

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

MILL VALLEY PUBLIC LIBRARY

MILL VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MILL VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

GERALD KOTT

An interview conducted by

Joan Murray

26 November 2006

The following manuscript is open for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to Mill Valley Public Library. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without written permission of Librarian, Mill Valley Public Library, 375 Throckmorton Avenue, Mill Valley, California 94941. Requests should include identification of specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of passages, and identification of user.

JM: One of the first things, I don't know if you've seen this or not.

GK: No.

JM: This is, I'm giving you two copies of historical reviews that the Mill Valley Historical Society publishes and I did give Margaret, your former wife, a copy of this because there is something in here that I wrote about the access that you gave, you and Margaret gave, to the property on the Three Wells.

First of all, I should say this is an oral history with Gerry Kott and the date is November 26, 2006. And Gerry, do you mind if I ask you your date of birth?

GK: February 7th, 1925.

JM: And where were you born?

GK: Yonkers.

JM: Yonkers, New York.

GK: Yonkers, New York.

JM: And so how did you get to Mill Valley from Yonkers?

GK: My mother was born in San Francisco, and she left San Francisco when she was nine years old. Her father was a vice president of a company called Cluett, Peabody. They invented the Sanforized shirt system. And so they were quite well known. And he got a promotion that made him move to New York. So we heard, she was nine years old when she left so we heard lots of stories about it rains orange juice in California and there's good weather and there's no snow and on and on and on. So after World War II. We had wanted to leave Yonkers but you know, we had ties, real estate ties, and during the Depression you couldn't sell anything. You were lucky to even own it much less. So there wasn't any way. We were just prisoners in New York. And when the war was over things had changed. The market had changed. Things were getting off the ground, and we thought before we put any roots down again, let's all move to California.

So my mother came out here to look for a house. She flew out. And she remembered coming over on a ferry to Marin county and she thought Well, I'll look over on that side first. And she somehow found her way to San Anselmo. She answered an ad in the real estate ad or something like that. She went to San Anselmo and she found a little house up there that she liked and thought would be a good buy and appropriate. I was married by this time. My brother was divorced many many years ago and my mother brought up his two children.

And he wanted to kind of get away from his ex-wife so they grabbed the kids and moved to California.

So we came out here. Now when I came out I towed a trailer out from, a house trailer from New York. I used my mother's car. And when we got here, the only trailer park was in Alto. So we went into that trailer park. It was twelve dollars a month, garbage included. Showers with hot water. And that's if you had your own trailer.

So that's how we got to Mill Valley. It was a beautiful little town and you had everything here that you needed, and we never moved further.

JM: So what year would that have been?

GK: It would have been 194, let's see. World War II I think was over in '45. Wasn't it? Or was it '44?

JM: '45.

GK: '45. Well, it would have been '46. Could have been late 1945 but more likely, because the war ended in June, if I remember correctly. The European part.

JM: So you came out here and you said you were married.

GK: I was married in the service, after I got out of the service, to Margaret. You weren't allowed to marry. The Austrians were considered the same as Germans.

JM: So you had been in?

GK: In the European theater.

JM: Oh. I see.

GK: I was in the 877th Airborne Engineers. Now I don't know if you want me to talk about that.

JM: Oh sure.

GK: Well, it's an interesting story. Because you know, World War II, it was a GIGANTIC effort. And the right hand didn't always know what the left hand was doing. But you know, you have to forgive that, because this was such an IMMENSE undertaking.

I was drafted. I didn't finish high school, and I was drafted when I was eighteen. Went to New York City. Went through a physical, which, you know, was just a day of walking around. Everybody was going to pass, more or less. And then

we went in and took the oath of, you know, allegiance to the government and the Army. After we got through. This was a big auditorium full of people. I mean, there must have been, oh, two or three hundred, five hundred people in there. And the sergeant stood up on the stage and you know, he gave the big speech about when your grandchildren ask you where you were in the big war you can proudly say you were there fighting for your country. And then we took the oath and then he said, "Okay, everybody can go home for two weeks and you'll get a postcard in the mail and then you come and do what you're told or you'll be AWOL. Now does anybody here that has a trade, would like to learn a trade, want those who a trade school, please stay after the rest of you leave."

Well I thought Yeah, I'm in a trade school and I'm trying to learn a trade. So I stayed. Most of the guys that stayed were older people. They weren't eighteen, they were more like forty. Because they had a trade. They were either carpenters or plumbers or whatever. So I couldn't quite figure out why they would want, why they would ask a thing like that, but I stayed. So he gave me this address and he said, "Go down there. In the next two weeks, go down to New York and here's the address, and they'll sign you up and explain everything." I still couldn't quite fathom why I was going to do this, but I did it.

So I got down to New York, went up to this big office building and ushered into a big room full of desks. Everybody busy working there. Girl sat me down and she said, "Well, where would you like to serve?"

And I thought, Where would I LIKE to serve? I thought the idea was we were going out to kill Hitler. I don't know where I would LIKE to serve.

"Well, wouldn't you like to be close to home?"

Well, yeah.

"Well, we have a school up in Westover Field, Massachusetts, and it would be thirty six months or thirty six weeks or some such thing, and you have to volunteer for it."

And oh, yeah, well that would be great, you know? I could come home on weekends. Yeah.

So I signed. I signed up for the 877th AB Engineers. Went home. Reported as I was told to. Went down to Long Island and got our uniforms and stuff. But me and another group of fellas were just pushed aside and we didn't have to do a lot of the testing and things that the others had to do, because we were already assigned to an outfit. So we didn't have to take aptitude tests and things like that.

So in three or four days they put us on a train for Westover Field, Massachusetts. And we got off the train on the other end and there was a big sergeant there. Huge big fella. With a clipboard. And he said, "Okay, all you Airbornes, line up over here." Well, I'm not no Airborne. Finally he comes and says, "Hey kid, what's your name?"

I told him.

"Yeah, right over here."

"No no no. I'm not an Airborne. I'm not jumping out of no airplanes. Not me."

"Yes son, you're right here in the Airbornes. 877th Airborne Engineers."

"Ohhh." I was terrified. I thought I am NOT going to jump out of any airplane.

But it turned out they were glider troops and that didn't bother me at all. So we went to Westover Field, Massachusetts, and we were there for about two weeks. We were replacements. This outfit, there were three battalions, the 877th and I think the 876th and the 879th. Something like that. But the battalions were never close to each other. They were always in a different location in the States. So we didn't KNOW anybody from the other outfits.

And the principle was this. They had these gliders, and you could put a Jeep inside them. They were pretty big. They were made by piano, of all people. Piano companies. Made out of wood with a canvas, tight stretched canvas over the outside. And they were kind of disposable. You never figured to use them twice in combat. You landed. You landed, and the thing was destroyed and the people that were in it, if they lived, then they got out and did their job. And our job was to cut down the trees. This would have been designed for the Pacific. On an island. Cut down the trees and with these little bitty toy bulldozers that we had inside, we smooth out some things and then the C47s would fly in with the troops and we'd take over the island. That was the scheme.

So they held a mock battle between the other two battalions. And generals came down from Washington to see how practical this whole idea was and they came away and they said, "This is totally a fantasy. This isn't going to work." These little bulldozers. You could stop them with the palm of your hand. They hadn't developed the little engines like they have today. So they just said, "Put these guys back in the service. Put all this equipment in the scrap heap. We need scrap."

But they forgot to cancel our battalion. They just simply misplaced the whole thing and we went to Europe. Our colonel just took us to Europe and we drew rations and got paid and everything. But we were never attached to any higher authority. So our colonel had complete control over us and we just moved

around. We went from different air bases and we got little maintenance jobs, you know, cleaning out the outhouses and patching up the holes in the runway and stuff like that. And when we felt like it we'd get up and move someplace else.

So we went through the entire war without really, without any of the people that were running the whole thing fully realizing where we were or what we were for.

JM: Good heavens.

GK: It was absurd.

