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Jack Blanco – Interned in Germany during WWII

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HIST 155, Fall 2016 / Mr. Vance Gentry

Student Interviewer's Name: Vance Gentry
Interviewee Name: Jack Blanco

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview occurred on November 2, 2016 in McKee Library at Southern Adventist University, with solely the interviewer and interviewee in the room. The recorded interview lasted about one hour.

About Jack Blanco:

Born in 1929 in Chicago to a single mother, Jack Blanco travelled with his mother to Germany at a young age, where she left him to return to America. Circumstances surrounding World War II prevented him from returning, and he eventually ended up in an internment camp. This interview starts with his time in Germany before capture and goes to his return to the United States after the close of the war.¹

Interviewer: Vance Gentry (VG)

Interviewee: Jack Blanco (JB)

VG: Dr. Blanco, you were eight when you moved to Germany making that 1937, correct?

JB: No that was 1938

VG: '38

JB: when I was nine.

VG: Okay, nine years old, you moved to Germany.

JB: My mother went over there, she eh she was was an immigrant from Germany and she had been here in this country for 17 years and then she said I want to go back and se my parents, and you know, lets go together and meet your, you could meet your grandparents. I said "Fine." Yeah, so yeah, that's what it was, 1938, yeah when I was nine years old.

VG: Okay. What was your experience like living in Germany before you were captured? What was, what was your experience in Germany like?

JB: Well, uh, you know, short sentences, my grandfather lived in a small village in a section of Germany called Bavaria and he had a farm and of course farming in those days, you know, 19 uh 38, it was like farming in Abraham Lincoln's day. There was no machines.

¹ Information in this biography was informed by:

King, Jolena Taylor. *Jack—An Incredible Life*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2005.

Everything was done by hand, you know. And whether its taking care of the cattle or the uh whatever or feeding and um and of course, you know, I was born in Chicago, grew up in Chicago, and here I come to this little town out out in the in this little village. Oh wow! There's a blue sky, (laughing) instead of just skyscrapers, you know, and the sun is shining, and oh the animals. And oh I just loved it, you know. So, well we were going to stay there a couple months or maybe it was a month, I don't remember exactly and it was time for my mother to get back—yeah must of been about a month—time for my mother to get back to work cause she had saved up her vacation time to go over there, now she had to come back. And uhhm, so my grandfather looked at her and asked “Why don't you let this little skinny kid stay out of school for a year?” Okay, “I mean get some sunshine, develop some muscles,” and yeah. And so she said “Well (eh) let's ask him,” okay. Well now if you ask a nine-year-old if he wants to stay out of school for a year what is he going to say? “Of course.” Yeaah.

VG: Of course.

JB: Right. Well, and so um but then, you know, she had to leave... We had to get on an ox cart to go to the next town to catch the train and that's of course when it hit me. Because before I was born, my father left me. He was from Vienna, Austria. And um, and so I never knew of anyone that really loved me except my mother. And that, now she's gonna say goodbye, and I won't see her for a year. Oh I could hardly, you know, emotionally absorb that. And oh I-I-I said, she kissed me goodbye, and oh my word! I tell you you, I just cried... And then she got on the train and and they had all went out on the platform in the back and waved goodbye to me. Oh my word its just like taking a rubber band and stretching it and stretching it and all of a sudden, (makes clicking noise) it snaps! Now I didn't I-I refused to eat for three days. But of course finally hunger takes over.

VG: Wow. So...

JB: And then the-then the next year, when the year-year was over, and for me to come back to the States, that's when the war started and, I couldn't get back—all the borders were closed, okay. There as no Sound of Music going over to Switzerland.

VG: So when... uhh... What do you remember about the extent and the rate in which at which Nazism infected Germany? When you were living over there.

JB: Oh, well, uh, Bavaria the southern part of Germany, yeah, they were against Hitler, but then he got the labor unions to back him up, and so oh yeah. And all of Germany became, you know, under the control of Hitler. And everybody in the school, well I couldn't get back, so I went to uh... I-by that time I had learned the German language, and uh, you know, I went to school... My grandfather said, “Oh you gotta go to school.” And so I went to school. Well when you went to school in those days, you had to belong to the Hitler Youth. So, you know, you had to salute and give the Hitler sign and all that. And I'm not gonna demonstrate it (laughing). All right.

VG: No... I was gonna ask, actually ask you about that. Were you in the German Young People or the Hitler Youth? Uh my understanding is that the German Young People was for younger children and then y-you-you kind of—when you, I believe, thirteen, or around that age, you entered Hitler Youth. Which organization were you in? One was—forgive my German—Hitlerhugen (pronouncing German word), Hitler Youth, and-the-other was...Deutches...jungvolk (pronouncing German word).

JB: No, uh-I-wa-I-was in the younger group. The Hi-Hitler what (incomprehensible/is it) called?

VG: German Young People.

