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Walter Baumhardt Memoir

B327. Baumhardt, Walter (1914-1993)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 30 min., 7 pp.

GERMAN-AMERICANS PROJECT

Baumhardt, German-American, discusses attitudes toward Germans during WWII while in the Army, and the treatment he received because of his parentage. He also discusses his experiences as a translator for German prisoners of war, and visits to Germany after the war.

Interview by Leslie Leamons, 1972

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Tape also contains Rocky Schoenrock interview

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WALTER BAUMHARDT MEMOIR

German-Americans Project

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Walter Baumhardt Memoir -- Archives, University of Illinois at Springfield

PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by Leslie Leamons for the Oral History Office on March 1, 1972. Daniel Horton edited the transcript.

Walter Baumhardt was born in Logan County, Illinois. His parents had immigrated to the United States from Germany and he learned to speak German as a boy. During World War II Mr. Baumhardt served in the U. S. Army, first in the Pacific and later as an interpreter in a prisoner of war camp in Michigan. As an American of German descent Mr. Baumhardt was interested in the reaction of Americans to Germany and German-Americans during the years of World War II.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Walter Baumhardt, March 1, 1972, Rochester, Illinois.

Leslie Leamons, Interviewer.

Q. How long have you lived in Springfield?

A. Since 1945 when I got out of the Army. In the Rochester area, east of Springfield.

Q. Where did you live before that?

A. Logan County, Illinois. In the town of Mt. Pulaski.

Q. When did your family come to the United States?

A. My father came in 1910 and my mother came in 1897.

Q. Did they come over from Germany?

A. From Germany.

Q. Do you remember any of the German restaurants around town in the pre-war period, pre-World War II?

A. No. They had one of them, but there are more German restaurants now, since the War, than there was before the War.

Q. Do you remember any special ones then?

A. I don't remember what the name was, I know the German menu that they had.

Q. I was just wondering where they were and perhaps what they served.

A. Well, I wasn't too well acquainted around Springfield before the War, just after the War when I lived nearby.

Q. Do you recall your feelings toward Germany just before we declared war?

A. Well, just before we declared war, I was already in the Army, but we kind of watched the progress of the war starting in 1939. We were amazed as everyone else at what a powerful war machine that they had built up, and how they went through France with such ease, in a few weeks, where in the other war, World War I, it took four years and they still lost it. My father, he was quite interested in it and was astonished as to how the war turned out.

Q. What are your earliest recollections of Adolf Hitler?

A. Well, that was I guess around 1933 or a few years before that, we read about it in the papers—how he had come to power in 1933. Later on, we learned how at first he really helped the Germans; there was a lot of unemployment and beggars in the street, and he put people to work, took the beggars off the street, made every factory that employed ten persons, for every ten persons employed they had to take one unemployed war veteran that was on relief and put him to work. So everyone had a job and then everyone had money and they started being able to eat better; but all the time he was building up a war machine and gradually drafting the population for the army. Of course, they didn't seem to care because they had always wanted to have another army, I guess.

Q. Do you recall anything about the organization called the Bund?

A. Well, we didn't have any down here that I know of, but there were quite a few up around Chicago, and Milwaukee had a very large Bund. I remember reading about and seeing pictures of them. They had their German swastika flags and they wore swastika armbands, had political meetings and get-togethers. They made big organizational efforts.

Q. What were your feelings toward the Bund?

A. We didn't pay any attention to it. They weren't here, they were up there, and we didn't really think much about it.

Q. What were your feelings concerning Germany during the War? You said you were in the Army.

A. Yes, I was overseas during it. Like I say, I was in the Army before the war ever started, and then I was overseas three years. I was against the Japanese; we were more worried [about] what the Japs were doing to us than what the Germans were doing. Of course, we were on the islands and there wasn't too much communication with the rest of the world really; we just went from island to island. All we knew was what we read in the little newsclippings that came through: how the war was going against the Germans, how they invaded Russia, and how they was being driven back. We were more pre-occupied with the Japs, at least for my part, I was. I don't know how the folks back home were doing.