One time, when we got to, we got to France, after they invaded, after D-Day, we got to, well yeah, near Cherbourg, but I can't remember the beach. Omaha beach, I think it was. And we landed on D plus thirty one, so things were pretty calmed down. We could still hear the explosions and the fighting and where it was all kinds of prisoners being marched back and forth and stuff. And we went out onto the Cherbourg peninsula. That's all we owned at that time, thirty days after the invasion, was the Cherbourg peninsula. And they had all these fields out there that were separated by thick hedgerows. Been growing there for years. They were supposed to be impenetrable, but you could get through them. You could crawl through them. And each of these fields had a different purpose.

The one next to, we weren't supposed to leave our field. You go inside in the gate, and you're supposed to stay inside this thing. But of course I didn't stay inside. I was the cook and I had extra time, and every time I had a day off I'd sneak through and see what was going on around me.

And I finally got through one time. They had, in the orchards, they had stacked all kinds of crates and ammunition and spare auto parts. They just used the whole Cherbourg peninsula as a warehouse, because without all that equipment we couldn't have really won the war. And I went, by coming in that way, I was in the back of a headquarters place that ran this whole thing. And there was a bulletin board. And on the bulletin board there was a list of all the different outfits and what their particular. Some of them were for, like they could build pontoon bridges. Some of them could, you know, spring telegraph wires, and so forth. And I said, "Oh look, there's my, there's the 877th Airborne Engineers." And it said A rusty wheelbarrow and a sheeps foot roller. Question mark question mark question mark.

I used to be friends with the supply sergeant. We got to be good friends. Sergeant Kenny. And he in turn had a speaking relationship with the company, with our company commander. Well, I didn't. And so he went and told him, "Yeah, Gerry was out there and he said." And our company commander was just a regular little boy scout, and he was just INCENSED that our very capable dedicated group should be so downgraded as to just be question mark question mark.

JM: Well, that's a different kind of war story. So you started to say that you must have met your wife while you were there.

GK: Well, after the war, when the war was over, I was eventually taken out of the Airborne outfit and put into. When they had the Battle of the Bulge, which was just before the war ended. This was Hitler's LAST push. They needed people on the front, and they said, "Hey. Take all these slackers back here that are just support troops." And they got to take three men out of each company up to the front. And so I got picked for that, and the day, the DAY before the war actually ended I was on the front. Was up to the front, that goes to the battle. I had no idea. We had gone through three months of infantry, tough you up, you know, go through basics again. And they get you all set to go for the infantry. And then we got put into these boxcars with hay on the floor, and we went on up. This was all, the training was done in France. And we went up to, I think it was Weisburg, Germany, and that's the end as far as the line, as the train lines could get us. And from there we went by truck on up into Austria, past Linz, Austria, and then halfway to Enns. And then Roosevelt and Stalin and Churchill had agreed that the Americans wouldn't go past the Enns River. The Russians could come up that far. Well, we got to the Enns before the Russians got to their side of it. But at that time in the war, everything was over. It was just complete total chaos. The German soldiers were trying to give up, to surrender to somebody, and nobody wanted them.

And here I come up to the front lines, a scared kid. Never been issued any ammunition. And what do I see coming towards me but a whole bunch of Germans. And nobody seems to be excited about it. And these guys would come out and they would surrender to you. And we'd say, "Well, I don't know where to put you. I don't know. Leave me alone."

It was just total total chaos. Eventually, we got put in a sort of like a holding transit place, just a house. They just took over the whole village, all the houses, and put soldiers in them and put the civilians out in the street.

And I was sitting at home writing a letter to my mom, when I heard. You could hear this commotion. You could just hear the general noise level going up. And I looked out the window, and I'm looking out at a central court where maybe five different streets entered into this central plaza. And I was curious, and I went outside, and I started to get surrounded by American troops. And there was a Jeep, it was an American Jeep, but it was manned by Russians. So we knew that if the Russians were there, there was no more fighting in between. And also everybody was, the Americans were saying, "This is good news."

And of course the Russians didn't want to go any further. And so there was just a whole bunch of hugging and breaking open the bottles and stuff like that. And

finally somebody next to me said, "I'm going to follow them. I want to see. This is a historic moment. I want to be there when we get to the meeting spot.

And so, I had no permission to leave or do anything. I just jumped in this, happened to jump in this Jeep. And the Jeep ahead of me was the Russians going back. And all of a sudden. The Germans had blown up any piece of equipment they could to stop the road from being used. So they would park their tanks and their artilleries and everything else out on the road and blow it up. Now we had the most GIGANTIC tow truck that you could imagine. And they just went down this road shoving everything off the road, pulling it off the road, but opening up for traffic. And all this mountain of iron, tanks and everything else was just on the sides. But as we proceeded down the road, we started to get to the part that didn't have all the stuff taken off yet. We passed the tow truck and were weaving in and out of, in and out of these vehicles. Very slowly. And all of a sudden the taillights of the Jeep up in front of us switched around and it was headlights. So you know, the driver put on his brakes real quick and when we got caught up to them, they had hit one corner of the fender on a tank and spun the vehicle around

So you always carried a little first aid kit on your belt, and you were always told "You never use your first aid kit on anybody else. That's for YOU." Well, this Russian was there and there was blood running down all over his face. Well you know the slightest little cut, and it looks just terrible. He wasn't really hurt bad. So I quick opened my bandages up and sprinkled this sulfur or whatever the heck it was in there, and bandaged his head up. And he got his stuff out of the Jeep and a whole bunch of guys turned around and picked up the Jeep and moved it around got it back on the road. And by now all these other GIs in back that were following, they'd stopped and walked up to find out why it wasn't moving. And the Russian broke open a bottle of vodka, you know, and poured some out. He asked me to drink with him and I didn't drink at the time. I said, "No, I don't drink."

Well, he was kind of offended. And he was two sheets to the wind, you know. He'd been drinking some before. And I don't blame him. The war was over for them. He knew it.

Anyway. Eventually a young kid came up that spoke Polish, and Polish is enough close to Russian that they could communicate. And the Russian, "Well, why won't he drink with me?"

And he asked, "Why won't you drink with him?" I said, "Tell him it's my religion." I didn't know how else to explain it.

And so he told him that and he said, "Boy. That must be a strange religion. Oh, okay."

And he picked me up and put me in his Jeep and he got in the back, put his arm around me, and we drove. And as we were driving along, here comes all the Russian army. And I mean, they were the most beat. Draggled. Dirty. Tattered. I mean, I looked at these guys. And here we are with our crispy clean uniforms with the pleats all pressed in the front and everything. And these guys had been in the WAR. They weren't out there cooking food or playing around like I was. And WOW.

Well, it turns out the next morning, when I got back. I made it just back in time to not be missed as the. I heard somebody saying, "I'm going back."

And I said, "Hey, I'm going with you." And it was hard to drive in the other direction. Very slow. But I made it just as they were having roll call and I snuck in. I just got in these big doors and I heard him call my name out. "Here!"

And it turned out. They wanted us, since we were going to meet Russians and they were our allies, they wanted us to show the proper respect. So they showed us the insignias. And it turns out that this fella that I had helped was a general. But he wasn't a BIG general. They used the term General in their service. It's sort of the equivalent of a colonel in our service. I guess it makes them feel good. You know, "You're a general now. But you only can have this authority."

It's like they have generals that are the equivalent of our generals, but it goes by the number of stars. So it turned out that he was a general. And I have no idea what his name was or anything like that. But he was the first one. When we left that night, the streets were. Every little village that we came to, it was just still burning. There were dead horses laying in the streets. And the Russian soldiers that we saw going through there were drunk. As. They. Could. Be. They could hardly stand up on their feet. They were screaming and hollering and singing. And they must have got into a hardware store someplace because they all had brand new hickory pick handles. Just the wooden handles. And they were smashing everything they could find, even though it had all been broken already. There was stuff in the street, and it was broken, they got there and smashed it into smaller pieces. And whooping and hollering and so happy, you know, that they made it through. And that was the end of the war. The next day it became official, the official end of the war.

JM: Wow. And so at that point you would have met your wife at some.