JB: German Young People, yeah.

VG: Okay.

JB: Yeah.

VG: Could you describe your experience in that

JB: Well, theres no outstanding experience except, you know, when you went to school, you had to belong to the German Young People, and uh, you know, you had to honor Hitler and you had to learn the Hi-Hitler sign, you know... salute and all that. But beyond that there was n-nothing more than that.

VG: So what age were you at this point... when you were in that?

JB: Well I was ten years old

VG: Okay

JB: And when I went there I was there from when I was ten till about I was about I think, yeah... thirteen.

VG: Do you remember them performing some sort of background check to determine your ethnicity?

JB: Well, no, not uh-uh, not at first, but came that... it went only up to um the I think it was about the sixth grade. Ummm so um that would make about twelve years old or something. Somewhere in there.

VG: I don't know.

JB: Yeah.

VG: So, then you applied and you thought.

JB: Well, well no. Yeah then I applied.

VG: To aeronautical engineering school, right?

JB: Well, I wanna continue my education and my grandfather said I don't wanna hold you back, you know, and so um sure y-if... you need to go away to school, you know, to continue your education, that's fine.

VG: At what point did you realize that you had been tricked into going to a-a labor camp—a slave labor camp?

JB: Well, let me add one sentence here real fast. So I filled out the application, yeah, to go on to education—get more education. Eventually my goal was to get to become an engineer. Yeah. Go into engineering. So I filled it out and send it in. And about a month later I got a reply, said you've been accepted in the, you know, in the school. I don't know what they called it, the (incomprehensible/possibly "advanced") or whatever, in the school and we want you to come to Berlin. (incomprehensible). And so I said goodbye to my grandfather and... got on the train and took the train to Berlin, yeah. When I got to Berlin, they said, well, you actually need to go on to Koenigswusterhausen, okay. Now I don't know whether you got the spelling correct there or not. Koenigs-swusterhausen.

VG: (Tells JB he has spelling and shows it to JB; JB says its right)

JB: Anyway, and uh and so um I took the-a yeah they put me on another train or I took another train—went on to Koenigswusterhausen and as we going out there more and more people were getting off and finally... got to Koenigswusterhausen. And say okay, "To Koenigswusterhausen," you know how they do it. And then I got off and I looked around and there was somebody that came walking up to me and he had a visor cap on and he had a brown shirt on, and he had an armband—a swastika armband on—and long black boots, you know, all... And he says "Oh," called me name, "Are you so-and-so?" "Yes." He said, "Come follow me." (incomprehensible) ok. So I went and followed him and we walked couple blocks this way, couple blocks that way and there was the barbed wire. And there were the dogs and there were the guards.

VG: Was (JB makes slight noise) that the point that you knew? When di w-at what point in this process did you think, "I've been tricked?" (JB starts to talk an VG interrupts) Or w-or what did you think?

JB: (laughing) I don't remember what I thought; I was just sorta—you're just sorta numb. Okay? Ya know, yeah.

VG: Mm. So, what did a typical day at the the Koenigswusterhausen camp look like for you?

JB: Okay, let me explain, okay, first of all. Now let me backtrack—and I shoulda given this to you at the introduction, okay. There's a difference between labor camp, slave labor

camp, and concentration camp. Kay? Now we use these names interchangeably, okay, and so but people don't have correct understanding of what we're taking about. Now concentration camp, y-you know about Corrie Ten Boom—in concentration camp, okay? She was in concentration camp, and I don't know whether you know her story or not, but they—they put you in there basically to exterminate you. Okay? The en-end result is uh, yeah you have maybe to do a little cleanup and keep things... but then they'll put you in the gas chamber and pshoop! Thats it. Okay? Now slave labor camp is similar to concentration camp, okay? The only difference is they work you to death... And when you collapse—and I've seen them collapse—they carry you out and that's the end. Okay? So that the end result is the same. Concentration camp, slave labor camp... Labor camp um is um um... Sometimes its m-its used in a sense—simply they restrict your mobility. Okay? And, yeah they may give you a a meager ration or something, but they don't work you to death in-in the some camps that we call just labor camp, okay? Now during-during World War II, ya know, the Japanese were put in a labor camp, okay. And that's what they called it. Well, they didn't work em to death till they collapsed... they just restricted their mobility... yeah. But umm, the camps that I was in a w-would be more in the category of slave labor camp.

VG: Okay. So they-the intention was to work you to death?

JB: To get as much work out of you as-as they can, yeah.

VG: So what did a typl-typical day there look like?

JB: (interrupting) Well, the first one, the Koenigswusterhausen.

VG: (interrupting) Yes.

