click it in the fuse, see. But then, as soon as those things start rolling there, our commander said, I think he was a master sergeant, he said, [with British accent] “Hold up! Hold up! Hold up!” Well, those guys were here, I was here, dugout was here, “Hold up,” there was only one way out. That was maybe a little two foot narrow path on top of ridge – ten, eight feet down there, a stone wall there, then you sit up there – a little terrace, see – a vegetable terrace. Those four, five guys were in the way there. In the meantime, the pineapples were exploding here, what did I do? I didn't want to go through that one, there, then I went back in the dugout, see.

And all at once, I heard the English voices. Then I just made, “Don't shoot! Don't shoot me!” I brought my arms out of the dugout there, then like a bunch of ants over a dead mouse, the British right there. One took my helmet, threw 'em away, one took my around 200 rounds of machine gun around my neck, and my rifle belt around my neck I had there. And one of them, right away, grabbed my wristwatch, and the other one went for my billfold, and the other went for my fountain pen that was a souvenir from my brother, who died in Russia in Stalingrad. “Any other ones around here?” he spoke in English, see. “More, more, more?” And I said

“Well, I’m alone in here.” That was around 11:00 at night. The next day, the rest of them got caught during daytime. They got cut off. They knew, during daytime, where these guys were going, see. And all at once, we embraced each other again back in camp. But coming back, before I got captured, while we were firing up there, the British were attacking that little flat area here where that apple tree was. I saw one British soldier – I will never ever forget that one – stepping on one of our mines there – the anti-personnel mines. Those anti-personnel mines are about like a two pound coffee can cut in half, roughly, see. Splinters all over, shrapnel all over. I see him stepping on that mine. Everything is dark, pitch dark, you don’t see anything, all at once you see those rays from the explosion going up, and he is hanging up in mid-air, arms spread out, hollering bloody murder. It’s hard to explain. Hanging there, he came down, and everything was quiet. There I knew what a mine can do.

And then they took me out and after they got me captured there, that was the end of February. Then, one of those guys – the rest of them followed the rest of them – one of ‘em brought me back. And if he says, “Let’s go,” you *go*. Because if you’ve got that burp gun in your back, you don’t argue, because you don’t know how trigger-happy that fellow is, see.

Mark: Yeah, I was gonna ask how well you were treated after you were taken into captivity. It’s a sort of tense situation –

Pechmann: The worst fear I had was – we’re going to come to that now. After that guy brought me back, the same pass he and those guys came, along the edge of those rocks – I knew we had mines there all over. And I said “Mines! Mines! Mines!” “Minen! Minen! Minen!” – mines was the only word I knew. All at once, on top of the hill, our heavy machine gun barked – the fourteen hundred rounds a minute, “Brrrrrrt!!” All at once I saw a streak of lightning going by there, maybe two foot high, three feet in front of me, “Brrrt!” Because he heard me, “Mines, mines, mines!” He said, “Let’s go.” Those guys heard the English words there, see. They didn’t know who it was, see. Then I hollered up there, “Kameradin, nicht schießen! Gefreiter Pechmann! Ich bin in gefangenschaft! Grube so-and-so,” which I actually shouldn’t have given out, because they heard it, see. [That quote roughly means “Comrades, don’t shoot! Private Pechmann! I am in captivity.”]

Mark: They could understand you –

Pechmann: The heck with – I could have cared less. I’m going to save my own neck now. And from then on, when he brought me back there now, that was the worst moment in my whole darn P.O.W. time. Because you don’t know how trigger happy he is. You do just one wrong word, or wrong move, and then “Brrt!” Bingo, you’ve got it. And if he’s supposed to bring back

to the commander or what, you don't know. From there, I spent the rest of the night – there were, like I said, four or five hundred guys against us, or even more. Those few hours we were shooting at them with rifles and machine guns there, I'm sorry to say it now, we raised hell with them. They had a heck of a lot of casualties. A lot of them. While they carried me away there on the stretchers there, right and left, are wounded and dead and everything else and blown to pieces.

Because the regular bullet, if you shoot it, and it doesn't hit anything, it goes right through you. A regular infantry bullet without hitting anything, it goes through seven people if you line 'em up behind each other. If you line 'em up behind each other, it goes through seven people, the regular infantry bullet. Not so if you shoot in the mountains, in the rocks. That bullet ricochets and then travels around jut like a whirlybird, and that one could cut a guy right in half, just one shot, see. I'm sorry to say, again, it happened up there. But war is war, see, so you have to defend yourself, see, no matter what the reason for it. We had our orders to do, though. And then they brought me up there on top of the ridge and talked to him – just like Wisconsin Dells – a little flat area there that was down the hill there to the Germans' side again, that was a different sector. I was spending the night up there, the British soldier, one of 'em, had just like stone hedge, piling stones up, little boulders that he found there, to sleep in it to protect himself. Because if a grenade sliver – the Germans were shooting from other directions there, so I didn't have any protection. I had my old coat on there. I found one that was way too big for me. I laid right next to him, see, so if he has that stone hedge there, and I laid right next to him so at least I had a little protection here, see. And next morning, they inspected. I was so darn tired there. There were a few shells from the German side, 8mm grenades, exploded there. There were little holes there, see, then you saw the end of the mine there, grenade laying there.

Then after that one, they took me out again then down to the commander. He was a British captain. I asked him, "Sir, how should I address him?" "Hauptmann." He spoke fluently German. Fluently. Then I made my little manz signe (??) and my sote (?) book. See each German soldier got the book where his unit is in it, and the group, and his salary and all those things, and his rank, and so on. What unit are we in? I told him. It's no use. He'd known it anyhow, so why hide it, see?

And before we got there, I saw a guy, a German soldier, he got killed. From the next neighbor unit, he was laying up on top, and I went to him. And the British guard, he did not stop me. I went to him, and the German soldier got a little cord around his neck with the dog tag on it, see. There's a – our old dog tag – aluminum, perforated, then you break one part off and take it with the sote (??) book and the thing and take it to the next commander. That means he's dead. So one half stays with the body with

the unit information on it, and the other one goes in. But somebody took it already and gave it away already. And then from there we went to the captain. And the captain then, alright. They took me by jeep then from there. It was a big hollow road there, he was hidden behind, captain. And they transported me up oh, maybe two, three miles. Maybe a mile up on the hillside to a big command post. And there the command post fellow – I don't know who was there – a lieutenant or so, he took us. There was a big, high plateau loaded with trees. And then he brought me to the edge of that plateau, just like the trees. Our unit was from here. He showed me there, and I looked here, right in my foxhole with my bare eyes. I couldn't believe it. When we looked over there, we were hidden here in the vineyard, in the vine fields. We didn't see anybody moving up there, and up there you could see a mouse crawl on here with your bare eyes. I couldn't believe it. I saw my foxhole. That they didn't get me there, that surprises me - that they didn't pinpoint down. They could see every movement we made down here. But, no, they had those great big [unintelligible].

And we retreated from the command post – we were further back. That is when I saw then the rest of my gang in the town. They were in a little house – a little barn, like, with heavy doors on it. We were in it, and that's when I saw the rest of my group, see. We were happy to be all together again. And then they told me how they got cut off the next morning. "We got cut off there, we were surrounded by those guys, and it's easy to raise your hands than fight and be shot at, see." That was the beginning of my P.O.W. time. But the most fear I had when he walked me from where I got captured back through the minefields there, because I didn't know, "Do I get it or not?" That is why if he say, "Let's go," you go. You don't argue.

Mark: How long after that was it that you were turned over to the Americans?

Pechmann: From there, from that little Italian village we were in, where there were maybe 15, 20 guys all together from different units and from my own unit there, that is when I had first my British food. They had a big can of cakes we called it. Those were crackers. And a cup of coffee – no! Tea. The British served us tea. From there, we came in a little makeshift camp down near Naples. It was a big stockade. Oh, maybe 10, 15, 20 feet high, barbed wire all the way around. A mud field. A mud field. Nothing there. They told us it was at one time a prisoner of war camp for Italians – the British. They brought us in there and had two men to a tent, raining like anything else. I've never seen that much mud in my life in – except Russia – down in Italy there. There was no end to it. Then you sit there, nothing to eat, hungry. Another guy and me – I didn't know him, he didn't know me – he had a tarp, I had a tarp, we put the tarp up. We didn't sleep. We were sitting on our mess kit there, so we didn't be in the mud

completely there, soaking wet, sitting, crouching in that thing, see, all night long. And then the next day, individually we were pulled out for interrogation by that British captain. He was a Jewish captain. He admitted it, "I'm a Jew," he said. One guy, he was from Berlin, he was a Nazi. I don't even know what his name was anymore. A little skinny guy, he was direct from the Afrika Corps. He came out, I went in, and he told me,

"Kurt, watch out. He just hit me in the face."

"That bad?" you know. But later on, he told me why. I went in there, I made my little man, "Hauptmann so-and-so, Hauptmann so-and-so."

He said, "I'm Hauptmann so-and-so. What unit were you in?"

I told him, "There's no use to hide it, you know it anyhow."

"True," he said. "Where were you born?" That was the regular information first, see. "How much ammo did you have? How much gasoline did you have? Where was it?"

I said, "We have plenty of ammo, we have plenty of gasoline."

He said, "Where is it?"

I said, "We picked it up at night. I'm strange down here. I don't know where this is, if it's this direction or that direction or that direction. I know it's just that we had ammo dumps with artillery and rifle ammo, and machine gun ammo galore, and grenades. And where? I don't know." And it was true. I didn't know it.

"And then how about your gasoline?"

I said, "The last time I got gasoline, it was in the evening. We had about 200, 250 50-gallon drums piled up on the hillside up above a ditch." There were trees growing over here, there was a ditch in front, and we had timber laying across, and then we rolled our barrels on it, see. Oh, that would be a lovely idea for somebody to blow this thing apart, see. But it was true – that was all gasoline. But we could not shoot because we had schiesebot (??) You couldn't shoot more than 10, 15 rounds whenever you shoot. And gasoline, so that was it.

And then he asked me, "Gefreiter Pechmann, are you a convinced Nazi?"

What should I say? I say "Yes." I can't deny it, because I said then, "What would you do if you hear nothing but one-sided propaganda from the German government. You hear nothing but 'The Russians are bad.'

Nothing but ‘The Americans are bad.’ Nothing, ‘The French and the British are bad.’”

Mark: That’s what you told him at the time?

Pechmann: Yeah. I told him that. I’m honest with it, see. I had to be convinced because I didn’t hear anything else but that. If you’re here in America and you hear nothing but, “Oh, the Germans are bad,” you have to believe it that they’re bad. Because I was 9 years old when Hitler came in power. What do I know about politics? I couldn’t care less about politics, see. We just wanted something to do. That’s why we joined the Hitler Youth, see. I told him, too, that “I had to be a convinced Nazi, because if you hear nothing but one-sided propaganda, you don’t hear anything else. You have to be convinced.” It’s as simple as that, see.

He said, “OK. Bye. That’s it.”

Nothing happened to me. I didn’t get any treated or something like that – that he once hit me on my face. But *he* got hit in his face because he was one of the sharp – he was officer material, that guy. He talked sassy back to ‘em.

He – the captain – asked him, “Why did Germany have the concentration camps?” Now I’m saying it just like he told it to me.

He said “Germany did not start the concentration camps. Britain did.” That is when he hit him in his face.