GK: She had fled Vienna because the girls were afraid of being raped and stuff and so they didn't know what to do. A lot of them went with the army as the army left. The Germans were smart enough to know that they better not get captured by the Russians, so there was this TREMENDOUS effort to get across the Enns River.

So when my outfit. I can't remember the name of it. Was an infantry outfit. 65th? I'm not sure. But our job was guarding the German prisoners. I mean, we weren't the only ones doing it, but we were guarding certain ones. And these Germans, they couldn't give up. Nobody would accept them as prisoners. So what they did was they went down and dug some holes, put some posts in the ground, strung some wire up and went inside locked themselves up and said, "Now we're prisoners of war. Take care of us. We want to be protected under the Geneva Convention."

And at night. They had a guard tower on all the four corners, and at night. I was a cook. I had been a cook in the 877th Airborne Engineers. And so when I came into the outfit the captain talked to me and said, "Well, we'll make you a cook here, but we can't do it for a month or so while we transfer out some other people."

So we would go up on guard duty and the Germans had three bullets. And we had NO bullets. They never issued us any ammunition. And I'm glad they didn't. I'm afraid somebody would have gotten hurt.

But it was kind of funny to be standing there. They put one German and two Americans, and the German had three bullets and the Americans didn't have any.

Tim: This is a recording. [Tim arrives to video]

GK: Well, that's about. For Margaret. I met Margaret. Margaret had gotten across the Enns River, and there was a refugee camp there, right close to where we were. And of course young girls and soldiers always got together somehow. And I learned to speak German REAL fast. And I eventually. Now the war was over, but it was just a matter now of getting men home, and you got home through a point system. You got a certain number of points based on your age and based on your marital. If you were married you got more points. If you got children you got more points. And then you also got points depending upon how many campaigns you were in. Well technically we had passed through three places where we were to be included in the campaign although we didn't lift a finger to fight in any of them. But we got the credit.

So then they start to switch people around from one outfit to another so that they would get, they would have. Everybody in the same outfit would have the same number of points. Within a few points. That way they could ship big lumps of people home at once. So I left Enns, and went further into Germany. I can't remember where. And I went back, and brought Margaret down to where I was. I don't know if you want me to get into all the details.

JM: I was just curious how you met and then you came to America. I still want to get you back to Mill Valley.

GK: We weren't married yet and I had to get married and they wouldn't let us get married. So in order to accomplish that. I'll skip a big bunch but quick. I got out of the, I got discharged from the service. And I got discharged from the service under the pretext.

I got to start further back.

Eventually I got Margaret, I smuggled Margaret with me to various places, and one of them was up to Czechoslovakia.

JM: You actually smuggled her?

GK: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. You had to. They didn't let you carry. There were various ways. I got her in a boxcar for fourteen days and she got there the other end and sometimes I'd dress her up like a soldier and just bring her right along. But our company people, they were, they called me in a couple of times and said, "How come that girl happens to show up?"

"Oh, she's got her own papers."

I was a scallywag. I was just a kid, you know? But I soon found out that the army really doesn't know what it's doing.

I wanted to get some Christmas cards printed with my photograph on them. And for the old used coffee grounds that we throw away, the printer was willing to trade as many things as you wanted. And I suddenly realized, he doesn't really know what he's printing. He'll print anything I give him to print. So I made up this imaginary card that said U.S. on the front, with a big eagle. It was cardboard. It would fold in half. And inside it said, it gave the description and photograph of the person and it was countersigned by Colonel Somebody or Other. And it said Please extend all the courtesies of your regime to this person and requested by so and so. She can eat in the mess hall and she's allowed to travel in the vehicles. Oh, ___ nonsense.

And I hardly ever got to use the things. I just got them because I thought it might be a great way to move her around.

But when we left Czechoslovakia, our company was. It was the day before Thanksgiving. We were on the road Thanksgiving day. Just a few men. And ___ just a couple days ago. So they had told us, "Now, you cannot smuggle any of these people out of Czechoslovakia." This is going back to the Russians. This is their zone and there was going to be a mass exodus. All Americans were to leave in one day and the Russians would swoop in behind us.

Well, Margaret slept in a little village, in a little town where they were, and for Thanksgiving Day, that's one of the biggest days for the cooks. We prepare turkeys and stuffing and everything. But we had to have a celebration the day before because we were going to be on the road for Thanksgiving. The week after we served the meal, we had to break down the kitchen, put it on the supply truck ready to leave real early in the morning.

Well, they got all our stuff on this truck and there was so much stuff that the wooden stays that went over the top wouldn't hold it all and they had to just take the tarps off and put the tarp over everything and pull it down to hold everything on that truck. It was that full.

Well, I went up into town. That evening, there were a whole bunch of Czechoslovakian people that came around and they just BEGGED for help to leave. And I gave out handfuls of these passes. I don't know if it helped anybody to escape or not. I don't know. But I never saw them again and I have no idea.

Real early in the morning, it was probably about four o'clock, maybe earlier. Roughly about four o'clock. And I brought Margaret into where I slept. Earlier that night when these people were asking for all these, for help, my, not supply sergeant, the mess sergeant. He didn't really care for me, and he didn't care for Margaret. So we didn't have a good relationship. And he started firing his pistol out the window to get these people to leave because he was thinking they were going to steal something out of his truck. Then he stuck a lamp, like this, just out the window so he had some light out there.

Now I got to get her in that truck. She's going to ride in that truck. But it's the only hope I could see to get her out. So I dressed her up like a soldier, put on a helmet liner and jacket and all that stuff. And we got her in there, snuck out to that truck, took the rope off, threw it back over one corner up by the front of the cab, got up in the truck and I took out two cardboard cases full of GI soap to wash the dishes with. And I took some turkey drumsticks and other meat, put it in a bag, shoved her in that little hole, scrunched on down like that, pulled the tarp over her back and tied it off again. Now the cooks weren't going to ride in that truck. That was just a single truck. It had a trailer in the back. We were going to ride on a big big semi trailer with the whole company of men. So I wasn't going to be IN that truck and take care of her. And you know, it started to snow. No sooner got her in there and a few little.

Well, by the time it was time to get up and breakfast was being served and stuff. We only served hot water for coffee. But her back was melting the snow in a circle on the top of the truck, and I was just frantic that maybe they were going to find her in there.

Well, they DIDN'T find her in there. And nobody of course paid any attention to this little melted spot on the top of the truck. Now it was so cold that when we left and got into the line, the caravan, I could never see either end of it. I could never see any end to the taillights in one direction, nor could I see any end to the headlights in the other direction.

Every so often they had HUGE fires. They had trees, whole trees. So the fire'd be like fifty feet long. And they'd let a certain number of people stop and warm up and then get back in the caravan again. And by the time we got to the other end, which was near Frankfurt am Main, in Germany, the truck that we were following, and every once in a while her truck would stop. It had motor trouble. It would stop and then it would catch up and then it would stop and then it would catch up. And we finally got to the other end and she wasn't there. The kitchen truck wasn't there.

Now the way they worked it was like this. We were out on an old air base, an old German air base. And before we got there, a company of engineers had shown up and just stuck up tents. They don't tie them down good but they just stick them up in the air so that there's a place for you to go and then you have to finish up the little details yourself. So when we got there, here's a company with tents on it, you know. And company commander said, "Okay, this is going to be the kitchen. This is going to be the cooks tent next door and then this is going to be first sergeants and so on and so on. And so these were like big tents. They would take like twenty five men. They were what you call a squad tent. And so now we're there, and we can't go to sleep yet until the truck shows up because we have to cook breakfast in the morning.

Now by now it's like two o'clock at night. So Margaret's been in that truck now for twenty two hours. And truck finally shows up. Well, they had, the company commander had designated a certain number of people to help the cooks clear the truck so they could prepare the kitchen for morning. So here is this BIG group of guys and they're tired and they want to go to sleep. And as soon as they get this truck unloaded they're going to go to sleep. And there's maybe fifteen or twenty of them. I mean, you know, they never spared any manpower in the service.

So the truck backs up. Two Jeeps put their headlights on the rear end of it and they open up the back and they're starting to throw stuff off like crazy. And I got just a, I thought I got to do SOMETHING. I don't know what to do.