JB: one was um the focus there was—is we had to work on the farm to raise food for the German army, Wehrmacht. (VG interrupting: okay) Since I was a farm boy, okay, they put me there with others, alright. And of course um, yeah, you had to work ten, twelve hours a day, you know, and of course, ya know, y-your're put in a barracks, and with bunk beds and all that stuff, and uh, oh yeah you're infested with fleas and bugs and-and all kinds of stuff, ya know and then they take you into a, um delousing ag-aaaa. What should I say—delousing chamber, okay? I-I don't want to call a gas chamber because that's the idea you-you die there. Now this wasn't to-to kill you—the was simply to delouse you and clean you up or whatever from al kinds of bugs and whatever in order for you to get—to get more work out of you.

VG: So, was the farm that you worked on located close to the camp—did you walk to it? Did they bus you to it? How did you get from where you stayed to...

JB: (interrupting) No, no... No we-we walked to it. It was within that same general area. Yeah.

VG: Okay. But it was outside of the confines of the camp?

JB: Yeah, it was outside the confines of the camp.

VG: Okay.

JB: Umm. (Pausing) I need to clarify that because I don't want you to misunderstand. Okay? That whole large farm area was the camp. Okay? It was a camp to work the farm (thumping table) to feed-bring for food for the German army.

VG: So the farm was inside the camp?

JB: Yeah. I don't remember ever walking outside the camp, no.

VG: Okay. Okay. So, while you were at the first camp, could you describe any of the acquaintances you made? It-did you-it sounded like you had two main friends.. at the-was this at the first camp... a Russian... and...

JB: No, that was-that was not at the first camp.

VG: So at the first camp...?

JB: I don't remember any that I had.

VG: Okay.

JB: No. I mean we were all (blowing noise)... It-it you're just there and its a matter of existence, ya know, and work, and-and um they had us dig air-raid shelters. Because by that time the Allies were bombing Germany, okay? And had to dig air raid shelters, and sort of like a-um what should I say, dig in the ground and put two by fours up. If I can use that... or wood supports up and cover it with dirt. It ba-basically is supposed to protect you from-from flying shells, you know, from—I shouldn't use the word shells—but flying fragments, yeah.

VG: So what kinds of people did you share the camp with?

JB: Well, let me finish one sentence there. Yeah, and I remember one night, uh, yeah we were, ya know, called out of-out of bed and yeah we need to get in the a—need to get in these air raid shelters because the Allies are bombing. And so we got in there and sure enough, ya know we heard the Allies, uh-um, planes flying overhead, and the bombs coming down—ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ (makes exploding noise) ya know, zzzzzzz (makes smaller exploding noise). And then all of a sudden everything was quiet. Oh... No. And then we hear a lone bomber who had lost ya know, his... got separated somehow from-from his squadron, ya know. And he's quickly trying to get rid of his l-loads of bombs so he can catch up with his buddies. And um... so we all of a sudden... it was quiet for a little while, a second or whatever, a couple minute... And then, we hear this-this bomb, ya know, this lone um plane dropping his bombs, ya know (makes exploding noises and thumps table).

Okay? And they come closer and closer and closer until the—you know—the ground shaking. And all of the sudden, quiet. He had gotten of all his bombs. And then of course we were allowed to come out of the air raid shelter and you know, and looked and and-and some of us went and paced off the distance of those bombs (thumping table) that he was dropping. You know, at regular distances. One more bomb would have been an direct hit on our air raid shelter (VG: Wow.) and I wouldn't be here.

VG: What um, how did you feel during the bombings knowing that they were Allied bombers and that you were an American, but yet you were... How di-what-how did that make you feel, uh, as you went through that experience?

JB: (pause) Boy, I'm trying to recall how I felt! All I know is my life was preserved... you know, one more bomb and I would of been gone!

VG: I mean, did it-did it... were you happy that the bombers were up there aside from the fact that they were threatening you life? (JB makes noise) Or were you upset that they were there...

JB: No, I tell you I don't know. I mean all I know is a-your-y-you know what's going on around you, and you know, I didn't have any thoughts or anything else, you know. (VG: Okay.) Yeah.

VG: And this was at the Koenigswusterhausen camp (JB interrupting: That's right.) that this happened at. Okay. So, what kinds of people shared this camp with you—were there... you know, the Nazis interned a lot of different kinds of people—homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Poles—what kinds of people do you remember were at the camp with you?

JB: I don't remember because, you know, it's a matter of existence. And so you don't ask any questions—theres hardly any free time at all. You know, and or hardly any time to-to really associate together. You know? I mean they work you to death—now not to death—but they work you as hard as they can and when ah, you know, when the workday is over I mean you're just exhausted... you collapse in your bunk.

VG: Uh, did you have any interaction with members of the SS... at the camp?

JB: No.

VG: None of the camps.

JB: Not directly.

VG: Any of the camps?

JB: Later.

VG: Later. Okay. At what point-at one point you were transferred to a camp near Leipzig, correct?

JB: Yeah.

VG: And that was—was that just a direct transfer from...