“How can you say that?”

He said, “Germany heard it from – learned it from Britain – from the British people. Because in the far east in Burma, they had the Burmese and the Buren – B-u-r-e-n – the tribe over there – that is where – it was a British colony – and that the British put those in concentration camps. And that is where the concentration camps started, and that is where Hitler got it from, too, see.” Though, I don’t know, that I just what I believe, and that’s what I heard, see. So, that is why he got punished.

And the captain told him, too, “You know, I could shoot you right here.”

And then he answered back, “That’s easy, you have the weapon, I don’t.”

So, but, later on we got separated, see. And I haven’t seen him since then, see.

Mark: So was it much longer before you got under American control?

Pechmann: From there, I believe that was two, three days away, and we came down in a big – very large and clean P.O.W. camp that was at that time an Italian prisoner of war camp, and then a British prisoner of war camp. And we came in there. And that is when we got turned over to the Americans. And that is when I got my first taste of American food.

Mark: See, I was gonna ask how conditions changed. Let's just go with the food, here. How was that different?

Pechmann: My very first taste of American food was three men, a loaf of military white bread, see. One third of a bread. And then one cube of bacon – smoked bacon – about, I would say 2 inches by 2 inches, or 3 inches by 3 inches. That was our first meal in American prisoner of war camp. And that tasted like cake. Oh my gosh, that bread tasted good.

Mark: I get the impression that was a lot more than the British were feeding you, too.

Pechmann: The British – we had just crackers and tea. Period. But then there, after that one, we got then Spam, coffee. And we were then with about – in the camp – 4,500 guys. Something like that. And then we got attacked by – not our camp – by German Messerschmitt and Focke-Wulf fighter planes that were strafing the roads where the American and British materiel was rolling along, see. And then they came in a deep attack. And two or three bullets hit our campsite, and one of them lodged in the bedpost where one guy was sleeping – a wooden bedpost. But no damage was done. We were standing around, and the Americans guards [unintelligible] were shooting, “Brrrt!” The plane was still shooting here, they follow fast, now up, “chhh!” They're come and gone, see. What is a little “Brrt!” gonna do in a case like that? That is when I saw my first American sign. “NO SMOKING,” it says there. A big sign. “No smoking.” And that's a different meaning in Germany. Because smoking in Germany is a cutaway or a tuxedo. Now why would anybody come with a tuxedo here into camp? And later on I found out it was a gas depot there. There was a gas pump there, see, gas and oil storage area. Why would anybody go with a “smoking”, with a cutaway, with a tuxedo in here, see?

There we got interrogated again –

Mark: By the Americans?

Pechmann: Not so much interrogated – they had all that information. But we got photographed, and we got our P.O.W. number. And my number was 81-G-225487. That was my P.O.W. number. I carried that all the way through my whole P.O.W. time. That was the 81st German, 81 G, 81st

German transport to America, or to England. See, they go by transport numbers. And I was a German, see, they had Italians [unintelligible], Japs. [I was] G for German. 225487 was my number. And that was the first transport direct from Europe to America. Before they had all kinds of transports from Africa and Italy over to England. And there, we came then, oh, a few days later to Le Havre—No! Naples. Naples, oh my gosh, and then you see what we didn't see before. All the ships were down in the water, and sunk, and half up, and still smoking. The Allies and the Germans bombed the whole harbor to pieces there. We came there on a liberty ship. They brought us out with a little cutter out there, with makeshift planks and a harbor – everything was in crumbles. The trailer was still smoking back there. We went in there, and they brought us with 500 men on one troop transport, a liberty ship. [untranslatable German phrase]. And 11 of us were there, going to America, see. Oh my gosh, America. We had no imagine – we couldn't imagine what America looks like because – the sun and the sky, that was what America was to us. And we were 500 men, 11 of – we never came together – we had different quarters. And then there were 20 days of high seas.

Mark: And what was that voyage like?

Pechmann: We came in the winter sturm [storm] – the fall and winter sturms. We left Le Havre, and 28 days later we came to America. And we were in a convoy of over 90 ships. There were destroyers, there were submarines, there were transports and everything else. Big ones and little ones. And the whole convoy can only go the medium speed of the smallest ship, because otherwise it would burn everything out, see. And the whole convoy was – they come in from Italy, they come from Gibraltar, they come from the Azure and all the way to Norfolk, and so we were coming together. On deck, we could go one hour in the morning, one hour in the afternoon. The rest, you stay down below it, because with the heavy storms. And then we were so long on the water, they run out of fresh water. So they wanted to get us the worst way – and food also – seasick. So they brought us up on deck in those winter sturms, and then a rope – we carried a two-inch rope from that end to that end. Then you have that thing cradled between your legs, and then you're sliding back and forth. There'd be a little tray here, your steel tray with four or five compartments, and it had maybe a grapefruit on it, a couple big sunshine crackers, and a cup of coffee, and an apple, and that was it. There was plenty for us to eat – not plenty, but we had one meal in the morning, one in the afternoon. So they wanted us the worst way seasick, so we don't as much food, or drink so much water. It didn't work. There were only five guys that got seasick. But they cut rations later on – you just had one cracker, and a half a grapefruit see, but that was the best because we came close to the American coastline. But on the way over here, in the area around the Azuran Islands, we got attacked by German four-engine

Condor bombers [Fw-200]. Those were the four-engined liberty bombers here, see. They attacked the convoy, not our ship, because our ship was marked with a red cross flag, and – [unintelligible] with the red cross of Switzerland, so they didn't attack us, see. But we had to go down below deck. We could not be on deck and watch it, but there was boats going under, because – for safety reasons also. And later on, before Norfolk, we had to go below deck every day, we had to go below deck, except two hours Monday evening. We got attacked by German submarines. How do we know? Because first, when the bombers attacked us, we heard the anti-aircraft go, and then before the American coast, we heard them drop the water bombs [depth charges] – the Americans boats that drop the water bombs, “Bloomp, bloomp, bloomp.” And then if you're down in the hold there with 500 men there, so hot and humid, the water's running off the walls. Because the boats are liberty ships, they were without a [unintelligible] put together. You see there a spot, there a spot, there a spot, see, so, with every wave the boat hits, it twists and bends and screams and cracks, see. Will it hold out? Well, we didn't have any problem coming over here, see. But, toilets. On the front there, the toilet maybe 20 holes across from that end to that end, double holes. Don't even go on that end there, see.

Mark: Because it'll slosh around?

Pechmann: Oh my gosh, it's like a big trough there, see. The water with those waves going there – there's three or four guys sitting on it there, all at once come see a fountain out of those holes – coming out – coming a fountain out of those holes. And that went all on that steel floor. You're sliding with your cots back and forth on it. Well we had our built-in cots, like your shelving here, see, but some of them had regular wooden cots that were sliding on the things. There were guys got hurt too, because they were slamming full force into steel poles and so on, so we had some casualties, too. Cleaning – saltwater doesn't take soap. Every three or four days we could go on deck there and take a shower while they had a water – 50 gallon drum there – with holes in the bottom, then they pump the seawater in. Well, you had a bar of soap, all you do is you roll your dirt up, see, the sweat and everything, you roll your dirt on, so it doesn't work. But at least you felt you were clean, anyhow. Shortly before Norfolk, it was Christmas 1943, Christmas holiday. We were still on high seas, a couple days out. We had Christmas on boat, and we made our own Christmas tree. No extra food – the same food as before. But we were singing Christmas songs there. We made a tree out of big cardboard boxes that were from – the goodies came in, the food and supplies there – we cut them out then were sliding them into each other in the form of a Christmas tree, see. A four-sided Christmas tree. And for ornaments, we had – the Germans had tinfoil in the cigarettes – they were wrapped in tinfoil. So we made little tinfoil ornaments out and hang them on the tree, and this

was our Christmas tree. ‘Til we came to Norfolk, we figured, what’s the matter? Is there no war going on? Because in Germany when we left, the propaganda was in Germany that America gets bombed into submission by the German U-boats and by their Condor bombers, see. We found out different. In Germany, in Europe, everything had to be dark. Everything was totally darkened out at night, see. We figured America would be the same. We came to Norfolk, “What’s the matter? Is there no war going on here?” Everything is lit up! The cars, the streets, the everything, the houses, bright and light. There is something wrong here. Either we were lying or they were lying, or they were putting a show up for us, see. And later we found out that back home, our government was lying. See, the Americans, they didn’t lie to us, they just left it the way it was, see, like nothing happened. So we came in Norfolk there, we docked in one of those piers there. Everyone goes out. Delousing! You strip naked from the top to the bottom, put your uniform, your underwear, all on a pile here, and it goes in a big container – oh like maybe 10 foot long, maybe 3 foot by 5 foot high – thrown everything in there and get deloused by some kind of chemical, see. While you take a shower with nice cold and warm street water, soap was working. And after that one, you dried yourself up and then came big husky negroes. Black fellows. I don’t know if they were in the army, or if they were employees there, with great big, two-inch tubes that “phoo phoo!” blowing that, uh –

Mark: Insecticide.

Pechmann: Insecticide.

[recording ends]

Mark: OK. Today’s date is April the 29th, a very snowy April the 29th. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, resuming our interview this afternoon with Mr. Kurt Pechmann of Madison, a veteran of the Wehrmacht in the second World War. And as we left off last time, um –

Pechmann: Going to Norfolk.

Mark: Uh, he was coming to Norfolk. So, I suppose we can – let’s start out by, as we were discussing before the tape went out, this won’t take too long, just describe briefly what sort of images you had of America. What sort of things you thought you were going to expect when you got –

Pechmann: Well, first of all when we came to America, we were told in Europe that America was all blackened out just like Europe. And we had no idea what to expect from America. We came by Pullman train in one of those big piers – warehouses. Everybody got out, everybody got undressed, got

deloused, our clothes were put in great big boxes and cleaned up. After that one, we were putting our clothes on, and 50 men to a Pullman wagon. Two men to a seat, so we had it nice there. And folding bag, and the windows of course would only open two inches. You couldn't get out – they were sewn shut from the outside, you couldn't open them from the inside. And each one got a razor, can of Spam, two packs of cigarettes, soap, and a couple chocolate bars, and that was our beginning of our trip to America. We didn't know where we went to. We left Norfolk. Of course, other trains had the priority – we always had to be sidetracked and waiting till either a freight train or passenger train came through. Then we went all the way up to Chicago. And there is in – we came to the stockyards. And there we had to wait for a long, long time again, then all at once they came – people were standing along the tracks there of the stockyards. Kids, women, some men, older men of course, trying – we didn't know why they were trying, see – either they saw the uniforms or they heard that there were P.O.W's, and they didn't know what we went through when they saw us there. Before that one on the way to here, from Norfolk to Chicago, we saw that great big country of America.

Mark: I was gonna ask what your initial impressions were. It's obviously a much larger country than the one which –

Pechmann: We never expected that America's that big.