Now the driver of this truck was not in our company. He was in a transportation company. So he didn't have to help with the unloading because it wasn't his job. And I went around the side of the truck and I said, "Well, I've got to get her out." And I just took my knife and I cut the rope. I couldn't untie it. Cut the rope, flattened it back on the corner. I put the knife in my mouth and I went up and got her. She couldn't stand up or do anything and I pulled her out. Now the truck

driver came around the truck and he saw me carrying this person out of the top of his truck. And his jaw just dropped wide open. And I looked at him. I had the knife in my mouth still. I was a harmless little guy. I never hurt anybody. And he looked at that and I said, "You didn't see nothing."

And he thought I was threatening him with the bayonet, you know. He said, "Oh, I didn't see nothing."

So I got her out. Walked her around. Put her in the cooks tent. Stuck her in a sleeping bag, and all of a sudden somebody said "Kott? Company commander wants to see you."

Hmm. Probably wants some advice on how to run this company. I'll take care of that. I'm just in great spirits. I figure I got away with it.

And this Lieutenant Bear was the acting company commander, and he was a nice guy. And he brought me into the command tent there, and he said, "Kott. Do you see these things on my shoulder? I don't want to lose them."

Tim: ___ Gerry. Gerry, I'm going to ask you to take a thirty second time out. I'm going to change the tape and change the battery.

GK: Okay.

JM: Thank you.

Tim: Finish up.

JM: All right. Thanks Tim.

Tim: I'll see this later, Gerry. I'll still hear the story, so make it a good story. I'm going to hear it later.

GK: All right.

Tim: Thank you.

JM: Thanks a lot Tim.

Tim: Let me ask you one quick question as I'm on my way out. I live on Browning Street. Do you ever recall doing any houses on Browning Street?

GK: Sure.

Tim: Do you remember the numbers or the locations?

GK: No. I just know we built on Browning Street, but I can't remember.

Tim: Do you remember Bud Dewall(?)? He was an old timer that lived out there for years. About your age.

GK: No. I don't think I know him. Dewalt?

Tim: Bud Dewall(?). He was a postman.

GK: Well, I don't think I know him.

JM: His son is the same age as.

Tim: Yeah. Bob.

JM: As. Well, Gerry's oldest older son Bill and I were in the same grade and the same age as his son.

GK: Did you go to school together? I didn't know that, Joan. I got to catch up with you on that.

JM: Yeah.

Tim: Okay. You're rolling.

JM: Okay. Thank you. Bye.

Tim: Thank you.

GK: Nice meeting you.

JM: So she's been in the truck for twenty two hours and we're just at the point where the commanding officer is saying he doesn't want to lose his.

GK: Doesn't want to lose these bars.

So he said. He didn't know what to do. If he brought her to light, it would have been, it was a real strong thing. They didn't care about us sneaking a few girls around. But not leaving Czechoslovakia, because that was an agreement between the Russians and the Americans. So he just said "Get her out of here in the morning."

So early that next morning, I dressed her up, put a big winter overcoat on her and helmet liner and we walked into the little village. And I went around from door to door until I could find somebody that would let her live there. I offered to pay them, with food and stuff. And so she slept there for quite a while. But the

Americans were smart, and I wasn't the only one that had smuggled people out. It turned out that there were a number of them. And so what they did, they got to these little villages early in the morning and they parked a Sherman tank at each end, and just raided the villages and got the people to show all their papers. But since I was a cook and got up early, four o'clock, I knew it was going to happen and I got all of the, I had brought this woman all kinds of things. You know, clothes that she could use for her kids. And got all that stuff in a sack, because if they got caught with it in their house they were in trouble. And we went out in the morning and slithered along the ground. I remember everything was covered with frost. Got out into the woods and I heard a fellow say, "Halt! Who goes there?"

And I said, "Oh, it's just me." And I told Margaret to scoot off the other direction and I'd come back in the afternoon and get her. And so I replied, "Just me! What does that mean?" You know, I was in here with my girl, I just didn't want to get caught.

"Well, you better get out of here. Go on. Beat it."

So she didn't get caught. And it turned out that they rounded up about fifteen other people. There was no sign of it. You would never have guessed. The other villagers said, "You know, as far as we know, you're the only one that got away with it. The rest of them got caught."

So we stayed there. That was the purpose for going to that spot, was to leave to go home. So on the day that we were ready to leave to get on the truck to go to La Havre and get on the ship. I had Margaret all dressed up in her GI clothes, out in the latrine. But there wasn't any way that it was going to work. I could see that it was just going to be absolutely impossible to smuggle her onto that ship and stuff. So I went and told the sergeant, "I got to go to the latrine."

"Well, hurry back."

We had all our belongings all packed and in a big barracks bag standing there in this big formation, waiting for the truck to come and pick us up. And so I went out to the latrine and I gave Margaret all the money I had in my pocket and stuff, and she said, "Don't worry. I'll make it back to Vienna." And I said, "Well, I'm going to go home, get discharged, and I'm going to come back and we're going to get married." She was pregnant by then, with my first boy Billy.

And as I started walking back to the outfit, to the company street, I just felt so terrible. And you know, up until that time, the only thing you could think of was, I want to go home. Home. I want to go home. And now, I didn't want to go home. I wanted to stay here with her.

So I got an idea as I was walking back. They can't move anybody with venereal disease. They HAVE to put you in the hospital immediately. They cannot put you in with other people and move you. So I went back to the Red Cross tent, to the medics tent, and I said, "You know, I just went to the latrine. I have clap."

"Ohhhhhhh. What are we going to do with you? We don't have any vehicles. NOW you find out. Ohhhhhhhh. Well, you can't go home."

"Oh gosh. That's too bad."

"Okay. Here." He wrote up a piece of paper. And he said, "Take this over to the next company down here." You could see them from where we were standing. "Go to the doctor down there. Tell him that we can't take you to the hospital and you should be sent to the hospital."

Well, I did. I went to that place. And I went to another one after that. And everybody had the same excuse, because each one of these people were going home but it was just the next day. So they were busy putting things in boxes and getting rid of them and signing papers. And eventually I figured out that the doctor in my outfit had taken me off the morning report, but the hospital didn't know I was coming. So I wasn't AWOL.

I wasn't in the service anymore. I was in between the cracks.

So the next morning, I got Margaret dressed up as a Polish refugee, this time, with Polish stickers on her shoulder. They used to wear Army clothes, because they didn't have any other clothes and they couldn't. So if they had to clothe these people it had to be with Army clothes. But they distinguished them by putting this thing that said Poland on the outside.

So I dressed her up like that, because they could drive in American vehicles. And we got back to Weisburg.

As we were hitchhiking on the road, this big command car stopped and then as soon as he saw her he said, "Oh, I don't know if she can travel in the car."

And I showed him this fake document, and he said, "Oh, sure. Hop in."

And he pulls into a place to eat at noontime. It was a big Army German fort with big walls around the outside. And they had barracks in there and stuff. We'd taken them over, had a lot of people stationed there. But when you drove in, you know, it was like a guard at the entrance, and then when you were inside you were like locked in.

And so the driver jumps out and he says, "Come on. We're going to get something to eat."

And I said, "Oh, no. We have some K rations out here. We'll just stay out here."

And he started to look kind of suspicious at us, like nobody would eat K rations if they could go in and get a hot meal. So I thought, Oh, better not to look suspicious.

"Oh, okay. Let's go inside."

We get up the stairs and the mess sergeant's standing there. And he says, "Well, come on. Hurry up. You have to go upstairs and sign in so I can draw rations on you tomorrow. Hurry up because I'm breaking down the chow line."

So we go upstairs in this building, and we go into this place, and here's a thirty five year regular Army, not just drafted for the war, first sergeant. Knows all the regulations, knows all the papers and everything else. And he says to the driver, "Are these people with you?"

There's Margaret and me, and the driver, he's perfectly honest, he said, "Well, no. This is MY trip ticket."

And so he says, "Okay, where's your pass?"