JB: Koenigswusterhausen... Uh, we were um, how many um, were transferred, that I don't know. All I know is there were a number of us who were um marched to the railroad station. And got on a train and were taken to Leipzig. Okay. Now, all I know is Leipzig, even today, is a-uh you know, well known city. And right now the the camp that was there was uh—what should I say—uh demolished and there are memorials there... for where the camp was, and you'll see that in the video that I showed you² because a couple a years ago we went back there to visit.

VG: Do you remember the name of the camp itself?

JB: All it-it was... it was Leipzig. That's all I know that we called it is Leipzig camp.

VG: Ho...

JB: Th-th-the city just like Chattanooga. ...its Chattanooga. ...was it specific? Not-not that I know—just called Leipzig.

VG: How did the experience at this camp differ from Koenigswusterhausen (apparently stumbling over name)?

JB: Well in this camp umm, we had to um... (pause) No... In this camp... (pause) I never actually got into the camp.

VG: Okay.

JB: Cause as we were, you know, we were marched to the train, the train got there, and we're taken off the train and we were marching towards the gate that goes into the camp. And um, as we were marching in... all of the sudden... God just reached down and pulled me out of the lineup and deposited me way out in the field. Okay. Now in the book it says, you know, that I escaped, and in one sense it's true. But the specifics of it is God took me out, okay, and deposited me in the field—just like what happened to Philip—in the Bible.

VG: A translation?

JB: He was, you know, giving Bible studies to the eunuch—from Ethiopia—and then the-he baptized the eunuch and then God picked him up and deposited him in the city of Azotus.

VG: So you don't remember moving between the two different locations?

² probably referring to *The Jack Blanco Story*

JB: No! Just phft—all of a sudden I was standing out in the middle of the field, and I was looking and way off in the distance there was the barbed wire and um, ya know, guard dogs and whatever goes with a camp, and guards but I was way out in the field.

VG: And you had been—where had you been before?

JB: I was in the lineup going to ready to walk into the gate (emphasizing gate) of the camp.

VG: So you were closer and then you were further away?

JB: Oh absolutely—I was way out in the field.

VG: Wow.

JB: Yeah

VG: What did you do then? What... where'd you go?

JB: Well, then, I finally got a, you know, my-my bearings together—I knew where Leipzig was and so I made my way back to my grandfather's farm, you know.

VG: you were really only in two different camps.

JB: No I went... I was in a third one.

VG: Well, y-you were in Koenigswusterhausen, you were sent to Leipzig (JB: Yeah.), but you never went in Leipzig (JB: No, no-) and then you went to...

JB: Begnitz.³

VG: Yes. So you were only interned in two different camps.

JB: Yeah. From that standpoint.

VG: Okay.

JB: Yeah.

VG: But you were sent to three.

JB: Yeah.

VG: Okay.

³ Modern spelling is possibly Pegnitz. Spelling given by Dr. Blanco (Begnitz) will be used in this oral history.

JB: Now what happened in Leipzig, uh—to add a footnote here—is that um as the Allies were approaching, okay—coming up into Germany, okay, and approaching Leipzig, okay, what the Nazis did is they um—what word should I use—they gathered together or herded a-as many of the inmates as they could—almost all of them—into this one large building—huge building—and set it on fire. And that’s what woulda happened to me!

VG: But you had been...

JB: Well, you would have burned up.

VG: But you had been removed.

JB: Yeah. The Lord saved me.

VG: Wow. (Pause) So...

JB: Then when I got back to my grandfather’s farm, he hadn’t seen me you know for a couple years and then—oh, you know, there were no cell phones and all that stuff back there that we have today... And he said, “Oh, were have-were have you been—you look so skinny, so thin” and all that ya know... “sit down—have a meal” my grandmother prepared a big, old, German farm meal—oh wow—that was fantastic. And then the next morning, and—and my grandfather always called me “Son”—and he said “Son, you gonna have to turn yourself in. If the Nazis know that I’m harboring a fugitive (thumping table), they gonna come and kill me and take away the farm. And that’s gonna wipe out the family.” ...so I went and I turned myself in and you know its funny Vance, but I don’t remember any details o-on how I did that. It’s just sort of vague. All I know is, that I was—turned myself in and I was taken to Begnitz, which is near Nuremberg.

VG: Could you describe your thought process surrounding your decision to turn yourself in? Do you remember anything about what you were thinking, you know, was that a very very hard decision?

JB: (interrupting) Well its a matter of-matter of saving my-my grandfather, and the family. Sure. Cause all the borders were closed, you know, uh, you know there was no—what should I say—Sound of Music going over to Switzerland (chuckles). Yeah. (pause) And then in um Begnitz, the labor camp there—and that was a labor camp—not just an ordinary, I mean that was a slave labor camp. Not just an ordinary labor camp.

VG: Was Koenigswusterhausen a labor camp or a slave labor camp?