Mark: I mean, you had been to Russia. I mean, Russia is very –

Pechmann: Russia was big, but America is bigger yet. Well, we have more settlements here in America. In Russia it was all flat land and, well, a little rolling land, but no trees and no houses. Hardly anything in between. And here, we got at that time already, good paved roads, main roads, and the houses were nice and clean and peaceful, and there was no war here! That was what we didn't expect. We expected, like the German propaganda told us, that everything is just as bad over here as Germany was bombed out. See, that's what we expected. The church is all nice and white, the steeples, and peaceful sunshine. Then they came to the stockyards in Chicago, and from there we were sidetracked over then to Camp Ellis. Camp Ellis had a railroad spur direct into camp. And we came about, oh, 10, 11 o'clock at night. We came in there, raining, lightnings. And they had along the railroad tracks, we got out of the train and we marched, oh, maybe 5, 6 blocks in three or fours side by side. And they had jeeps, any motor vehicle, right and left of the building road, lighting up the road. And in between those lights were the guards with the MP's and burp guns. So we had to follow in between those tracks there and in to the campsite then. And there, 50 men to a camp, to a barrack. And we couldn't believe that those were our prisoner of war camps there.

Mark: They were pretty –

Pechmann: Floors were clean. That was not what we expected as prisoners of war. The beds were there, each one had a mattress. Each one got a brand new army tweed blanket. Then we put our feed bag, our duffel bag, we hang it on the bed, there. In the middle of the camp, in the middle of the barrack, next to the stove, I had the bottom bunk. There were two bunks, top and bottom, and I had the bottom bunk. Now what? We were telling each other there, voluntarily – well, voluntarily or not – “How long do you figure we are staying here?” See? We figured in America about two years, that’s what we figured, which was about true, see. Two years, three months. Oh, and then that was at night. And the next morning we got up for breakfast. The whistle blew, we go out in the wash room. We had our own wash room there – toilets, shower, everything you wanted. We had our soap, we had our towels. We got in, and our shaving cream and shaver, we went into the wash room to shave. And after you got cleaned up, you go back to your barracks, make your bed. And after that one, you waited till they call you for breakfast. Then we went all in the dining area, dining room. Big, beautiful tables. The benches there. Coffee pot in the middle. Milk bottles in the middle. Then each one goes by the kitchen and picks up their little tray with – either you had scrambled eggs, or – it was at that time powdered eggs – powdered eggs, you had your orange, you had your white bread, you had your Spam, you had your butter, well, margarine wasn’t known at that time. But you had oranges, some crackers, and also some Corn Flakes, what we never knew before then in Europe and the German Army. And then you had your big cup of coffee there, cup of coffee or milk, as much as you wanted to drink. And after you were through with it, you bring your cups and everything back to the kitchen to get cleaned up. And then there was KP service there – POWs who would clean the table and everything. And then we went back to the barracks.

Mark: Now, you seem to suggest that there was a lot more stuff, I guess you would say, than you expected. Was that the case for other German POW’s as well? Did you expect so much abundance of food, and the quality of –

Pechmann: I would – they depend from camp to camp, but ours was a big troop training camp, which was entirely different if you were just a little branch camp, see. The branch camp, there were no troops quartered there except just the guards. But since that one was a big troop training camp, we had all the warehouses full of clothing, we had our big butcher shops there in the camp. We had our big ice storage area where I worked later on, where they were hanging as far as you could see, hundred, two hundred yards long, those big warehouses, those refrigerated warehouses, one side of beef right next to the other one, from top to bottom. Lamb, and pigs, and beef hanging there. I worked in there too, see. And I’d never seen that

before. And that is why we got the more food also than those little branch camps, see, because the food had to be there for the armed services, for the army there, for training. So it was only natural that we got the stuff also. Funny that our camp was surrounding by another wire fence. We were a camp inside a big camp, see, so. But we didn't bother with anybody – we had our own soccer fields and everything else there.

Mark: So, how long did you spend at Camp Ellis?

Pechmann: Camp Ellis, I was there from November '43, till about April of '44.

Mark: So, what did you do while you were there? What sort of activities did they do to keep you prisoners occupied? What sort of activities did perhaps your officers – I assume you were with German officers.

Pechmann: We were separated. We never, ever seen – after I got, became a POW, we never seen a German officer before – [correcting himself] never afterwards. Could be, too, because there were enough problems already [chuckles]. So we were in the camp there. Some groups were divided into labor groups. That one went out to – I have been there also – in the junkyard. Not in the junkyard, but out in the dump area where they dumped the old tin cans and water bottles, and – we bottled everything – collecting cans, tin cans. That was – one commander was in it. Another one was in it cutting weeds. Four or five guys getting a big scythe and then cutting weeds down a long fence, and so on. And another commander that was in it was picking up – Camp Ellis used to be a big – uh, nothing but farms. And there was farm equipment – old wire, barbed wire fences laying around, everything, machinery. We collected those, see, and put them all on piles to be brought away later on. We were – on one commander I was also – they put a airstrip in it before I got there, and we widened it and lengthened it. So we had to lay those big long – what were they – three foot, or two foot wide, ten foot long, corrugated metal strips there for airplanes. We had a little – two little Piper Cubs, whatever, that were observation planes. And we laid those. And then we worked down at the motor pool repairing, and ripping apart old jeeps and trucks that came back from overseas – ripping them apart. And also grading along the – another commander I worked in it – grading around the shooting range. They were building a great big cement wall there, and we were grading around there. Also, another one – now, those were not, those commanders were not necessary there to keep the camp going. It is just to keep the POWs busy.

Mark: Yeah.

Pechmann: Another one was also – they had to, oh ravines maybe a hundred, two hundred yards long, ten, fifteen feet deep where they dumped all the cut

up lumber. 2x4s, the boards, and 2x6s, and 2x10s, cut up stuff. They dumped them in there in the hole when we were building the barracks. Well what we had to do then though there, just to keep us busy, one of em had a saw, the other one had a hammer, the other one had a crowbar, pulled the nails out what they had pounded in. Well, the nails we threw away, and the boards we threw away on the pile to be burned up later on.

Mark: So they kept you busy on these labor details pretty much every day, I take it.

Pechmann: That is just to keep the prisoners busy so they don't lose their mind. That's all it is, see.

Mark: Yeah. Now, as a German POW, what was expected of you, in terms of how to behave towards your captors? Are you supposed to try to escape or not? In the U.S. that would be really hard, I would imagine. But I don't – what sorts of things as a soldier were expected of you while in captivity?

Pechmann: Well, it is in any army, no matter what nationality it is – they expect the prisoners to escape. If you are caught while escaping, you could be shot. We were all front line soldiers, and I still can't – some of them escaped. I know that I was not one of 'em. But we helped with other wards, second tent, we helped them to escape because it was Hoopeston in Illinois. Three POW's escaped. It took the guards three days to find out they were gone, but they caught back. They were calling in, brought back to camp. And we staged a phony riot on that end of the campsite to direct all the attention of the guards in that one while those guys on the other end escaped. They escaped through the toilet holes, see. I just, two or three years ago I went down to Hoopeston Illinois to that very same camp, and I told those people there how they escaped. Nobody ever knew how they escaped. They got caught. They got three weeks water and bread, but it was nothing, because all the pain and suffering what we went through as front line soldier, that was nothing. That was kid's play for us. But anybody was encouraged to escape from our own government. Any army that way.

Mark: Right.

Pechmann: But I still can't figure out why would anybody in his clear mind try to escape. Here he was on the front line, got shot at by the enemy, the other side, and then trying to escape to go back to Germany again and put back on the front line again to be shot at. That doesn't get me. That's beyond me. Why would I give my good living quarters up, my good food up? Nobody bothers me here. Why should I give that one up to be shot at again? Because, and besides that, as soon as you come back to Germany,

if they ever – I don't know if anybody ever did – if they came back during Hitler's time there, they would be court-martialed, and probably shot on top of it. Because there is – what should I say, how I express myself – you did not behave like a soldier in front of the enemy, see, so you should be trying to do as much damage as possible to them but not to give yourself in to it. And that's what every German prisoner of war did, because, if Germany had won the war, every one of them would have been court-martialed. Every one of them, unless they were escaping and staying over here then, see. But thanks God, didn't happen this way. And why would I escape and give up my good food and my good living quarters and nobody bothers me here? And working, we had to work no matter where we went to. So that was just kid's play for us young kids anyhow. And I was 20, 25 years old.

Mark: I guess my question would be, if you're going to escape –

Pechmann: Yeah.

Mark: Where would you go?

Pechmann: South America.

Mark: Oh.

Pechmann: South America. That was the only drawback by – that it was too far away, see. They couldn't go to Canada, because Canada was American-friendly. They would deliver them out there again to America, see.

Mark: That's the idea was like – get to Mexico, or –

Pechmann: Exactly, yeah. They were taught to go down south to Brazil, South America, not Mexico, but South America. Argentine, and Brazil. And they were German-friendly at that time, see. They, from there, you're going back to Europe. But I've no way. Because I was homeless then already. Germany later on lost the war, where would I go, see?

Mark: In terms of how the American guards and the American officials in general treated you, how would you characterize it, and, again, was that what you would have expected?

Pechmann: The American guards – well, you find not so in those – in any army, no matter whether they are German, or American, or British army. In general, I would say 95% of the American guards, including civilians, were German-friendly, and treated us very well. They did their job. Understandable. Never ever hurt a G.I., mistreated a German prisoner of war. Because in that, I will say I regard the American guards very highly.

They were human beings. You did not expect that from Russian – a Russian soldier. No way. Well, let's face it. How many Americans were here already they were German ancestry? They had German relatives. Matter of fact, it was in Camp Ellis, Illinois, that father was out as a guard with a rifle – American army – guarding prisoners, while his own son was a German prisoner inside. And that happened because the years before the war started, the whole family came over to America. The son, before he became a citizen, the war broke out. He was – his father sent him over back to Germany to study in Heidelberg in one of those big universities over there, to go to school. In the meantime, the war broke out, and he couldn't get out, and when Hitler grabbed him, the army grabbed him, and they put him in the German army, see. And he became – down in Italy, or in Africa – he became a prisoner of war and he was brought back to Camp Ellis, and his own father guarded his own son inside the camp. That happens too. But, in general, American guards treated us A-1. You do your job, that's what they expected from us, and that's what we did. And there was no hassle. There was no hassle whatsoever. And, matter of fact, later on, when we worked on the milk factory in Juneau – Juneau, Wisconsin – we relieved high school kids. The high school kids, in a 8-hour shift, they turn out one railroad car of condensed milk, while the POWs were there, they turned out three railroads car in a 8-hour shift. The chief came in and put the chain so the machines go faster and faster and faster, and then we turned three railroad cars full of condensed milk in a 8-hour shift. And wherever we went – the hemp mill and the red, Libby milk, Libby, the canning companies in Hartford – everybody praised the POWs because the POWs had to let steam off someplace. We, with our sport groups, our soccer clubs and so on and so forth. But working was our main – keep busy.

Mark: So, these work details – would they be five days a week? Six days a week? Seven days a week?

Pechmann: Around the clock. Well, uh –

Mark: Sundays? Did they make you work on Sundays?

Pechmann: Oh yeah, we did, too, yeah. But that was in shifts, see. We were in the hemp mill because – and then the peas, when the peas come in you have to go out. The milk factory, we worked in three eight hour shifts, see, around the clock, see. And we had no complaints there. We worked in onions. Matter of fact, I worked in the farm. About fifteen, twenty guys, the farmer came and brought us to work in marsh. And he had a field of onions to be picked out. Pulled out, they showed us how to do – rip 'em out, and laid the bulb here, the straw here, side by side to dry 'em out. And we were there Saturday, and – Friday and Saturday. And he expected, oh, if in those two days we could get half of the work done, that

would be plenty, and he would be happy, see. Well it came Friday afternoon, about 2 or 3 o'clock, that whole field was done. The whole work was done. We did twice as much work as he expected. So what did he do? He put a big feast on for us. Home cooked meals. The neighbors came there and they were Germans also, but they were born over here already, see, but the ancestors came from Germany. And they expressed to us there how good workers we were. No matter where we went – hemp mill, pea factory, and in any work detail. And why should we work? Because we were prisoners of war. We lost the war. We got captured, so might as well make your best – what you can. Why make it worse for yourself?