And I'm caught red handed, and I don't know what to do. So I tell him, "Well, I don't have a pass because I'm on duty."

"What do you mean, you're on duty?"

"Oh. Well, this young lady is with the Viennese consulate, and she travels from Vienna to Seine section in Paris." And I'm making this up as I go along.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, yes. They go back and forth. They're couriers, and I'm a guard. Each one of these girls gets a guard, because, you know, it's dangerous work."

"Hmmm. Well, if... where's your travel orders?"

"Oh, well, you see, we're not supposed to leave the train."

"Well, why DID you leave the train?"

Well, you see, in those days the tracks were so bombed out that it took sometimes days to go over what would be only an hour's travel. Because only one train at a time could get through these bottlenecks. So it was perfectly

feasible that you could leave the train and hitchhike down the road and catch up with it real easy. So I said that's what we were trying to do.

So he says, "Well, where's HER papers, then?"

And I show him this document. Now it's real nice and official looking, but he ain't ever seen nothing like this in thirty five years in the service. You know?

So he picks up the phone and he calls down for a doilmecher(?). That's a translator. And I said, "I could translate for you."

And he said, "Yeah, I'll bet you could."

So I step over to see Margaret, and I tell her, "Everything's okay. I'll get it straightened out in a minute."

And I go back over to him and I say, "The young lady would like to go to the bathroom."

"Oh. George, take her out to the bathroom."

So now they get kind of busy there. Phones ringing. And they start to handle some other things. They're waiting for the translator to come up. And I step over to the door, open the door, slide out in the hall, find a frosted glass door that looks like a bathroom. ___ Margaret ___ behind it, grab her by the wrist, run out through this row of desks, down the stairs. At any one of these points, just the opening of the door and saying, "Stop those people!" would have stopped us. Got down in the parade ground, grabbed our bag out of the back of the truck, and made it out the front door of this fort. And I am just scared to death. And we get outside and I quick jerk out a raincoat to put on so I LOOK different.

And a UNICEF truck, from UNRO, from the United Nations Relief Organization, full of grain, came by. And I jumped right out in front of it to stop him. And he said, "Where are you going?"

And I said, "Where are YOU going?"

And he said, "I'm going to." I forget where it was now, but it happened to be in our direction. But if he said the moon I would have said, "That's where I'm going too."

And we got up in the cab of this truck and it took off, right out into the country. And I thought it was all over. You know? I was starting to feel good again. And all of a sudden a big truck passed us, goes up the road about a half a mile, parks across the road, and when we catch up with him he's standing there with a gun.

"You two. With me."

Well, I got this kid and I said, "Oh please. Tell him you stopped but we escaped and everything else."

He said, "I can't do that. Come on. You got to go back with me."

So we went back and we went up to this, the SAME place again. And this staff sergeant. Boy, he is all puffed up, boy. He has just stopped this, foiled this thing.

And what they thought was, these Nuremberg trials were going on. And Nuremberg's not far from Weisberg. It's only one, next village. Next city. And so they were very very scared about the Nazis perhaps trying to foul up the trials and help escape. You know, something like that. So they thought maybe we were a couple spies or something. And they arrested both of us. And by the time it came time to get put in front of the provost marshal, they changed ships. And the people that brought us up before the provost marshal, they had a couple of drunks and me. And you know, you staggered up and they held the drunks out in front of the provost marshal, and "Guilty?"

"Yeah, I'm guilty."

He asked me if I'm guilty and I said, "I don't think so."

And the provost marshal says, "don't be smart, young fellow. You know whether you're guilty or not."

I said, "Well, sir. I'm a high point man. I'm on the way home. The doctor tells me I have venereal disease. I know for a fact I don't. I couldn't have. He's mistaken. And I should be on my way home. I'm a high point veteran and these guys arrested me trying to get to the hospital."

"Ohhhhh." Well. He ripped them up one side and down the other and had me sent off to the hospital. And the doctor there helped me to, he made a couple phone calls and got Margaret taken out of the venereal disease section of the jail. And he gave me a test and he called me and he says, "Look. If you promise me you'll go straight home, I'm going to let you walk out of here. Don't go getting that girl again and getting in trouble."

"Oh, yessir."

And of course I didn't. I got out. I got another paper to carry with me. It showed me that he was sending me back without a venereal disease.

And I got ahold of Margaret and we smuggled our way in the engines, in the electric engines, of the trains. And we made it over the border. Well, we almost didn't make it at the Austrian border, but we made it. And I got her to her home in Vienna, which is in the Russian zone of Vienna. And then I left, and got back on the Albert(?) Express and started to turn myself in to try to get discharged and get back to marry her.

One of the guys that was on the train with me said, "Well, you know what, Gerry? You can get discharged over here. You don't have to go all the way home and get discharged and then come back. And there's no ships coming back or anything. It's going to be hard. But you've got to apply for it."

So when I got off the train in Seine section in Paris, I was going to look for a place to billet. I had no place to sleep or anything. So I went to an MP and I said, you know, "I need help. I need a place to sleep."

"How come you don't have any travel orders, any papers? I'd better see my boss."

Oh, well. He listens to this whole story and he starts to call people to find out what to do with me. And eventually he gets somebody. He must have made eighteen or twenty different phone calls. They ALL told him to try somebody else. So he finds the. I forget what it was called. Seine section PD or something like that. It tells me to go out there to this place and he gives me instructions on what subway to take and then get off and walk three blocks and there's the big building.

When I knock on the door and the door opens and I step inside, I realize this is a penitentiary. It's a prison. And the people that are walking around in there have got Army uniforms on but they've been dyed bright red. The prisoners, to distinguish them. And so I tell the guy, "Oh, I think I'm in the wrong place."

And he says, "Son, that door only swings one way. You're in. You stay in."

JM: Oh, how scary.

GK: Now, I don't have any orders. I don't have any papers. So you have to first establish who I am. So I have to go in and give them all this information and they see if I'm wanted or if I'm AWOL. I'm not listed anywhere as AWOL.

Now this is a very severe military prison. You're not allowed to talk to these people. You can't say Good morning to somebody. It's silent at all times. You only speak when you're spoken to and only answer what you're asked.

Well, they put you in a holding tank for the first night. This is in an old factory. The glass has all been busted out of the windows, but the windows are small metal bars so it acts like a prison.

And I decide that I don't like it here and I don't think I want to spend the night.

So we go to chow, and when I get back get back to this holding tank, I keel over. And somebody runs over and says, "What's wrong?"

And I say, "Appendicitis."

"Ohhh." And he runs a cup on the bars and the cops come back in.

"Yeah. Run him over to the dispensary."

Now I'm Ohhhhhh, pain. Ohhhhhh. You know, I got myself so worked up that I was actually sick. And these two guys that ran the dispensary, one of them said to the other one, "You know, that quack we got in here for a doctor, if he gets his hands on this kid he'll kill him. Let's get him off to the hospital. He looks like a kid."

So they quick start a bunch of stuff and they got me in an ambulance and over to the hospital, and when I get there, they're all with gowns on and everything, ready to operate. And I don't want to get operated on. And they put me in this little booth where they examine you, you know, and the doctor says, "___ minute." He says, "Something's wrong here. You know, I don't think he has appendicitis. I think this is indigestion. And I don't think we ought to cut him open yet."

So they put me up in a regular hospital bed and it's nice and clean and white sheets and a pillow and everything. But it's prison. It's a prison hospital ward. And I meet a bunch of interesting people there. And eventually they let me out of this place and they tell me to report to an old department store in the heart of Paris that they're using as a, they're using it as a, like a hotel, for GIs to sleep in while they're waiting for the trains.

JM: So you weren't charged with anything?

GK: No. I wasn't charged with anything because I wasn't wanted and I wasn't AWOL. And the documents that I carried showed that I was supposed to have venereal disease, and I don't. And so it was a big mistake and everybody was saying, "I'm sorry."