JB: I said it would be closer to a slave labor camp.

VG: So they were both.

JB: Yeah.

VG: Okay. So (JB at same time/unclear: Sure.) back to...

JB: Because they worked us to death on the one at Koenigswusterhausen, yeah.

VG: So back to... Be-Pegsnitz?

JB: Huh?

VG: Beeznitz—how do you...

JB: Begnitz. B-E-G-N-I-T-Z (spelling out).

VG: So back to that—you ended up there after you turned yourself in, correct?

JB: Yeah.

VG: And... how did this one differ from the first—how were you

JB: Well this was different because we had to work in ammunition factories. (pause) Making, ya know, stuff for the German army, ya know, different ones had different jobs, and so I uh I worked on some kind of machine that did—(thumping noise) made something for the German army. Yeah.

VG: What was a typical day like there?

JB: Well I'm coming to that, yes. Okay. But let me say this first. This was a slave labor camp. Because I know, and I saw some that collapsed...from overwork. And they picked them up and carried them out. And that was it. (pause) Okay?

VG: Never saw them again.

JB: Never saw them again. So the end result of a slave labor camp was the same as a concentration camp, (thumping table) okay. Uhh the um... the typical day was they get up very early—I don't remember maybe six o'clock or so—and...we were herded out on the parade ground and-and we heard propaganda and all that, ya know, and uh and did that—the same in the evening after the day was over, and heard all this propaganda and um also heard how the Americans were mistreating Germans that had immigrated to America, and so on-so forth. And my, I tell ya—and knew that wasn't true. And um I want to tell you the lesson that I learned there Vance, was, okay, you can't believe everything you hear. Alright? And whether its propaganda or (incomprehensible) ya know, you hav-you have to set your mind *against it* because if you just stand there and take everything in that you hear, okay, you may end up believing it. So I had to set my mind against it. Yeah. But anyway and what-the diet that we had... In the morning we had a cup of black coffee and one (thumps table) slice of bread. At noon (thumps table) we had a... a small bowl of watery

soup—literally watery soup. Two slices of bread. Okay. And, in the evening for evening yeah we had a cup of coffee and a slice of bread, and that was it.

VG: So did you live, work and eat all in the same compound?

JB: Yup. Right.

VG: ...how many people would you estimate were there with you?

JB: Oh man. I don't know. A lot of people. That's all I know.

VG: Thousand? Five-thousand?

JB: Well I don't think it was that big but... thousand for sure it seems like. I don't know.

VG: Okay. So... was this... how were you treated at this camp—by the Nazis?

JB: Well as I mentioned already, ya know, it uh uh the food was scarce and you had to do your work and you were expected to do it and so on... yeah mhm.

VG: Was there any physical abuse?

JB: No.

VG: Okay. Could talk some about your decision to join the German military? Was this... did that decision come out of your time at Begnitz (VG and JB saying "Begnitz" at the same time)? It did.

JB: Yeah.

VG: So you joined from that camp. You were in that camp and you joined...

JB: Well I don't like to use the word joined. Ummm... I had two friends in that camp. One was um originally from Russia and I guess—I don't know, don't remember, ya know whether he was captured or whatever, but anyway. He was, ya know, my age at that time which mus-must about what (incomprehensible: possibly "was I") fifteen or something like that. And sixteen. Um yeah one's sixteen. Because um and the other one was a German political prisoner, okay, and we were good friends and um, Hitler, near the end of the war Hitler was getting desperate for military personnel. So he was drafting anybody over sixteen, and also over sixty. Okay. And, uh, me and my two friends we were over sixteen. Okay. And um so um... they drafted us. Okay. So its not that I *joined*, okay. I mean I had no choice—what am I going to do? Say no?

VG: (interrupting) So did they—did they force you to join?

JB: Well, because I was over sixteen—(thumping table) that was the law of Germany at that time. Cause we were over sixteen... Anybody over sixteen was-was pulled into the army—maybe that was a better expression.

VG: Cause I read that it was... in the book I was reading (referring to biography *Jack—An Incredible Life*) it sounded, from my memory more like a decision—it was “you can have more food if you join,” but you didn’t have to.

JB: No that’s what, that’s what we thought. Ohhh yeah we’re not gonna resist, okay. T-t- there is a positive factor to this and the positive factor is what? We’re gonna have more food (thumping table).

VG: So you were forced but you thought, it’s okay because we’ll have more food (seems to thump table).

JB: Yeah that’s right.

VG: Is that accurate?

JB: Yeah.

VG: But you couldn’t really say no?

JB: Well what do you th-what do you think—if I would of said no or we—the three of us woulda said no. When Hitler has a law over sixteen—anyone over sixteen is-is drafted.

VG: True.

JB: Yeah.

VG: So, wer-were you then...

JB: So, you know, the guard comes in, and so okay, “You, you, and you. Come with me.” So what’d you do? Say no?