Mark: Let's just go through these steps. You left Camp Ellis in the spring of '44? Sometime in 1944.

Pechmann: '44. Yeah.

Mark: And you went from there to Wisconsin?

Pechmann: No, from Camp Ellis, we went to camp Hoopston, Illinois. It is on the east side of Illinois. Just south of Chicago. Right on the border of Michigan, and – what is it? Michigan?

Mark: Indiana.

Pechmann: Indiana. Of Indiana and Illinois.

Mark: And what sort of work did you do there?

Pechmann: There, we were about 350, 380 men there in the asparagus harvest. We went out 6:00 in the morning, by 8:00 we were back, we were done for the whole day, cutting asparagus. The next day we went and the same thing again. Each one had two rows, you go in between the rows. One row here, one row here. Over in Europe, it's different. Over here, the asparagus, as soon as the head comes out, you cut six inches below that, see. In Germany, the asparagus has to be six inches above ground before you cut them. Over here, the asparagus puts the head up, you cut them underneath. So we had one there, one there, and then we went all the distance to the middle of the field, 300 yards maybe, then you go along there. You, when your basket is full, you leave 'em right there. And from there, you pick up another basket and go to the other end, see. And on the way back you see the same thing again. We were maybe with 60, 80 guys going in one row over there, and cutting asparagus. And by 8, 9 o'clock we were back in camp, nothing to do. Because we had to wait again for the following day till the asparagus comes up again, see. And we played soccer there, we played multi-cards (??), skat [German card game] and

had our own music band there. Matter of fact, we had three, four guys who played music. And there was the big barbed wire fence there, ten foot fence. Across the street there were civilians there. And there came all at once, a girl with a saxophone from the high school. She was playing over there, and the POWs were playing over here. German songs that the high school girl knew the songs too, so we had quite a ball there, see.

Mark: Quite a jam session –

Pechmann: Oh, that's right. All the civilians came around and listened to it because no matter where we went to, we were either singing German songs or playing songs. And civilians used to love our music. See, we were marching or so. And in that very same camp in Hoopseston, there, it was – our camp was a big storage area for the canning company. Stored machinery and so on and so forth. And we were down below it in the big building there. And that is where the three POWs escaped. And in that very same camp, by roll call, by mail call and eating around 7 o'clock, there was one fellow by the name of Willie Schmidt. He got a letter. Willie Schmidt. And the way he pronounced his name, I heard that voice before. That was my boss when I learned my trade as a granite cutter over in Germany, the steinmetz. And I went to him, and you should see his eyes when I said, "Willie Schmitz from Favitsky (??), the granite works?" "Yup." His eyes opened up that somebody knew him there, see. The plant got closed down after the war, and got drafted also and became a POW. And we were maybe four weeks together there, but I don't know what became of him. He was a little bit older. He maybe was 15, 20 years older than me, so he probably came back to another camp. I don't know if he's alive yet or not.

Mark: So after Hu - Hoopseston?

Pechmann: Hoopseston. H-o-o-p-e-s-t-o-n.

Mark: Then you went to Wisconsin.

Pechmann: Then from there we came in railroad cars again, in Pullman wagons, and we went all the way up to Barron, Rice Lake.

Mark: Oh, that's way up there.

Pechmann: It's way up there. And there we were in a cow pasture. Nothing but one single strand of wire around the whole camp. 350 men again, or so, 300 - out in an open field – two men to a tent. There we were supposed to work in the pea harvest. Because we followed where the harvest sites came. Peas and so on, carrots – carrots later on, but the peas were ripe. And while we were traveling from Camp Ellis to Hoopseston and up there, the

bookkeeping didn't come along, see, because we had our coupon books. Each one had about 20, 22 dollars worth of coupons in it, and three dollars worth of coupons from the Red Cross to buy cigarettes or chocolate bars – well, we bought those things 24 bars at a time, a little case right away, see. And all at once, the commander came, “Well, I can't give you any more credit. If you haven't got any money, you can't buy anything.” That was just like it came out of one mouth, and, well, no credit, no work. Because if we don't get that money, we can't buy the stuff we had it coming. The guards had it coming. Then we refused to work, see. And that was just the time when the peace came out again. The camp commander said it, no, the civilians said it later on, too, the camp commander said, “Well, if you don't work, I can't do nothing about it. I sentence you two weeks water and bread.” Well that didn't bother us one bit because what is water and bread? We were so used to suffering so much already. One day later, at midnight, the commander came, “Boys, I got your money, you go back to work?” That's all what we wanted, see. And the guards were happy too, because they said, “Boys, that was the best thing you ever did, because we didn't get any money either.” And as soon as he said “Two weeks water and bread,” the camp was closed down, and before there was one guard on that corner and opposite corner, so each one took the sides. There were guards on every corner, see, but we had no problem whatsoever there, and we got to work the next day in the fields and in the canning companies. Well you strike, howcome? Did you do that in Germany too? No. We learned it over here in America. Germany didn't know what strike is, see, which is true. We learned it over here to strike as a POW. We learned it in America.

And there was one family in Barron, they went on vacation and they had a great big St. Bernard dog, and they didn't take him along. And then that St. Bernard understood only German. So they asked the guard on the command if they could leave that dog here for a week or so, see. Why not? It was good entertainment for us, and we got along fine with that big St. Bernard, and they were happy they had a good place for him, see. And at that time, while we were in Rice Lake, in the canning company, we were in Barron, Rice Lake, Turtle [Lake], Cameron, that whole area there. We were in the canning company in Rice Lake, and I was just in the bathroom doing my – what I had to do – there came a guy in it and he said, “Shh. Don't tell anybody.” He lifted his lapel up from the jacket and said, [quietly] “The F.B.I. is after me.” He showed his swastika. He belonged to the underground, the American underground. We didn't say anything because we didn't want him in trouble, otherwise we would get in trouble too, so, he didn't bother us. He said, “You don't know anything. Keep your mouth shut.” Maybe he was just a – he was a agent, or he just wanted to show off. Who knows? A sympathizer, or something like that, see. So, I don't know what happened to him, and he just said “Don't say anything,” so it was forgotten. But at that time we never knew

there was such a thing as underground or [unintelligible]...sabotage, or something like that, we don't know that.

[both started talking at the same time]

Pechmann: Pardon me?

Mark: That is rather odd, I've never heard such a thing myself, either.

Pechmann: Yeah, yeah.

Mark: So I suppose when the harvest cycles went around again, you went from –

Pechmann: Barron, Rice Lake, we came to Lodi.

Mark: Lodi?

Pechmann: Lodi, Wisconsin, down here.

Mark: Yeah.

Pechmann: And we came by railroad car again. I still remember when we went over the bridge down in Okee, over the railroad bridge there, and they pulled in the railroad station in Lodi. All we got out there of the railroad cars and marched in four, side-by-side, right through town. And sung all the German songs there, German military songs, of course. And people right and left looked out the windows and out the street looking, and see, because we were the first bunch of POWs the town had seen there. We went out, oh, maybe mile, mile and a half, out to the fairgrounds. There, they had two man tents out there. And I still remember where my tent was right in the middle of the camp there. We had two men to a tent. And we went from there the next day to work, picking corn, canning company on the machines that were taking the cans up there on boiler room, and shucking corn. And sometimes we went over to the canning company in Waunakee, neighbor town, they didn't have a camp there, but we worked there. Worked also in the canning company in – several times already, right now, while I'm here in Madison, people come there, "I worked there, I know you POWs. I worked with you POWs." They come and they remember that, see, so, our age group, see. But there we worked in Waunakee, and from Waunakee we went to Arlington in the canning company. We were shifting around. And in the evenings, if you had the midnight shift, they brought in coffee and donut from Weber's Bakery in Lodi. And we never had donuts in our life before. Chocolate donuts, they brought those there for a little snack, and either a cup of coffee or a little, we had a little bottle of milk yet, and we had those, and we never had the stuff before, see. Sprinkles, see. It was delicious. It was something

different for POWs. So they made it as pleasant as they could to the POWs. And the POWs appreciated it and not once, not once in my time here ever did I hear about the POWs, they rebelled, or made damage. Not once did I hear it. Not once while I was here. Why should they? Because we were treated well. Because as soon as you do something wrong, you put your finger on a spring, the spring pushes back. The same thing – if you do something wrong to the civilians or to the government or to whatever it is there, you get punished for it. With rights, though, because we lost the war, so we had to fit our way into it.

Mark: Now, this agricultural work you were doing – as I think you mentioned, there was a group of about 350 prisoners who were doing this. Were you selected for this work on the basis of something? I mean, not all POWs were doing this kind of work to my knowledge. I was wondering how you – was this just the luck of the draw that you happened to get put into agricultural work as opposed to something else?

Pechmann: Well, we had blacksmiths, we had watchmakers, we had any profession. We had professors, we had attorneys, you name it, we had ministers in it. We saw it in Germany, we say it, “Mit gehangen, mit gefangen,” where you got caught, you were going with the rest of them, see. They had to do – for some of em it was a little bit lighter, because I was brought up in the agriculture field, lighter force, and the hard working, a guy who would sit behind the desk all day. For him it was twice as hard to make a cow or shucking corn out there. He had blisters while we didn’t, see. So, that was no different than – you go in the commando, you do the work, what you’re told to. It takes ‘em a little bit longer maybe. I took 2, 3 bundles of corn under my arm, while he just had to do with one hand, with both hands on one bundle, see. But otherwise, we do not have any complaints from the POWs, oh, “I don’t want to work.” No, not at all.

Mark: Now, you were still beholden to your German military superior – the sergeants, in this case, I guess. There was still a military structure in the camps among the other prisoners, I would imagine.

Pechmann: Yeah.

Mark: I’m interested in the sort of chain of command among the prisoners. Who was in charge, and what sort of powers did the top sergeant, or whatever it was have? And how much did people really listen, or did the discipline sort of break down in the prison environment?

Pechmann: No, uh-uh. I was a private. If another guy was a regular soldier, or a private. And then with the two squares on it is the oberfeldwebel, what is it, sergeant. They were all alike. As soon as you are a POW, you are all alike. You see, if you are a non-commissioned officer, like a corporal or

so, you don't have to work. If you volunteer to work, fine, you get paid like the rest of 'em. And that's what 99% of them did, because why should they sit in camp and do nothing? They'd rather go out under the civilian people and get \$20 - 10 cents an hour, 80 cents a day to get paid for it, while sitting in camp gets just \$3 a whole month. So, and there's usually – the master sergeant – he was usually a staff sergeant or so from the army. He was in camp also, and he was usually our speaker. And everybody regarded him, and I will say, respected them. Because he was digging up – he was a middle man between the U.S. Army and the POWs.

Mark: Right.

Pechmann: And everybody respected him. Nobody bumped him or rebelled against him. We did our job and that was it. And the rest of them were alike. The rest of them, if we had one square, or two, or three, or – doesn't make any difference. We were all together in one camp, so we had to make the best of it.