But we're in Paris now. And they sent me down to a building that the Army had taken over. And you had to swear out your records. You had to undertake an oath and then give your records, you know, it was under penalty if you lie about it

you're going to go, you know. It's a big thing. One of the questions to prove that I had these number of points, I had to give a gate. And I had some letters, that I didn't have with me, that would jog my memory so I could prove that I was at this spot at that time. So I said, "I'll bring them in to you."

And he said, "Yeah, go home and get them and come back tomorrow."

So when I came back, I gave him that information, and he gives me a brown envelope with my new records in them. And he says, "Take these to your company commander and he'll send you home."

As I'm walking down the hall, I see a sign on a door that says Marriages and Discharges. It was an old manila file folder and it was scotch taped to the door with handwritten. And I thought, This has got to be a joke. What do they mean, Marriages and Discharges?

So I open the door. There was a guy sitting inside with his feet up on the desk and a newspaper over his feet. Over his face. And he said, "Yeah? What do you need?"

And I said, "Well, I want to get discharged and married."

And he said, "Well, you came to the right place."

"What do you mean?"

And he said, "Well, a lot of guys are marrying French girls, and they get a job here."

Ohh.

So I tell him, "well, the girl I want to marry is from Vienna."

And he says, "Nah. That wouldn't work. They would never approve that." He said, "Well, I'll tell you what we can do. This officer that comes in here and rubber stamps these. I do all the paperwork. And we'll HAVE to be truthful about it. We'll have to say she's from Austria. But I'll stick it in with about two hundred applications. He never reads them. He just rubber stamps everything I put in front of him. So I think we can get this done." But he says, "Here's the thing. If you give these, your records, to your company commander, he's going to have you on the next train leaving Paris for the boat."

So I said, "Well, I don't know what to do about that."

And he grabs my records and he sticks them in his desk drawer and he says, "They just got lost."

So if you don't have any records, they can't move you. So during this process.

JM: Now did you have to pay him? To do anything like that?

GK: No. This was just buddy system in the service.

Eventually, I got discharged out of this place, on the day of my birthday, February 7th, 1945.

JM: It must have been, was it '46?

GK: Well, I think it was late '45. I was twenty one. No, '46. I was twenty one. Yeah. I was twenty one. I was old enough to get married.

And so.

I lost my train of thought for a second. But all right. In order to get discharged in France, I had to. This was a process we were doing unbeknownst to anybody else, in cahoots with this sergeant that had gotten, that ran the marriages and discharges office. And there was a girl out in the corridor, and I had to get permission from the French government. I had to go and make a formal application. They were going to GIVE it to me, but you had to go in and make a formal application and swear that you wouldn't be a burden on the French people and take care of yourself and stuff like that.

So while I was doing that, there was this girl sitting there next to me out in the hall. They don't have waiting rooms. You wait out in the hall, on a big bank. And you know, she was trying to strike up a conversation with me, and I wasn't on the make at all. You know. But finally she says, "Listen, I've got to ask you a question. I'm Latvian, and every six months I have to renew my permission to stay in France, as a foreigner. But surely every American soldier doesn't have to come in here and get permission to stay in France."

I said, "Oh no. I'm trying to marry a girl from Vienna, and I need to get discharged here so I can go back and get her."

And she said, "I'm trying to marry an American soldier. We're in love and everything, but I can't prove who I am because my documents are all in Germany, and you can't get into Germany. It's an occupied country. There's no way to get in."

So I go, "Yeah, there is. There's a way to get in."

And she said, "Could you get me in to Germany?"

“Yeah, it wouldn’t be hard. I could do that.”

So the next day I took her down to the ____, in a taxi. She was staying in a hotel called Hotel Splendide. She told me that it was inexpensive and clean and stuff. And so I took her down in a taxi, and told the driver to go a block past the station. We walked in BACK of the station, down to the track. Now, the platform, there was a leave train that went to Munich, from Paris to Munich, every day at noon. And this was one of those old Victorian stations, with the glass roof over the top. And they wouldn’t bring the locomotive, it was a steam locomotive with smoke coming out, until the LAST minute, to save all the smoke coming inside. So they had the TRAIN inside, and they had MPs at every gate getting in, but nobody out on the tracks. So when the locomotive came along the tracks, we just walked right alongside the locomotive and up in to the station, opened the first car on the train, put her inside. She had kind of GI clothes on. And said, “Goodbye and good luck.” Her name was Anna Suzanne.

And I left, and got discharged from the service. I got on that very train the next day, after I got discharged. I was on that very train. Smuggled my way back up into Munich, and from Munich to Salzburg, and from Salzburg into the Russian zone of Austria, and into the town of Vienna.

Now, I’ve got a discharge from the Army. But you weren’t allowed to do all this traveling. And then I went to the Russians and I got a ration card. And they were very nice. The Russian said to me, he spoke English, and he spoke quite good English. And he said, “Look, young man, you obviously have no respect for your OWN country’s laws, because you broke all of them to get here. But I guarantee you you will have respect for MY laws, because if you break any I’m going to put you in prison. There’s not going to be a trial. You’re going to prison. Just DON’T break any rules. But we’ll share our food with you.” And he gave me ration stamps. And we lived for several weeks in Vienna.

Now what I would do is put my uniform on and go into town, and go to any military installation I could find. A hospital. Anything. And go inside and steal all the food I could find anyplace, any shape, size or description. And if I couldn’t find any food I could find overcoats. I could find blankets. I could find pajamas. I could find bathrobes. And they were all saleable on the black market. I could.

Anyway, I’d go to the Red Cross and get donuts. You weren’t allowed to take them OUT. They’d put them in front of you, you know, and I’d slip them into my shirt. The shirt was all full of powdered sugar.

Anyway, eventually I got a rash on my forehead. So I went into Vienna, and I went to an Army hospital, and the doctor looked at me and he said, “Young man, that’s infantago. It’s a contagious disease. You can’t leave.”

And I said, "Oh Doc, I'm an American but I'm not a soldier." My uniform had no insignias on it. I just wore the uniform.

And he said, "I don't care. This is an American hospital. You're an American. You're not going outside with a communicable disease."

Now right away you have a problem, because you can't mix civilians with soldiers. You can't mix officers with enlisted men. So they didn't know where to put me, and they put me in with a reporter for the New York Times. He's a civilian. And he hears this story about a kid that gets discharged over there, can't get back home because they won't let him bring his wife. And he files the story. And of course the Army censors everything. They couldn't print anything without passing censor. And they decide that he can't print the story. So they send me a letter. It took two weeks to get across the town of Vienna. In those days the mail was SO slow. And the letter went something like this. Dear Mr. Kott. There may be a way in which, if you will cooperate with the Army, there may be a way in which we might straighten this thing out and get you sent home. Please come in to the State Department.

So I went in to the State Department. They had an embassy open by then. And they said, "Look. We don't even know if you're an American. You speak English but we have no proof who you are. Your discharge is, no photograph on it or anything. But we're willing to believe that you're who it says you are on this thing and that you've served your country. And you can't leave here without a passport."

So they issued me the fourth passport out of Vienna in that year. The other three were given to Americans that had hidden out in attics during the entire war, and the minute it was over they went in and got sent home.

Now all we had to do was get visas to enter Switzerland and France, and Margaret didn't have any papers. So I said, "I'm not going without her."

Oh, they tried everything to persuade me to go. Finally, and I just said, "I'm not," and they just said, "Okay. Here's what we'll do." And see, this shows you, when they want to settle the problem it's SO easy. They put a piece of paper in a typewriter and they write down all the following facts. This is Margaret Kott. She was born so and so and so on such and such a day and such and such a parish on such and such a date, and so forth and so on. And due to the fact that there is no Austrian government, this letter will act in lieu of a passport. They pasted a stamp on the bottom of it. Looked like a postage stamp, but it wasn't. It was some other kind of stamp. And then they cancelled the stamp and it becomes a legal document and we came right back into the United States with it. I've still got it somewhere.

In those days, the loophole was this: the wife of a GI didn't need a visa to enter the United States. They did not specify that it had to be the wife, a wife from France or England, because that's where all the GIs married. They married French girls and English girls. Those were our allies. But you couldn't marry a German or an Austrian girl. It was not allowed. You couldn't even apply for it.