VG: No.

JB: No, no right (both chuckling). And so you follow him and they were taken to a camp, yeah. And we were givinga-given uniforms and that was a-a laughing thing because, I mean we were so small and skinny, and these they gave us were so big—I mean... What kind of picture did we make? Ya know. And as we were marching into camp and... had—I don’t know—a week training or something like that, in how to use hand grenades and how to use, ya know, machine guns or whatever.

VG: So the training was only about a week?

JB: Yeah, it wasn't very much. Ya know, maybe it coulda been ten days—I don't remember exactly. And I think it was about a week. And um, but anyway we (incomprehensible) marching us, ya know with some other fellas, and-and marching in and here we march as we a walk towards the a training ground, ya know we march back past these German veterans who are-are getting medical treatment in this building, okay. And they looked at us and laughed. I mean these little guys are gonna try to win the war? Oh my word c'mon. Hahaha. So anyway, yeah we had trainings in—in hand grenades and guns and bazookas. That's what they were called in those days. That was anti- anti-tank um—(thumping noise) what should I say—devices. Yeah.

VG: Were you considered part of the Wehrmacht?

JB: I never thought of that...I guess so. Yeah. Part of the Wehrmacht.

VG: Was that th-the, what you were in?

JB: Yeah well, oh yeah. When I was in—when the Hitler put the order in anyone over sixteen is drafted (thumping table)—drafted into the Wehrmacht. Sure. ...yeah we had, ya know, German uniforms and so on—even though they didn't fit us, or we didn't fit them (chuckling).

VG: Where were you sent?

JB: And then, and then after we had the training, the three of us—there's another miracle—the three of us were taken back to camp.

VG: The same one?

JB: Back to the same camp. You know, the-the labor—slave labor camp

VG: Begnitz.

JB: Yeah Begnitz, yeah. And the guard said “okay”—or the guy that took us back said, “Okay, just stay here until we call you.” Well, I mean, the-the guard of the ca- the guards for the camp—they saw us now as part of the Wehrmacht. Okay. So they trusted us. So sometimes, ya know, they were called away from the gate for some problem, ya know, and they said, “Oh just stay here and keep your eye on things,” ya know, make sure nobody escapes and so on. And that happened a couple a times so he trusted us, ya know. And so one day he again was called away and the three of us stood there and looked around and there was nobody close by, and... the guard had gone, and then we looked, ya know, outside the gate, and—(changing tone) oh there's a woods. That woods isn't very far away. I bet we could make a dash for that and get away! Ohhhh, yeah okay, next time. Went up there, ya know, associated with the guard, and looked around and he was called away again. And so this time when he was called away, we looked around—nobody else nearby—okay, there are the woods (makes wooshing noise)—we took off. Okay.

VG: And this is you and the same two friends—the German political prisoner and the Russian?

JB: Yeah. We took off. And um... Then when we got into the woods, um we had planned for this and so we had our civilian clothes—if I would call them that—ya know, underneath we purposely put ‘em on underneath under our uniform, and so we got into the woods—we took off our uniforms. Okay. And threw ‘em away. And-a and so the one-the first night out, cause knew the direction that we’re going—and wanted to go, and so the first night out, it was d-it was so dark! Oh my land! And, all of the sudden um... ya know, we hear this voice, “Halt!” What? And we looked around. And there-there-there was a-a ya know, there was a German guard. “Halt!” Ya know, “Where are you going?” ...he talked German, we could understand German—we talked German. And, “Where are you going?” Well, we said “we’re displaced persons.’ Ya know, “We’re going home—were going here-there (trails off),” okay. He says “Okay” and then as we look in-in-into the dark a little more, there we saw a whooole—a-a whole detachment of German troops sleeping. They were retreating from the Allies. Okay. And um we had wanted to go through the city of Nuremberg, but when we got close to Nuremberg, um the city was on fire. So we didn’t go there—we went, ya know, stayed... came back to the woods and stayed close to the woods. And that’s when the Germans stopped us. Yeah.

VG: So how long were you in the German military before you escaped? You were trained for about a week, and then how long were you in before you...

JB: Oh, it wasn’t very long. I would say from the time we were...forced to go into the-a—or drafted into the German military... um... to the time that we escaped it couldn’t have been longer than a month or so.

VG: Okay. So thought the war, how much did you struggle with country to identif-...

JB: I mean I was-I was in the camp longer but I’m talking about from the time they drafted us, yeah.

VG: Yes.

JB: So when-when people say, well, ya know, um yeah, “Jack Blanco *joined* the German military,” that is incorrect.

VG: You don’t like that.

JB: No. No.

VG: You were conscripted.

JB: I-I don’t correct people—I don’t want to get into a discussion over it, but I’m telling you the facts. Yeah.

VG: You were forced to join.

JB: As I remember. Sure.

VG: You were forced to join.