Mark: Now, were there some POWs who were more committed to the Nazi ideology than others? Because, as I don't have to tell you, I mean, you could join the Nazi party or just be in the army. Um, and if so, how did that factor –

Pechmann: Uh, in the army in that time, only those fellows who were higher up already in civilian life – they had a better job – they belonged to the Nazi party. The average soldier in the German Army was not a member of the Nazi party. It was – either he was a teacher, doctor, attorney, or watchmaker, or had his own business – they profited from being a member of the Nazi party, see. The rest of them don't. The rest of them – they are not members of the Nazi party. There was no such a thing.

Mark: And so those who would have been in a different camp, or –

Pechmann: Yeah, they would have been because the German – the regular German Army, no matter who they were – they didn't have a blutgruppe like the S.S. The S.S. had a blutgruppe tattooed OAB or AB, tattooed under their – in the armpits, see. The regular army didn't. We had our tag, our breakaway tag – metal, aluminum tag, here that was engraved in it, like it is our pass book, see. But otherwise, nobody was in the Nazi party. The only one – while I wasn't hot for it here in Wisconsin – we had health inspections. Health inspections was just a gimmick to find out who was a Nazi or something like that. We had that assessment in there. Those were not the hard fanatics, the black shirts, those were the regular S.S. who were in the army or artillery, dressed a little bit different, but they were a little bit more political trained than we were. And here they came. Everybody – the whole camp – without any scrabble we had to undress

from the chest up, put your arms up. Then they just came with the flashlight and wanted to see the blutgruppen. There were maybe 20, 30 of them in our camp there. They were put aside. And they were, by night, shipped away, see, to a different camp, because those were the S.S. men, see. But the rest of them, all the same, see.

Mark: Now, you've talked about recreational activities from time to time. Let's talk about those a little more, I guess. When you weren't doing –

Pechmann: Working.

Mark: - agricultural work or something like that, you mentioned soccer and that sort of thing. What sort of activities were there to keep you from getting too bored and going crazy, I guess.

Pechmann: First of all, we had any sport you wanted to, except swimming. We did not have that. We didn't have a swimming pool. First of all, we had three or four soccer teams in our camp, in our fort here, in any camp. And we played between each other during the week. Different leagues and so on and so forth. Then we had the –

Mark: N-now, I'm sorry. Were these organized by the U.S. officials or by prisoners?

Pechmann: By – inside the camp. Just inside the camp. There were no connections between the outside world or the POW camp. Everything what was organized was just inside the camp. That was even in the Camp Ellis where there are 4, 5000 POWs were there, strictly in the camp. We could not play games – other teams – let's say in Camp Grand or Camp Pocharno (??). It was just inside the camp, see.

Mark: Well, I understand. But were these activities organized by fellow prisoners, or did they -

Pechmann: POWs only. POWs only. Right inside the camp, just the POWs worked. Because at that time, soccer was not known in America. But the guards didn't care less if they played soccer or whatever it is called, because at that time it was football. And those football games was not so interesting as a regular soccer team, because entirely different game, see. And we played soccer, we played softball. We played those, which was not known in Germany, not to the extent like over here. Then we had running and hiking. Not hiking, but jumping, and those things, see. And the main activity was playing cards. That was our main, in the evening or weekends or so. Skat was the game that is similar to euchre, or whatever it is. But there's – every game is different. Not two games alike. And three guys or four guys, one of 'em rests a little bit. We played scot, and

that was the main game. To make it a little bit more interesting, we played for cigarettes, because we couldn't play for money – that is gambling – they would play for cigarettes, see. And sometimes the commander came to buy the cigarettes away. He had cigarettes – we bought those things by the carton – three per carton at the time, see, but once you get – alright, there's one cigarette there, goes four, five times back and forth, then there's no tobacco left, see. So, that's just the paper all left, so. [The commander] Just bought those. And of course we had movies. In Hartford, we had – I do believe it was the best camp in the whole United States, because it was a ballroom. Beautiful parquet floor. It was a round room with a big dome over it, and we had chandeliers there with different light settings - every light setting you could. Stage in front – that is where our band – we had a nine man band with everything from modern to classical, and everything they played there.

Mark: Where did you get your instruments from?

Pechmann: Instruments. We had so much money that was left over and that got in to the canteen fund, the camp commander bought it second hand or new from music stores. Some of them were donated from civilians – they donated those to us. And then we had movies. I would say four, five times a week in the evening. We had some nice films.

Mark: What sort of movies were these?

Pechmann: Well –

Mark: I mean, are these American movies, or movies from Germany?

Pechmann: First of all they brought American movies, and those were mostly front line movies. How – they showed us how the German Army suffered, and how they clobbered the German Army. But we complained about it, because why would we look at those movies where we went through it? We know all about it, there. We don't want to see those things again! We want to see something different. So they brought us a new film with Shirley Temple and Roy Rogers and all those things. Wild westerns – western movies. And no problem whatever, then. Perfect.

Mark: Did you get the feeling that you were being propagandized with those movies, at first, at least? That they were – the Americans were trying to tell you something.

Pechmann: Oh yeah, they wanted to brainwash us, see. That's what we figured. And then we don't need that one because we know what's – we know everything about war. We know what all this – everything was, see. So

they couldn't impress us with that one, and matter of fact, get rid of that stuff, we don't want any of it, see.

Mark: And they did!

Pechmann: Overnight! It happened. No more war movies. Sure, we saw the movies from Pearl Harbor – the beginning we see Pearl Harbor and all those things. But we are not interested in this stuff. We know all about what shooting is about, see, so why should we? Because we had our fill with that stuff, see. That's perfect, see.

Mark: Now, in terms of reading material and that sort of thing, did you, um –

Pechmann: Any book you wanted to read. We had our own library there. We had, at one time, they had even classes there for – English classes. I went to two, three of them, but I gave that one up because I didn't spoke any English at time. "What do I need it for?" I said to myself. Because, right now, here, everyone talks German. If you don't talk English, why should I talk English to you? Because I know we have to go back to Germany again, and at that time I didn't know that I'd come back to America, see. But we – I believed that those classes flunked. They never finished 'em. Never finished 'em. Actually, we had one guy – he was an interpreter – he knew English from a school in Germany. We had one of our camp fellow, he was our attorney. He was a German attorney, and of course he spoke English, and then he went, uh. Otherwise, I don't know anybody who went to English classes in our camp there, and finished it.

Mark: And so the books you had were in German, I take it.

Pechmann: German and English. Oh, the books were all in German also, yeah.

Mark: Where did you find German books? I mean I know there are some –

Pechmann: Donations. Donations, yeah, from the university – University of Wisconsin – Madison, and Milwaukee. We had those, yeah.

Mark: Did you have camp newspapers, something like that?

Pechmann: No, not in our camp, no.

Mark: Because I remember, before we turned this on, you remarked on the stars and stripes –

Pechmann: That one I had in Madison, I got about 6, 8 years ago from a fellow down from Camp Ellis, it was a camp newspaper from Camp Ellis, see. Not – that was an American newspaper, not from the German side, see, so, no.

Because we never were that long in one camp. Three, four months, see. We were little work camps, see. If we were staying all the time in Camp Ellis, in the training camp, that would be a different story, but not from camp to camp, see. And then the guy who probably was the editor or a reporter, well he was at a different camp again, then be sitting there without us, newspapers, see.

Mark: Now, in terms of keeping track of the war, and what's going on – did you have any idea how the war was progressing?

Pechmann: From A to Z. We knew it from the beginning to the end.

Mark: How did you get information?

Pechmann: Black market. We had our own little shortwave radio.

Mark: Oh, God.

Pechmann: [laughs] We had, well, I could say it now – there was a guy – we had any – not anybody, but in any camp, somebody who is intelligent enough, and who has something to do with radio, see. And we had some guys too where they – information services in the army, and so on – and they know how to get those things by civilians. Our radio was under the coal pile down in the furnace room, covered up under the coal pile. And we had a guy who was a caretaker in the furnace room, getting the hot water going and the furnace going, and he gave us all the news. We knew exactly what was going on.

Mark: Now where was this?

Pechmann: Shortwave radio.

Mark: Now, was in this in Hartford?

Pechmann: Hartford. Hartford, down in the – we knew exactly when the landing was, and when they landed. And what we couldn't figure out was that Germany always boasting, bragging about the new secret weapons that came out. Never knew what it was. Never knew what it was.

Mark: But that didn't show up on the news reports you were getting.

Pechmann: No, no. We just know it that Germany pretty soon will try out the new secret weapon over to England, and the war will be over pretty soon, see. That's what they figured at that time. That was in '43, '44 and everything. And what they were were the V1 and V2 rockets, see. That's what we're shooting over there to England, see. We didn't know what it was. That's

the only thing we didn't know. But the invasion, and then from Africa up to Italy and then in France and Norway and all those things, and how it went on the Russian front, we knew it all from the German side – well, German and American side, and also from the news, see.

Mark: So as the war is drawing to a close, it's not going particularly well for Germany.

Pechmann: Yep.

Mark: How did the German prisoners react to the news, and how it was –

Pechmann: Well, everybody was anxious to find out how it will end up, see. And of course we knew it that Germany was *kaput*, with other words. And – well, with me, especially – where do I go? My hometown is Polish – Russian at that time. The Russians came there. I would probably never see my hometown again. So I had to make plans already to – for my future life. So there were several possibilities. Later, when I released myself in France – what should I do - no, before I got released in France. With whose side? Go home and let the – go with the majority? Or join the French Foreign Legion? That is where most of the German S.S. men ended up. They joined the French Foreign Legion. The French needed the soldiers over in Vietnam, Cambodia and so on. And that is where most of the S.S. men ended up. Because the S.S. men would all be in camps anyhow again, see – interned. And that you see there, I go to the French Foreign Legion, or I go with the mainstream in Germany, because I was homeless – I didn't know where to go to, or commit suicide. And that one was out. No way. I gave up? No, come on. You're not – too young for that. So that is when I went, after I released myself in France, I went to my girlfriend's home, see, then from there came back to America.

Mark: I want to come back to that, but I've got a couple more things I want to cover in terms of the POW experience in America. One of them is German Americans. Now, as a German prisoner, how aware were you of how many German antecedents there were in this part of the country? And how much contact did you have with, say the Turners of Milwaukee, or something like that?

Pechmann: No. No. We did not know, and still today I'm puzzled how many Germans are in America. Even before we came, before I came over here in '43 or '44, we didn't know that America had so many German immigrants here. And also at that time, when we came here, they tried to avoid us. The Germans who were here already, before the war, they tried to avoid the German POWs, because they didn't want to show the American people that they're German friendly, see, even [though] they

had the same blood and same town, maybe, or territory, see. So, oh, they'd talk to us, but in general, they avoided us. They avoided us.

Mark: So, it was very rare, if it happened at all, that you would find American civilians who could speak German to the prisoners.

Pechmann: No, we had quite a few of them, matter of fact. Quite a few of them would talk to us while we were working with them, see. But, oh, "I came from there," and "I came from Hamburg," "I came from Bremen," or "I came from Berlin," see. But in general – there was one fellow I met in Beaver Dam. Beaver Dam? Mayville. He was a prisoner of war during World War I, and he was staying over here – he was a prisoner of war over here, and he was staying over here, and they didn't ship him back. That's why we couldn't figure out that we couldn't stay here, we had to go back to Germany. That was just politics see. We could have, the law is the POW who is released, after such a date from a camp, can choose his own hometown. Because, other words, that time they told us we could stay in America, I would have stayed here. But, no, they told us that was Eisenhower – General Eisenhower's fault – and Truman's. They promised all the POWs from America to France, and that's why we had to go back to France, see. Otherwise, 95% of them would stay here. Even bad guys.