Anyway, this general that gave me the, that finally agreed to. He said, "If you'll tell us how you crossed the borders, because we're of the opinion that nobody could do that." And we had walked across those borders so many times it was ridiculous. And they were having the Nuremberg trials at that time, and so they, THEY felt, that nobody could get through.

And I said, "This is ridiculous." And I had to show them how I did it. And they were just flabbergasted, it was so easy to do. You know.

So that's when Margaret and I left Vienna and we got to Paris, and I went to one of the cheapest hotels I could find, because I had to support myself, you know. And it was hard. I was living on whatever I could steal from the Army. And.

I lost my train of thought again.

Okay. So we went to this horrible horrible HORRIBLE crappy hotel. Dirty. Now Margaret was not a complainer. She never bitched or complained about anything. And I can still remember standing there, looking at this dismal view out the window, and Margaret said, "Gerry, this has got to be the lowest ebb of our. Everyplace we've stayed was nicer than this. Can't we find something better than THIS?"

And I remembered yeah. The Hotel Splendide, where Anna Suzanne, where I helped her get back in. And I remembered how to get there on the subway. And I went there and I rented a room.

I got her upstairs in the room, and I remembered that there was a little restaurant across the street, and "Hey, let's go get a bowl of soup over there."

So we went out. Now this place had a birdcage elevator, you know, with the open wrought iron type cage. And the stairs kind of went around the elevator all the way up to the fifth, I think it was five stories high. So we went out and pressed the button for the elevator, and up comes the elevator. And who do you suppose is standing on the elevator? Anna Suzanne and her GI husband. And she looks at me and she says, "Gerry!"

And I, "Anna!"

Margaret has no idea who she is, and this GI's with her going, "Who's this guy? What? What?"

Now the elevator doesn't stop. It keeps going. And so we're running around the stairs. I've got Margaret by one hand, yanking her up around. And "Where are we going? Why are we?"

And the elevator doors open up and we take a big hug. And she introduces me, "This is the guy that made it possible for us to get married, Honey."

"Oh, well, fine."

And they got there within an hour of us getting into that hotel. Isn't that unbelievable?

JM: It is.

GK: Unbelievable. Just completely. You couldn't believe it would come. Not even a day later, or a week later. The same day. Within an hour.

So we became good friends and they stayed. We were both waiting. She was waiting for a bride ship. He was waiting for a troop ship. And we were waiting for a civilian ship to take us back. And had to pay the fare back myself, and it had to be paid in dollars in the States. You couldn't pay with the play money over there in France.

So we stayed together for about six weeks. And this guy was real smart. We would go down to the PX, and you could buy money orders with French money. You could buy a hundred dollar money order with French francs, but it was cashable in dollars. And the money order comes with two parts, the part that's the money and the part that's the receipt. And if the guy that sold it to you was a civilian, French civilian, and he was running a black market operation where you buy the money order, pay for it, and you give it back to him and he gives you twice the value, two hundred, in francs. So we would go in every day and buy and sell a money order and double our money. And that paid for our hotel and taxis and running around. We didn't live high but we lived good.

Eventually our ship came and we took a train to La Havre. Cherbourg. And as we left. The ports were all blown up. Sunken ships left and right. Our ship was leaving. We looked across the fantail and there was, I think we saw HIS ship, the troop ship, first, and he was standing there waving at us. And we went by another ship, and there SHE was, on that ship, with a bunch of women. Both left at the same day. They went back, he was from Old English, Iowa. So when Margaret and I drove out to California, I looked on a map and I saw Old English, and I said, "Look, that's only a little way out of our way." It was about an hour's trip out of the way.

We drove over there and it was, his mother was there, and I asked for them, and she said, "That girl isn't going to stay in a place like Old English, Iowa. She thinks she's going to become a movie star in the United States and they're off in Hollywood." So she gave us a beautiful lunch and we took off and came to San Francisco, but you know, that's a long way down to Hollywood. So we never got to go down there.

And finally when we did, we looked them up, and they were still married. And I've never seen them since. That was the last time I remember seeing them. I've lost track of them completely.

JM: Well that's quite a story. QUITE a story.

GK: Yeah. It is, isn't it? That's quite an adventure. Yeah.

JM: So then.

GK: Now I'm in San Anselmo.

JM: Now you got to San Anselmo though your mother who rented a house there.

GK: She BOUGHT a house there.

JM: She bought a house there. And so you and Margaret moved in with your mother? Is that how you?

GK: No. We towed a trailer with us. We had a house trailer.

JM: And then you went to Alto.

GK: But I didn't have a car. I didn't have a car but I had the trailer and my mother's car. She flew out here with my brother.

JM: Oh, I see.

GK: And so I brought the car out for her. And we moved into the trailer park in Alto. And I already had a union card, which is another long story you don't want to hear. But I had by accident gotten that. And I wasn't a carpenter by ANY means. I mean, I went to trade school and I learned how to build a waste paper basket. I didn't know anything about building houses. I had a box full of tools and I had a union card.

So I had to go to work right away. I had a boy. The baby was born then. Billy was born in Yonkers. He was born in the same hospital that I was. And so I went back to work. And I couldn't keep a job longer than a day. Mostly if I got

there at eight o'clock in the morning, by noon they were handing me a check, saying, "Hit the road."

JM: Why was that?

GK: Because I didn't know what I was doing. I had NO idea, I had NO idea what I was doing. You know? It was absurd. I mean, they were telling me cut a board, and I, you know, I can cut a board. I mean, I wasn't COMPLETELY stupid. But I didn't know how to build a house. I didn't know what carpenters did. Drove nails into wood. But you know. But I could get a job. It was EASY to get the job, because they'd hire anybody that came along. But like I said, along about noon, they'd say, "Well, we're not THAT hard up. You know. You're gone."

Well, one night. And I was doing fine. I was able to live all right because I could get a days pay every day, pretty much. Some places I'd last more than a day. But I got to figuring it out, you know? And I thought, you know, you better LEARN something. Because this shortage of people is not going to be around forever.

I was driving home and they were just opening up Greenbrae. And it was about five o'clock at night. Everybody had gone home. And I saw the superintendent's shed, the little lumberyard there. And I dropped in and I said, "Hey, you looking for any carpenters?"

And he looked out the door and he said, "Yeah. You know any?"

I said, "Well, me."

He said, "Oh." He smiled and he says, "You a finish carpenter or a rough carpenter?"

And I said, "I'm a rough carpenter, and I don't know anything at all about it, but you know what? If you show me what to do, I'll be here every day. I'll work hard."

And he smiled and he said, "Well, that's refreshing. Almost everybody's got a BS story to give me, and you know, an old timer can just smell out another mechanic." And so. I lost my train of thought again.

JM: So that was in Greenbrae, you said?

GK: That was in Greenbrae. That's what it was. Okay. Greenbrae.

So I thought to myself, You know, I haven't given this guy any BS. And he says to me, "Well, leave your name and address and I'll call you."

And I thought, Yeah, sure you will. Yeah. I can just see you doing that.

And I started to leave. And he says, "Aren't you going to leave your name and address?"

And I said, "Oh yeah, sure. Here it is."

And sure enough. I got home a couple of nights later, and Margaret says to me, "Did you get fired again?"

And I said, "Well, yeah. But I'll get a job in the morning."

She said, "Well, there was a guy here looking for you. Had a job for you."

And I went back the next day, and Gordon Hancock(?) from Schultz Company was in the shed. I was there real early in the morning. He said, "Well, son, this is a union job, you know. Nothing starts here until eight o'clock. Not five minutes to eight. Eight o'clock."

So I said, "Well, that's okay with me."

So he said, "Look. Go across the street and start stripping those forms over there." And there's a job that I mean, any donkey could do. So I went over there, and I wanted to impress him so much. I wanted to show him what a hard worker I was, and I got a sledgehammer out of the tool shed, and I was just whaling back and forth, knocking everything into little splinters and getting that wood off those forms.

Somebody tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Son. You're not going to last till NOON doing that. Look how easy these things come off. You don't need this sledgehammer to do it."