JB: (talking at same time) O-over sixteen. Yeah, you can check it out yourself. Towards the end of the war, he a—Hitler drafted those over sixteen and over sixty.

VG: Over or under sixty?

JB: Over sixty.⁴

VG: So throughout the war, how much did you struggle with which country to identify with—being American yet living in Germany for a while before the war. Was that ever a conflict in your mind or were you 100% American, in between—what-what was your thought on that?

JB: Repeat the question.

VG: Throughout the war, how much did you struggle with which country to identify with—Germany or America, being American.

JB: I'm an American!

VG: So you were American 100%.

JB: Absolutely.

VG: Okay.

JB: Okay! Sure, I mean let me go back to the camp in Koenigswusterhausen (tapping noise on table). yeah. In the late 30's and—well in the early 40's—that-that whole era right in there, boxing was the in thing, okay. And the American champion was Joe Lewis—black fella. And a the German champion was Max Schmeling I think. I may have—I think saying it right, Max (thumping table), I think it was Max Schmeling. And Joe Lewis defeated him, okay. And of course a-ya know, a-G-Germans, Hitler thought of the Germans as a super-race. And here this black American defeats this super-champion, from Germany. Oh and of course the, ya know, the Germans were all upset about it and so in that first camp where we were in, uh, the um, uh guards thought well, ya know, let's have a little fun sometimes and um... have some boxing tournaments. And so, ya know, when uh... they would take us and put us into—well not a ring—but I mean they would just have all the other inmates stand around in a circle (thumping noise). And then they would match us up, ya know. Now this was not just a play-act, because they would match you up by weight, okay... and if you were able to knock the other guy down, and you were still able to stand up (thumping table) after you got hit and all that, okay—you got more food. So what kind of

⁴ Under sixty.

fight do you think this was, just play-acting? No. Okay. Well the thing is, when he matched me up with...this guy my size, I knocked him down—I was still standing. So he put me in with another...was a little bigger...

VG: Right afterwards?

JB: Not right afterwards. Maybe the next time around or whatever. I don't remember... But anyway umm and I did the same to him. I knocked him down; I was still standing (thumping table). Okay. And so he put me in with the next one, which I guess I would—if you want to use some terms—I guess I was called, not a lightweight, I was like a flyweight (slaps table, laughing) and then, ya know, put in with a lightweight if you want to use those terms, and finally of course middle-weight, and umm and it was the same thing. I knocked the other guy down and um, ya know, and I was still standing. You know obviously it didn't happen right away when ya in-when ya in a fight that you hit him and he knocks down—there's... ya know, a real fight going on, because you get more food. And so then the um, uh, the... (slaps table) company... the guard in charge—I was gonna say company commander but that's the wrong term. But um, anyway the camp... the guy in charge of the camp—the German guy in charge of the camp, okay. He put on the gloves! And he came into this...ring. And he beat me to a pulp. I wasn't long. I mean this German, um uh—what should I say—guard? I mean with this little guy—I mean c'mon, give me a break—I couldn't stand up against him. I mean some big fast blows and I'm on the ground. Okay. And I still remember looking, opening my eyes, my face all bloody and looking at him—the boots, his boots straddled over me, ya know. Okay, and he's looking down at me—you know the thought that came to my mind Vance? Um, yeah—you don't like Americans. (pause) Because—Joe Lewis beat their champion? Okay. And you can kill me, but you can't kill my spirit. *I am still an American!*

VG: Wow.

JB: Yup. (slapping table noise)

VG: Wow.

JB: Well that was up in Koenigswusterhausen. So that—we jumped back on that but- (VG: Yes.) anyway come back to the Begnitz, yeah and the escape and all that.

VG: (somewhat interrupting) So, coming back to that then—so you escaped, eventually you ended up at a repatriation camp, right?

JB: Oh from, from Begnitz, well yeah we escaped and took off our uniforms and-and so on, yeah. And we were stopped by the guard, ya know

VG: Then you continued on home.

JB: And he asked us questions—where are you from, and so on. W-We're displaced persons, ya know, and so on. Obviously we're not gonna tell him that we were... ya know,