Mark: Let's cover that. But before we do, I'm interested in how you learned the news that the war was over, both in Europe and then in Japan, and what the reaction was among the prisoners. I mean, I've interviewed a lot of American veterans, and they tell me what their reactions were –

Pechmann: We, of course, were happy that the war was over because there is always a chance that, no matter how long the war lasts, when the war's over, we have a chance to go back home to Germany, no matter what condition Germany was in, see. And when the war was over in Japan – of course, Germany lost the war. Germany signed the declaration, or whatever it is there, those papers. It was bad. Germany was licked. Now what? So everybody built his own life up the way they figured they would, see, to the best of their knowledge and ability. And while the war was over in Japan, I was working in the boiler room in the milk factory in Juneau. And for two hours straight there, I had to shovel the coal and feed the boilers that bring up the steam to blow the whistle. Because every whistle was blowing, and every churchbell was, and everybody was happy and relieved. Even that we lost the war, but for us, the war was over also, see. So, and then, in camp, we were in Camp Hartford at that time, and shortly before the war was over, we knew we got rationed and everything. I had two cases, two 24-bottle cases of beer under my bed, under my cot. And the camp commander came then [unintelligible] around and he confiscated every beer bottle. He had, because the war was over, tried to punish us,

see. Didn't do us any good, because the next day, we bought three, four bottles again, so we didn't suffer any, see.

Mark: Now, where did you get the beer from?

Pechmann: From our canteen, from our PX. From our PX.

Mark: Oh, I see, it wasn't –

Pechmann: It wasn't stolen, it was all legally –

Mark: - or black market type of thing –

Pechmann: No, no, no, no. We had beer. We had, in Camp Hartford we had about 8, 9 different types of beverages from milk to pop to maybe four, five different types of beer.

Mark: If I could digress for a minute. [sheepishly] Um, what did you think of the American beer that you were getting?

Pechmann: Of course, it was not what we had over in Europe.

Mark: Oh, [chuckles]

Pechmann: What we are used to in Europe, see. That was, ha ha, nothing but rinse water, what you rinse you rinse your dishes with. You see, because a half a percent, while Germany had 8, 9, 12 percent. That was not strong enough, see, but better than nothing. Of course, they emptied all the warehouses, then we got instead regular milk, we had powdered milk. Instead regular eggs, we had powdered eggs. And then peanut butter, peanut butter, peanut, peanut, peanut butter. We never knew peanut butter in our lives in Germany, see, and here the stuff was the cheapest stuff. They emptied all the warehouses out. The stuff was sticking to the roof of your mouth, to your gums, see.

Mark: So the food seemed to get worse as the war ended?

Pechmann: Well, they emptied all the warehouses out. The food was plenty there, there's no question about it. Matter of fact, when we came from Europe, that time in 1943 in November, there was a big flood on the Mississippi and the midwest there. And then President Roosevelt at that time, he addressed the prisoners of war, "Please excuse us that we have to cut down a little bit. This is not a punishment for you, but we can give you only now turkey and chicken. And beef and pork and that other stuff, and lamb, that has to come later on because we cannot get the food through to you, to your campsite, because of the big flooding." He excused himself

that it was a one sided food. It wasn't any beef and pork and lamb, and I couldn't get any turkeys, or vice versa. See, either one of them didn't get through there, see. He excused himself. Excuse yourself because of the food here to POWs? Unheard of. It was the truth. Matter of fact, I believe I saw it in one of the books, I don't know if it was from Arnold Kramer, who wrote that book, and it was also in the National Geographic, I believe it was. Or there's another one, another big magazine – National Geographic, or Smithsonian! In the Smithsonian, there was an article in it also, and he wrote a book, and my name is in that one too. And it says in one of those books, the article says that he told the prisoners of war, “Don't consider yourself as the enemies of America. You are our guests. And I would like to warn you that the food will be a little bit one-sided now.” Or thereabouts, see.

Mark: And so, as you mentioned, you were sent off to France to do labor for a few years. How long was it between the end of the war and the time that you were sent over to France?

Pechmann: Well, the Geneva Conference, they said every POW should be released to his hometown territory within 90 days – three months. That's what they told us. When we left Camp Hartford, they – in the middle of the night – I don't know why we couldn't finish that shift. The camp commander came, “Close the machines down, close everything up. Lock everything up. You're going home.” Why we couldn't end that shift is beyond me, because we were sitting for three or four weeks in camp yet afterwards, see. So we went home in our bus again, and went home to Hartford. And there the next day, doing nothing. Just get shots again in the arm and the – immunization. New clothes. We got almost brand new dark blue dyed army clothes. We gave everything away. At that time, I accumulated in my time as a POW, 39 pair of socks. We were issued only 3 pair. 39 pair for me. Shortest one, all the way, all woolen up here, see. How did I get 'em? The guards. Dirty socks? Throw them away. They go and get a new pair, see. Well, what I did, I washed 'em out, there was a hole in them, I made the hole bigger, and went in and got a brand new pair for it. That's why I collected all those socks, see. Then on the way back, we could only take three pair along.

[recording stops]

Pechmann: And from there we came to Billy Mitchell Field. On the airport. They were laying there for three, four days. More shots again, and different clothes, then all the paperwork had to be arranged. And after that one, we came to Camp Shanks. That is Billy Mitchell Field. Billy Mitchell Field, we came to Camp Richardson (?). From there, we came then in railroad cars to Camp Shanks. That is a big troop shipping out point in New York State. And there we were staying again. Then we went with 8,000 men

on a big troop transport. And when we passed the Statue of Liberty, I know it, I had tears in my eyes because we had fallen in love with America because America treated us so A-1, see. We never had a treatment like that before. Never got one again like that. On the way over, they told us we had to go to France because - we have to go through Le Havre – because in Germany in Bremerhaven and Hamburg, the harbors, are destroyed. So they had to load us in Le Havre. Le Havre was just as leveled out as Hamburg and Bremerhaven, see, but it was just to keep us quiet, see. They told us, “Well, from Le Havre, they ship you by train over to Germany,” see. Well, in Le Havre, the American troops gave us over to the French troops. There were the French troops outside the railroad cars. There we went from the boat to Camp Selée (??) in cattle cars. Forty, fifty men to a cattle car. Different than our Pullman wagons here, with straw in it. And then the gates, the door was that much open just so you could look out and do your necessary thing there. The French troops took over from the American troops. For each POW rations for a whole week, for 8 days. They got food from every prisoner for 8 days. We were three days on the railroad, and we got but one day food. And the rest of them, we thought that all the food that was supposed to go to the German POWs, Spam and bread, white bread, and bacon, whatever you can name, the French troops were having a feast. Actually, the food that was supposed to go to us went to the French. And then they told us that every POW who come from America has to work at least 3 months in France to help rebuild France. Well, 99% of the POWs who came from America were either from Italy or from Africa. You never saw France in their life till they came from England. They never saw France in their life before. I had never seen France in my life before. Yet, out of three months became three and a half years after the war was over, which was strictly against the rules and regulations of the Geneva Conference. Because every POW, no matter what country he’s in, should be released to his hometown, or to his hometown area, or where he wants to go within three months, see. America, well, after having us here, they shipped us back. Well, nothing to grieve about, but they should not give us over to the French. And then France, my pay was – I worked there three and a half year – a little cube, two inch by two inch, tobacco. That was my pay in whole France. What a life. Oh man.

Mark: Now that was three years.

Pechmann: Three [and a] half years.

Mark: Um, where were you, what sort of work did you do, and how would you compare it to what you were doing in the midwest of America?

Pechmann: The difference was like day and night. I was three months in France, I collapsed. When I came to America, I weight 228 pounds. When I left

two years later, I weight 285. Now you know they treated us well here. And I was three months in the French camp, with three red beets a day, you don't go very far. You collapse. That is when I collapsed, see. After that one, I came on a French farm, and he was a German hater. You worked on the French farm milking cows, what was 65 cows, three times a day. We were three guys milking cows three times a day, morning, noon, and night. And in the morning, you milk your cows. You get up about 5, 5:30. You milk your cows, you feed the cows, you clean the barn, you clean yourself, and then you go and have breakfast. The breakfast was a chunk of bread, maybe that thick. There was butter on the table there – a stick butter for the four guys on that farm there. And appetizer. That was it for breakfast. At noon, we'd milk the cows again. Either the milkmen cleaned the barn or brought 'em out to the pasture. Then you wash yourself again. There wasn't much to wash with because there was no water there. [They] used a system from rainwater, what came down from the roof in the gutter there. And at noon you had "legume," a one-sided, tasteless vegetable with a string attached to it, carrots and celery and whatever it was, and maybe a potato half boiled in it there, and cooked in cream, in a white cream from the milk. Tasteless as could be. No taste to it whatsoever. And a piece of pork with it, oh, maybe like the half fist here. Solid fat. Boiling fat. If you put it in your hand, it was just like jello. Not a string of lean meat on it. You know what that does to your stomach. In the evening, we had that very same stuff cold. A slice of bread with a little butter on it, and then the fat cold. But we as POWs, later on there, we stole onions, vegetables, whatever we could steal. And we let it out, and we made our own frying pan, our own stove there, let it out, made our own fat there. Just like butter, just like lard to put on your bread, with onions in it and salt and pepper in it so that would get a little different taste to it. That was what we were eating at night at home. Because that fatty stuff is alright for the first two, three weeks, but then you throw it right back down again in the pig pen, see. That was our food there, see.

Mark: And those conditions lasted for three years.

Pechmann: Yeah, that was. You had the same food Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Warm at noon, cold in the evening. And I didn't see in those three and a half years, I didn't see one cup of coffee. Apple cider morning, noon, and night. Apple cider, cold apple cider. He made his own apple cider. I don't want to tell you how they made that one there, because I helped make it. You wouldn't believe it. That nobody ever got sick surprises me. Friday we got, at noon, we got two boiled goose eggs. And at night we got – each one of us got three boiled chicken eggs, see, with butter and bread again, see. And at one time out on the – I go back again – Saturday we got, we call it chulehleh (??) – boiled stomach lining from beef. I don't know what you –

Mark: Tripe, I think it's called. I've never had it!

[both laugh]

Pechmann: Bon appetit!

[both continue laughing]

Pechmann: We had that one warm at noon and cold in the evening. And on Sunday, we had potatoes, vegetable again, cooked in cream sauce, flat-tasting once again – and beef fat. Maybe just one string of lean meat in it, see, and in the evening cold. That was our meal for the whole week. But –

Mark: Was it the same farm for three years, or did they move you around to different –

Pechmann: No, that was the first farm. They didn't provide us – we were sleeping with four guys above a garage. He had a car down below there. He never used it. Later on he used it. No he didn't. So we made our own from a 25 gallon old oil drum, we made a little stove there, see. Line it up with clay and some bricks and coal we stole from him and wood we got, we found that one. Our chimneys were made from the exhaust pipe from a German V-1 rocket that was shot down in the neighborhood. So we collected that one and put that thing right through the window, and then up the – worked perfect. It was heavy steel, see. Then we made eggs galore. We made pancakes there in the evening there with our frying pan. We stole the eggs, whatever you could on the farm there, see.