And he showed me how to just walk ____ and the thing just falls apart.

So about noon, he comes over and he says, "Listen, young fellow. You can read blueprints, can't you?"

And I thought, Oh god, I'm going to lose another job. All I want to do is be the lowest man on the totem pole. Not make a lot of noise. Not be noticed. And that's not going to work. And.

JM: So did you have to read the blueprints?

GK: I can. I can read a blueprint. But I wasn't sure that I could. And so he hands me a set of prints and he says, "This is the house we're going to build, only it's going to be left instead of right." Means it's a mirror image.

So I walked around. And he wants me to lay out this house. The floors were all down and I'm supposed to lay out this house. I've got a picture of the house, but you have to put it up like this to make it right. So I'm walking around like this trying to make it hit the spot. And I'm scared to death. To lay out a house, you really have to know what you're doing. And I didn't. And I knew I didn't.

But you know. The superintendent. The next day I started to lay out a house and the framing foreman came around and he says, "Hey! Who told you to be layout man?"

"Well, Gordon did."

"Oh. Well. If Gordon did, that's _____. Well, hurry up. Get this laid out because my crew has to be down here to build it. You've got to lay it out. Hurry up. Do it fast."

Well, I didn't know how to do it fast. I was scared to death that if I put a mark down it would be the wrong place, and I'd fidget with it and mark again and measure and everything else. And finally the assistant superintendent showed up, and he said, "Who the hell hired you and told you you were layout man?"

"Gordon."

"Oh. Well, that's different."

And Gordon came over and he said, "Listen, _____. I got a feeling that if we teach him how to do everything, he'll do it our way. We won't have to be fighting with the people to do it. It'll only be our way."

And so he just held my hand and showed me how to do everything. Very patiently brought me through the whole process. Now, it didn't take very long before I was a GOOD layout man. If you can lay it out, anybody can build it. But it's the laying out that's the thing, and that was the start, that was how I got my start. I maybe couldn't drive nails as fast as somebody else but I could lay it out better than anybody else.

So that's how.

JM: That's how you got your building start.

GK: That's how I got my building start.

JM: Well, I know that, I remember seeing pictures in the History Room of that trailer park in Alto.

GK: I might have some of those. I'm not sure. I'm sure I do if I look for them.

JM: If you have pictures of early Mill Valley, we could copy. We have a process.

GK: Of course. I brought a lot of stuff here for you to look at.

JM: Oh great. That's terrific.

Well, I'd like to talk a little bit about. So you got to Mill Valley in 1946. That's a LONG time ago.

GK: Yeah, it is.

JM: That's sixty years. So how long was it before you were building your own houses? Because I remember talking.

GK: It was in the early '50s. About 1950. I was building. After I worked in Greenbrae for about three months, my mother was starting to build a house. I convinced her that I could build her a house. And I would hire the guys that I worked with all day long to come work for me on weekends. And the lumberyard that furnished the lumber, he noticed that I was an active little guy and that I was always in there every Friday night to have a big load of stuff delivered for Saturday morning. And he said, "Listen, Gerry."

JM: And what lumberyard was that?

GK: McCormick and Tucker. They're not here anymore. McCormick Tucker. Now this was Mr. Tucker. He had bought out McCormick and it was all his now. And he said, "Gerry, look." He said, he brought me out in his yard and he says, "You see this pile of lumber here?"

And it was kind of crappy looking. You know, a little crooked and maybe big knots and stuff. And he said, "I paid top dollar for that, but when people come in here, they select those out. They say, "Oh, I don't want that one.'" And so he said, "I could furnish you with all of this lumber, and you put up some land and we'll take this lumber and we'll build a house, and then we'll sell it unfinished. We'll put a stack of sheetrock in it. We'll frame it up, and sell it. Somebody will buy it. We'll split the money."

So I did it. I didn't have to put up any money. You know. And we got a lot for not much money down. Five hundred dollars, as a matter of fact.

JM: Where?

GK: In San Anselmo.

JM: In San Anselmo.

GK: Yep.

JM: Five hundred dollars down.

GK: Well, five hundred dollars was the price of the lot. And we got that fronted to us. Yeah.

JM: Amazing.

GK: We paid for the lot when the house was done and sold. So I actually didn't have to lay any money out of my pocket at all. And he furnished the windows and all this lumber and stuff. And that was the start. I got the building permit.

Well now, we got up in back of Tam High School, there was a gym teacher by name of. Gosh. I could have said it a second ago. Jerry...

No. All right. This guy, he was the gym teacher. It'll come to me later on. At Tamalpais High School. And he used to stand down there in the athletic field, look up at the hill in back of the school, and the lower part of the hill had a lot of houses on it. But the upper part of the hill was empty. And he said, "You know, those are all lots up there. It's all been subdivided. I'm going to start sending out postcards and letters out to all these people all over the United States and offer them a price for these lots. Because people are going to want that land after the war's over.

So he got control of a big percentage. Not all of it, but he got over half. And put some rough, bulldozed some streets in and he'd park his car out there on weekends and sell these lots off to people. And he'd seen me around, and he said, "Gerry, I'll sell you this lot down at 30 Morningside, and I'll sell it to you for nothing down and you can pay me a year later when you get the house built and financed."

I had NO idea how to finance anything or anything like that, but I just said, "Well, I can get the lot. I'll start there."

So I built the thing on weekends and evenings. And we took our trailer and we moved out of Alto, and I towed the trailer over the land in BACK of the lot. We didn't actually own it. You couldn't do it now because it's got houses on it, but it was just empty then. We just drove over it and parked the trailer. I'm sure it was illegal. On our lot there. And I built this BEAUTIFUL house there. It was the first one I ever built on my own. Of course, I got all my guys from work to come and work on weekends, and helped me put it up Saturdays and Sundays and stuff.

And I built it strictly with the idea of selling it. And Margaret kind of fell in love with it. We were living in this little dinky trailer, and now we had the baby. The baby was getting big. And so Margaret said, "Couldn't we move in that house?"

And I said, "Sure we can."

And by that time, though Jerry Windring(?), that was his name. Jerry Windring was the guy that was the school teacher. He fronted me a couple of other lots up on Midway Avenue. And I started to build, to design the house myself, and I built one that looked like a red barn. I thought it would look cute to have a red and white, with a gambrel roof on it and a hayloft door on the top and stuff. And it was SO popular, people would drive by, you know, and honk their horn and say, "Hey, that's great."

And I thought I was onto something. So the next thing, I got a lot on the Tiburon Blvd., but very close to the Mill Valley, to the strawberry area over there. And it was, you know, Tiburon Road was just two lanes and this HUGE big lot I got there, from Podesta Divers, deep sea divers in San Francisco. They sold it to me for fifteen hundred dollars, which was a LOT then. Lot of money. And nothing down and a year to build a house and get it sold. And I built another red barn there. And lo and behold, the San Francisco Chronicle put a half page picture of that red barn. It was really really picturesque thing there. I've got the newspaper down here. In the Sunday. Examiner or Chronicle, I'm not sure. I'm not sure anymore. It'll say on the paper.

And all of a sudden, you know, I couldn't have paid for that kind of publicity. All of a sudden, you know when I walked in the bank it was, "Oh, hi, Mr. Kott. We saw your house there in the Chronicle. Can we help you with anything?"

And the next thing you know I was borrowing money. And then I lost my job up in Greenbrae. They had a little recession, and they had built a huge number of houses there. They'd about developed all they wanted to. And I was the last person to get laid off up there. They had it down to assistant superintendent, the superintendent and me.

And then I got fired. It was just before Christmas. And I went to work for another contractor who was building the most beautiful houses you'd ever want to see. And he helped me a LOT in the style and design of things. And then I got hooked up through Jerry Windring with some other empty land and I was starting to build things. But I had no license.

And there was a guy that was kind of jealous of me because I was building a lot of stuff and it's a long story, but he turned me in to the union for building on weekends and evenings. You're not allowed to do. He turned me in to the State Contractor's License Board. He turned me in to the District Attorney's office in San Rafael for operating without a license. [End of recording]