inmates (chuckles). He said “okay, well—yeah that’s fine”—ya know, and of course we were in our civilian clothes and we looked like, uh, ya know, young farm boys. And he said, “Stay off the road. Because as soon as it gets light, the American planes are gonna strafe, and they gonna shoot anything that moves.” Okay. And sure enough, okay, as we were—daylight came, we got off tha-that road. Okay. No doubt. And then of course, what happened is the three of us separated—the Russian went obviously towards-toward the east, and then we—the German and I—we came across (thumping table) where he lived, stopped at his house, and oh my word, yeah. His mother gave us—oh was so glad to see him—and gave us a big meal and so one and, yeah. And so then—he stayed there obviously and I went on by myself. Okay. And uh... as I went through the woods and I was going through the woods of course the American tanks were pushing in, ya know, and um, this was a sort of with smaller trees. Well, with a tank pushing in, with the smaller trees, there’s no problem, ...ya know, push the trees down and keep going. Well anyway, as-a they went by, I came out to a clearing and I was up high, and I looked down on the road, and there were American GIs in trucks, okay being hauled...in. Okay, and one guy looks up at me and sees this little, well to his mind I guess this little farm boy, sitting up on the cliff and looking down at him and he looks up there and he goes like this (makes thumbs up sign). Oh my word Vance! I tell ya did that give me a thrill! That-w-I-was—in my mind I was back in America! Wheeeyyyyyyy yeah (making tumbs up sign)! Oh my word. Yeah. Then of course I finally made it to my grandfather’s village and-and was welcomed with open arms and so on. Yeah.

VG: So, after that—after a period of time—how long of a period of time was it that you ended up at a repatriation camp? How long until you... ended up there?

JB: Umm... At least a couple a months, because I’ll tell ya what happened. Umm, ...after the Americans occupied that part of Germany, ya know, I turned myself into-to the Americans and said ya know, my name and so on. The problem is I haven’t spoken English for eight years. Now you don’t speak something for eight years and—you don’t hear it for eight years, what happens?

VG: You forget it.

JB: That’s right. And uh, so the German guy... the American guy who could talk German he asked me, ya know, my name and all that and I told him I was born in Chicago and this and that. And um here I couldn’t even talk English. Okay. He says, “Look, just go back to the farm.” In other words, you’re just a little farm boy trying to get to America. Ya know, just go back to the farm. So I went back to the farm, and um I think about maybe a couple a weeks or a m-I don’t think it was a month, but couple weeks, month later, ya know... Ya know, after all these years, I mean yeah you’re talking about, ya know, what? Seventy years ago? (incomprehensible) can’t remember every little detail (chuckles). Um... Anyway, but um... I think it was about a month or so later—a couple weeks later... the German mailman... in this little village... brings—delivers a letter to my grandfather’s house. And it’s a letter from my mom in Chicago. And she says, “Where have you been? We tried to contact you. We contacted the Red Cross. They don’t know where you are. We gave donations to the Red Cross to help them find you. They can’t find you.” You know

and she's going on and on. And... Oh my word! So I took that letter to, ya know the American authorities, and I says here's a letter from my mom in Chicago. Oh they said, "Sit down, sit down. We'll check it out." I sat there—I still remember this—I sat there for about three hours. Man! I didn't n-what was gonna happen. And they finally came back and says, "We checked it out. It is correct. ...go back to the farm." So I went back to the farm and I was there maybe another month or so and then they the said "okay, c'mon" and then they called me into the repatriation camp. Yeah.

VG: What (coughs) was it like at the repatriation camp? How long were you there? What kinds of people did you share the camp with...

JB: Well, it was, ya know, um... mostly people of course from America, ya know, and um (sigh) but boy- We had good food, and every day they would put our names on the bulletin board to let us know who will be taken to um Bramenhofen, which is the port there where ships were stationed. Bramen (spelling it out)—B-R-E-M-E-R... (mumbling to self) Bramenhofen—H-O-F-E-N. You'll have to check the spelling. And put the names there... ya know, which people are gonna be shipped back for the states. And of course every day I went up there and... checked for my name. And so- How long I was in there I really don't remember.

VG: Okay.

JB: But then, one day my name was on there and they put us on the train, with—some others and took us to Bramenhofen, put us on an American transport, okay, and shipped back to America. And there I saw the Statue of Libertyyyyy. I had chills from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet! Home free, Vance!!! Home free!! (slapping noise). Okay. No- you don't know what freedom is until you don't have it! (pause) Freedom. Yeah, okay? And looking back yeah, no more barbed wire, nor more dogs, nothing. Home free. Yeah. And then of course um, my mother, ya know, came... took a train from Chicago to New York, to meet me there and umm... (laughing) One little footnote—I gotta—funny because this... this was—I think it was at Ellis Island... or something, where they took us all-got us off the boat, and then I got a phone call from my aunt who lived in New York. And—said well ya know—your mother hasn't come but I'll send-I'll send your cousin to come and pick you up. Well they handed me this phone—now I-I had-I hadn't used the phone for almost, ya know, eight or ten years. And they hand me this phone, ya know, with this long neck, those old phones with the long neck, and the hook on the side? Well they hand that to me—the lady hands that to me—"You got a phone call." Okay. So I take the ya know, the-the hearing one that hooks on the phone, and I thought that was the one to speak in. And then I put the other long-handle one on my ear (chuckling). She said, "No, you got that...mixed up"

VG: So you had it backwards.

JB: Had it backwards. It's the way-other way around. Anyway my cousin came and picked me up and then, ya know, and then after that next day or so my mother came and yeah (slaps table). So that's the story.