And one guy, he was a electrician – his dad and his uncle owned the big electrical business in Berlin. Of course, he was not made for farm work, that guy. Skinny looking guy there. So he wanted to make an electric heater. So what did he do? He took one of those, like in Europe on the roofs they have those big, heavy clay tiles – he took from the machine shop there, from the farmer, an old textile blade and cut notches in on the edges there. And then he put strong wire around it, see, and he wanted to make an electric heater for our building up there, see. Well, and that farmer came and saw that the textile where he cut that clay tile there, of course there were no teeth left, see. And he clobbered him, see. Got him in the kitchen there with the high attendant, his two sons – they were older than me – and crushed him, see, hit him with everything – broomsticks and everything else. And there was one guy – he was a little hothead – he was from Bavaria – Max Püf (??) was his name. And he didn't like that, see, so he went in there and tried to defend him, see, and then he got it too, see.

But my idea was getting away from there. So I went – I wrote – I was the only one who came from America. Those guys were captured from over there from German camps. I was the only one from America and I felt I can get help. So I went – I wrote three letters to the camp commander explaining everything that happened there, that those guys got punished and hit from the thing, and those letters never saw the camp. He put them in his pocket – the farmer’s boy put ‘em in his pocket, never delivered them. Well, uh, one day I went through – I wondered why I didn’t get any help from the commander. I went night through the windows down one story down and then went to the police department, four or five miles away. I wanted to get help. What I didn’t know at the time was that he was a dear friend of the farmer. Oh, just a minute, I came at night, it was 2 o’clock when I came in there, see. Chief Complais (??), Chief Complais, see. I thought that the Chief of Police would come, but no, first the farmer’s son came pretty soon. Meantime, here was Kurt. Kurt is not working there, he isn’t there, see, so he came and to the police, see. He came in, “Bonjour, monsieur,” he said. The farmer said funny. And then all at once, he pulled out of his pocket those three letters I wrote to the camp commander, see. And then he wrote [means read?] it in German because the chief there could read a little German, see. “I could hit you, too!” And then he had the broomstick and he wanted to hit me, too. And then the farmer said, then the farmer’s boy said then, “No, no, he’s alright, he didn’t do anything wrong.” “You go back to the camp.” So I went back to the farmer, see. Nothing happened.

But before that, we always had some company coming from – we met those other POWs from the neighbor town. And there is one from that one cheese factory – the driver always went once or twice a week to our camp to mix where our main camp was – POW camp was there. And I told those guys, “Why don’t you come tomorrow night, and I’ll write a letter today, tonight. You come and pick that letter up and give it to him,” see. So the next day he came and he got that letter back, and a week later, the camp commander came from the main camp, with his guard and the interpreter. That farmer got those contracts cancelled from us four POWs. He never got another prisoner of war again. And then we came back to three or four days in camp, then we came to a different farmer. He never got another helper there because he mistreated them, see. So the French camp commander, he was strict in that regard.

Mark: So it had to have been about 1948 then that you were finally released.

Pechmann: Uh, ’47.

Mark: ’47. And as you mentioned, you had nowhere to go to, basically. Once you got out of the French labor –

Pechmann: Well, I went into another farm. From that farm I came to another farm, and he was entirely different. He was German-friendly. He asked me, "Kurt," but he couldn't spoke English here, in German either, "If you need any money, let me know. I'll get you money that should buy you – could go to the movie," and so. See, so, I was there maybe for a year and a half. Then I released myself, and I went back to Germany. Because I had a letter at that time, from my girlfriend at that time. She invited me to the wedding from her sister. At that time, I knew already I wanted to go in the worst way back to America. See, that was – I couldn't go from France to America. I had to go back to Germany and then to America.

Mark: So where did you go in Germany?

Pechmann: In Germany, well that was funny too. My wife, at that time my girlfriend, lived in the French occupied zone.

Mark: Which is in the southwest.

Pechmann: French farmer that was near Neustadt along the wine road, Wienstrasse. If the farmer in France knew where I was, he could tell the police or the French Army was there, police and everything, could go and get me and get me right back. But he didn't know the town where I was in, see. So, and I came home in 1948 – November, '48. I wasn't even a week at home. I went to the high commissioner, high kommissar in Bad Homburg. He was American civilian – civilian government. And I asked him, I would like to live in that town for the time being until I go back to America. "Oh, you were in America?" He knew that I was a prisoner of war. "Where were you?" I said "In Wisconsin and Illinois." "How did you like it?" I said, "I can't wait till I get back there!" See, and that's what brought me up there with him, see. So he did everything possible, see. And, too bad I don't know his name, but he's probably passed away in the meantime. But, that was then when I went to my wife's hometown. I was staying there because I couldn't go home. I have no home.

Mark: That town is where?

Pechmann: That is my wife's hometown. That's in Neustadt on the –

Mark: Neustadt.

Pechmann: Neustadt, yeah. Along the wine road [Neustadt an der Weinstrasse]. Near Bad Dürkheim. Mannheim [unintelligible] south of Bavaria. Because I didn't have any home. Because mine was Polish now, see. Russian. And I certainly didn't want to go there. When I came home as a POW, before I

went to that high commissioner there, to the high kommissar in Bad Homburg, I went in that one German office there, and he said “Pechmann,” the German guy, cocky guy, eating his noodle soup and his sandwich and his can of beer there, “We don’t want you here. You have to go back to France where you came from, or you go back into Russia and home where your mother is!” “Every POW could go where he wants to after the war, and I’m going to Koenigstein,” I told him. “No, you can’t!” “Oh, yes, I can!” Then from there I went right to the high commissioner, to the high kommissar, to the American civilian government. And he said “Pechmann, you go to Koenigstein.” And he gave the berger master in Koenigstein a phone call, he gave him a cigar. I believe that guy is still smoking on it. But I went to Koenigstein, and I couldn’t wait to come back to America, see. And, within two weeks, I was at the consulate in Frankfurt and make applications to come to America.

Mark: Had you gotten married by this time?

Pechmann: Uh, I married in 1949. In ’48 I came home, and about – in ’49 in August, yeah, three-quarters of a year later I married.

Mark: And so before you went to the United States –

Pechmann: Oh yeah, I was married then, yeah. First I had mine for coming alone over here, but then I met her, see, and then she waited for me. So, I ask her, if she want to marry me, you have to go to America with me. Otherwise, goodbye. “Let me think about it.” Couple of days later, she said, “Yeah, alright. I’ll go with you to America.” Then we were married and here, see, ever since.

Mark: So to get here, it’s not always easy to immigrate. What sort of laws applied to you? Did you have to get in some sort of quota? There was a –

Pechmann: Yeah.

Mark: There was a displaced persons program at that time. Did you qualify for that?

Pechmann: There was a code at the time. I don’t know what – two thousand, three thousand a year could emigrate to America. But they came all with those war brides and those G.I.s married the German girls, they were pushed ahead of me because they had the right of way, with other words. See, so they got pushed ahead of me, so four or five times I got pushed back. So instead of ’49 when I applied first for it, it became ’52 when I came here, see. And, uh, I enjoy it ever since. And when I married and my wife was that time – first when I wanted to come over here, I went to the farmer in Lodi. He wanted to sponsor me, see, but I had to ask first again if he would sponsor for my wife also, see. So, he agreed to it. But it took us

then from '49 till '52 – July the 1st '52, we left Le Havre, and then we went by train through France, Germany. Seven days we were on the water. Ile-de-France – it was the old German Bremen. It was at that time the biggest boat afloat – 54,000 tons.

Mark: So, in those years between '49 and '52, I would imagine you had to make a living somehow.

Pechmann: Yep.

Mark: Was that difficult in post-war Germany?

Pechmann: No, in my trade it was not so difficult because I was a granite cutter by trade. And I used to work for a fellow by the name of Powell Rumpf in Koenigstein. Of course, either you take the bus or you walk. And where I went to there wasn't a bus connection so I had to walk maybe three miles one way in the morning, and three miles in the evening, so there was room to `move in there. And I applied for a job, and he said, "Pechmann, sure." You could get a job. And that is where I work and my wife is, my girl at that time, she worked in an household. They had a store for – like [unintelligible]. They had the store down below, then upstairs, she lived in the living quarters there, see. Then we got married and we moved together, see. We had a little apartment there until we moved away to America.

Mark: And when you came to the states, then, in '52? '53?

Pechmann: '52.

Mark: You settled right away in Wisconsin, in Dane County?

Pechmann: I settled in Lodi, Wisconsin. I worked on a farm where I worked for the farmer as a prisoner of war. But it didn't work out. He didn't want to pay, or couldn't pay, see. I got paid there \$100 a month. And \$50 he kept right away, and those \$50 he couldn't pay, either, because he didn't have any money, so he paid me \$25 every two weeks. And if you can't pay – that is the lowest wage. The rest of them all got double that amount, see. And then he wanted me, my wife – I worked on the farm – he wanted my wife to work for nothing cleaning eleven room house for nine people, or – nine room house cleaning for nothing and cooking for 11 people, doing laundry and everything. But his wife didn't do anything. And he wanted her to do that work for nothing. Well, we didn't have to do any work for nothing. To work for nothing, we didn't have to go to America, she could stay in Germany, see. So she found a job in the bakery in Lodi, and there she got 50 cents an hour, which was not the most, but better than nothing. And I worked on the farm, well, for 8 months. And the farmer borrowed me then \$275 for – to buy a car. And then I paid that one off. The bank in

Lodi loaned me the money to pay him off. Then, after that one, after eight months, I went in my trade as a granite cutter to Madison.

Mark: And the rest is history, I guess they say.

Pechmann: The rest is history.

Mark: So you found resettling in the United States to not be terribly traumatic?

Pechmann: No, because it helped me already because I worked as a prisoner of war here. I know what to expect.

Mark: So to be accepted by people around the area –

Pechmann: Oh yeah –

Mark: - found any problem with –

Pechmann: I had no problem whatsoever. The hardest part was because I didn't speak English. My wife didn't speak English. None of them spoke one word of English. And that all had to come in – we went to first, second year to MATC here, right behind here, and learned English 1 and English 2. And we wanted to go later, and the teacher said, "You don't have to take English 3 anymore, you know how to get around." And that was it. And the rest is history. The rest we learned through TV and newspapers, and talking among people, see. And if you treat people right, if you don't show off and be a big showoff, people treat you right. They treat you and take you for what you are. That is what I found out.

Mark: Now, I know that you've been active with veterans groups and that sort of thing. I guess, legally, you're not an American veteran, but I know you've been involved in sort of – memorial activities and that - sorts of things. Why don't you just explain basically –

Pechmann: First of all, when I came here, then we got married – we had been married – came here, then in 1956 and 1957 we got two sons – Alan [spelling ?] and Gary. Alan's the oldest one, born in '56. And later on when he became in scouting, I was quite active in scouting. Both of them went through Eagle Scout. They made Eagle requirements. And in 1976 for my activity in scouting, I got the highest honor, I got the Silver Beaver, which I am proud of.

After that one, in 1986, vandals damaged – I went right away in my trade then here in Madison, the granite cutter – in 1986 I was on my own already – vandals damaged a war memorial in Forest Hill Cemetery before Memorial Day. They burned about 4,500 little U.S. flags on that monument there and ruined it. And the caretaker told me then, "Kurt, come on out here." That was just a day before Memorial – before the

ceremony. Matter of fact, it was the morning of the ceremony. He called me out, and I said, "Plain rotten." And, I always had a little pride being a German soldier, and American – I never ever actually considered the American soldiers a enemy of mine. More or less as a buddy, see. Even if they were on a different color and different background. But I told him I will repair the monument free of charge. I repaired it free of charge, and he couldn't believe it. Of course, that hit the newspapers, radio, and television nationwide. I didn't expected that one. Later on, I got awards from – a letter from President Reagan. I got, uh, thank-you notes and plaques – I've got them in the office – from the Madison Veterans Council. I got decorations and awards from the Wisconsin Officer's Club.

After that one, I got a call from the president from the Vietnam Veterans from Monticello. They ordered a monument from a monument dealer down south, and on the dedication they found out – that is Monticello – that he misspelled the name on it, and he wouldn't repair it unless they paid him two-and-a-half thousand dollars for it, see. So he came to me and Gary said, my son Gary went down there and said, "I'll go and inspect it once. He came down and said, "Dad, we can repair it. We won't even charge them for it." So we went down, picked that monument up. We repaired it and brought it down within a week – within three or four days we brought it down again, and they just loved it.

Then it came out that Vietnam Veterans – southwest Vietnam Veterans from Milwaukee [he means the Southeast Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans], they wanted to put their own Vietnam memorial up there, see, down on the lakefront. They called me up, they called Gary and me and we should come down there once. And then we were sitting, there was a ten or eleven man memorial committee. We met the radio station upstairs there, and "Can you come up with a memorial?" Because they had three, four different types of memorial designs there already. They didn't like neither one of 'em. And then came to me. "Yeah, we can come up with one of 'em." "Can you come up within a week? We have another meeting yet because we want to push ahead with it." I said, "We'll do it." Then it came to me, my son and me. We decided on the three pillars – four foot by four foot. First it was two foot by two foot, 25 feet high. No, I want to go higher, because at that time the tallest Vietnam memorial in the United States was 27 feet. I wanted to beat 'em. So my memorial, I decided, was four foot by four foot, thirty feet tall. That made three of them. 30 feet, 27, 24 feet. 24 feet was the shortest one. The tallest one is for fellows who gave their life. 27 missing in action, and the POWs. And the 24 was for the rest of 'em who served in Vietnam. And not only that, we made it on paper, we made a model out of redwood. And on the circle, it is about 90 feet in diameter. We put 11 posts – 11 years of Vietnam. And the 5 benches behind it, here are the three pillars standing there, and a V in front, what never – I had it first in mind, make it a bench out of it, so we left it down, flat on the ground, because victory was never attained there.

So we had the 11 posts, 11 years of Vietnam. The 5 benches were Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and so on. And then those three pillars there, high polished Wausau red granite. And I insisted on red granite because it is for the Wisconsin Vietnam veterans, why should I go to a different granite? And so they have the top – it's not level, it's not pointed – it is from one point, one corner to the other one on an angle, and that one is like the bamboo sticks – the spear what they had when Vietnam started out first. And so I put that one on the table there, they leaned back. “I guess that's it. You've got a job.” So we got the job. We designed it, we put it up.

And after that one was up, I got the same one month, another contract to sign. That one was for all Wisconsin Congressional Medal of Honor winners. It is a monument down on the welcome center by Beloit along 90-94 when you come to Wisconsin from Rockford. And that one consists of six big granite blocks set in the wall and one free-standing one with the Medal of Honor on it. And we didn't design it, but we cut the stone, and I personally engraved the names on it. And that was that one.

After that one came the Korean War Memorial up in Plover, Wisconsin that is – we are still working on it. The granite is up, but the benches – we've got them finished now – we wait till they put the foundation in, then we put those five benches up, and that is all in gray granite – very gray granite.

After that one came, then we did some little monuments. One of 'em is in Mount Horeb for all Wisconsin veterans – it's about the size of one of those graphs (??) with the black shelves in it - about that size – that is in the entrance to the cemetery there. What we are working right now on is – they are still raising the funds on it – my son Gary is on the committee, on the memorial committee, and they made me advisor to it – Hometown, U.S.A. That will be the largest red granite star probably in the world. It's 90 feet and 60 feet in diameter, 8 feet tall in the middle. That is the regular American star with all 2,000 names on it, or whatever it is there. And they are still raising the funds for it, but we have the plans already and we know we are going to get that one there. And we've got another monument going on, but I don't want to talk about it, that is for the police memorial here, see. We've got our hands on that one, see, but it is a – you know how it –

Mark: Don't want to divulge any trade secrets.

Pechmann: Yeah, yeah.

Mark: Well, it sounds like you've stayed pretty busy with those sorts of activities.

Pechmann: And every one of those monuments we saved a pile of money to the veterans. Because, I don't want to make money on them – I just want to take so I don't lose anything on it. They don't lose any money on it. But we practically – commissioned those things, and the profits, see, then went right back to the veterans, see, so. And I'm proud of it. And like I said, I do not consider American veterans as my enemy, see – as a buddy, see. And I know that for a fact, they had a convention here in Madison several years ago, and American veterans, American prisoners of war had a convention, and I was invited to it. I was the only German POW there, see.

Mark: And how did the fellow – I mean, how did the other POWs react to –

Pechmann: Which one?

Mark: The American POWs.

Pechmann: They acted just like – well of course there were some of them that were a little bit on the, on the, uh-

Mark: On guard, I suppose you'd say.

Pechmann: Yeah, they didn't care too much about it, but most of them were – he passed away – the postmaster – he passed away in the meantime. He was a friend of mine. He lived just two blocks away from me. And the rest of them were friendly. I have no ill feeling then, they don't have any ill feeling. Well, you find bad ones no matter what army you go to.

Mark: Sure. That's extremely –

Pechmann: With your fellows you are working with, you don't go along with what everybody was doing, see. But otherwise, it has been very rewarding to me, and still today. And I do many, many monuments for American soldiers, for prisoners of war, became friends over it. And also, we engrave B-52 bombers – or, not B-52, but B-27s [probably means B-17], B-24s because there were pilots in it, even that bombed Germany. It was not fault. They did their job, we do our job, see. Became friends. But, otherwise they – I would say, I don't regret it. I just regret it that I was on the wrong side at that time. But right now, everything is ironed out, see.

Mark: I've just got one last area I want to talk about, and I'm curious to know – I think you've mentioned it previously – have you been back to Germany since you left?

Pechmann: I –

Mark: And if so, how has it changed, and what were your reactions to going back?

Pechmann: I have been back 12 times. And only once to my hometown. That was last year. I have been back to my wife's hometown, and I love that territory because I fell in love with her territory there. See, I just love the territory. And last summer, I went back to my hometown. I went in the house where I was born and raised. I broke down, I cried. I admit it. There were Polish people living there. Everything is run down, dilapidated. They are going downhill instead of uphill. I spent eight hours on the train going from Neustadt all the way across Germany to Legnica [Poland] [sounds like Liegnitz], and from there I rented a cab, Polish cab, to go to my hometown. And I spent less than 2 hours in my hometown. And the cemeteries are just plain run down. They made a junkyard out of our cemetery. Everything was German is leveled out, and made Polish cemetery out of it – junkyard. That one was a junkyard where I was. I was standing on my father's grave – there's nothing but a little hole in the ground and full of cement, and bricks and blocks and dirt and gravel and rubble.

Mark: Now as you were growing up, I presume it was mostly German. I mean, there weren't too many Poles around, because the Poles were re-settled –

Pechmann: My territory was pure German. That is what – Russia took part of Poland, for that gave part of Germany to Poland. So with other words, they just moved the border over. And those parts here from where the Russians moved in, those Poles were put in our territory. And the Poles have no interest in it, and bring it up to a good level, because they don't know if they ever stay there or if they have to move out again. Today, the weeds are this high on the road. The windows, they are all covered up with cardboard boxes. And when the Russians – that was the front line when the Russians were there. Our hometown had about 1,200 population at that time when I was living there, there were over 5,000 Polish troops in it, see. Covered everything. And they took everything along if they could use it or not. Light switches, light bulbs, and doorknobs, and door handles, and you name it, door hinges, they took everything along, even if they have no use for it. They stripped everything. And now the big farms there like Von Richthoffen, the Red Baron's relatives were in our hometown, the big hundred, 200 feet long – yard long, not feet – yards long building, the roof is caving in, the windows down, the doors are hanging and loose there. Empty. Dilapidating, running down. Everything is run down. And we saw that, I couldn't believe it.

Mark: And that was the first and only time you've been back since the war.

Pechmann: That was the first time since 1943. '43 when I got drafted into the army, I was home on leave. Then after I came home from Russia, after I froze my feet, I came home on leave there, and that was the last time I was in my hometown – 1943. And now it is '96, 53 years later.

- Mark: Yeah. So you said you've been back 12 times. When did you first go back after you moved over?
- Pechmann: The first time I came back was in 1961.
- Mark: Hmm, so what's –
- Pechmann: No, pardon me. '52 I came over here, and '59 I went the first time back.
- Mark: So, Germany's changed a lot too. I mean, it was divided, now it's reunified –
- Pechmann: Oh, yeah, and crowded. I wouldn't want to live there anymore.
- Mark: It's much more crowded than when you were growing up.
- Pechmann: Oh, it is. Oh, definitely. Now all the foreigners over there, see, the Turks and the Italians and the Poles and everybody else. They come here because they have so much better living in Germany in their own homeland. They don't want to go out anymore. And then the problem is Germany's own fault. Right after the war, Germany was down on its knees, and then they start building up. The Germans were then, "Oh, I don't want to go in the street and shovel gravel," or whatever it is there, "Leave that one to somebody else." Then the Germans brought the Turks in and the Yugoslavs in and the Italians and the Spaniards in there, see. Now they are living there and they don't want to go out anymore. And now the Germans, huh-huh, they have no work anymore. There now – unemployment is worse than anyplace else. And no way – Germany at that time didn't wanted me – I go just to visit my wife's hometown, because I love this territory and her family, see, and I have nobody anymore. I've got a niece in Sweden. I've got a niece in Dresden, Germany I haven't seen since 1950. And I have two nephews, they are in where my mother used to live in Saxon, central Germany, and I haven't seen them since 1950. So, I don't know if they're alive or not. So, they are strange as anybody out here on the street. And I have no desire to go back. I will be buried here in America. And I've got my business here, I raised my family here. Gary got his business now – he takes over for me in my monument shop. And Alan got his own business as an electronics engineer, or whatever, and he's doing this. So, I raised my family, and it's up to them now.
- Mark: Those are pretty much all the questions I have. Anything you would to add? Anything you think we've perhaps missed or skipped over?
- Pechmann: All I can say is just - I say "thank you" to America that you took me in, and I'd do everything possible that make my life and the American people's life better, and I try to do what's right. And I do my best in order to help them out, there, see, so. And especially here to American veterans

I'm just plain lucky I can do it. And I will say too yet, I never went after those jobs, the war memorials – they came to me. And it is just my trade. I do my best to do it.

Mark: I suppose that's a great place to end. Well, thanks for coming in.

Pechmann: Thank you for having me.

Mark: No problem.

[End of Interview]