Q. Do you recall your feelings toward the German people? How did you feel then?

A. Well, we had relatives over in Germany but we had never seen them and never really heard from them very much. In the War, we was in a big war, we was more worried about us--our own survival-- than worrying about how the Germans were getting along over in Europe. As for how my folks were, they were at home, I don't know. They just took it as a matter of course how the war went; they didn't seem to get all worked up about whether Germany was winning or losing. [During] World War I there was more feelings then than there was in World War II.

Q. As a German-American citizen, did you notice any prejudice of any sort towards you as the war progressed? How were you treated by people in general?

A. Like I say, I was in the service, but we used to--of course, there was other boys with German names from Wisconsin, names of Schultz and Schmidt and all that--we used to kind of kid about it once and a while. The guys would say, "Well, you could be a spy and we wouldn't even know it." We just joked about it. Like I say, most of our concern was with Japs. As it turned out, later on, when I got back to the States, I was in a prison camp as an interpreter working with the Germans, working with them in the force, in the factories.

Q. What were the conditions like there?

A. In the camp?

Q. Yes.

A. Well, I was the only American that could speak German, so I was

the interpreter. We went to work, working Germans in the forests, cutting trees down, sawing them up into firewood to be taken to the chemical plant about forty miles from where we were stationed, where the firewood was put into big burners and made charcoal out of them and then the sap was distilled into alcohol and then the charcoal used in the blast furnace for making steel. We worked along pretty well.

I was in charge of about forty men in the spring of 1945. I drove a truck filled with prisoners by myself about forty miles to the factory and back and forth and I was all by myself. One prisoner rode in the front seat with me, he held my rifle while I drove. We went to the factory to work. Each one had a job to do and they would take off and I wouldn't see them until dinnertime, then we would eat dinner together in a railroad shack in the yards and after dinner they would go to a different place to work until quitting time. Then I'd blow my whistle and we would all get in the truck and go back to camp. This went on day after day, except we didn't work Sundays.

Q. How were most of these prisoners of war captured?

A. A lot of them was captured in Africa; they were with Rommel. Then we had prisoners that was captured on the D-Day invasion at Cherbourg--mostly Africa and France. The other prisoners were captured by the Russians and the British had some, and Canada. There were more German soldiers, I think, in the United States than were American ones when I first got here.

When we got back from overseas, the officers told us that when we get into camp that there would be Germans working there. They'd be cooking the food and doing the work and that sort of thing, and not

to think anything about it because they were soldiers, too, and they were prisoners of honor. One thing I noticed about them, they had a lot longer hair than we always had. They wore hair nets and they didn't make them get crewcuts.

Then up in Michigan, the Finnish--there are a lot of Finnish up there--they sided in with the Germans. They [were] always throwing them cigarettes, candy, things, when they would come to work in the factory because they, Germans, were fighting the Russians the same as Finnish people were, so they considered them as being friends. Then we took prisoners working in northern Wisconsin in the packing plant where they can peas, cherries and vegetables. There was a lot of girls working in the factory that were of German descent and could speak German. The prisoners, every morning before they left the camp, they would be all spruced up, with their hair combed nice and everything to go see the girls at the canning factory.

I could always speak when we would talk about Germany. And after the War, a few years ago, I went to Germany and I visited several of the prisoners I had in the camp. They were doing pretty good. They had a rough going after they got back home, they said, but after about five or ten years they got back on their feet again and were doing all right.

Q. What did your father do when he first came here?

A. He was a stone cutter in Germany. He came over in 1910 at the age of thirty. He came to this country and worked as a farm hand

and then he got married to my mother--she came over when she was five years old. They got married in 1912, then he worked as a farm hand and he worked on the railroad for a couple years, but went back to the farm and started farming in 1917 on his own. He farmed the rest of his life.

Q. Is that what you were before you went into the Army?

A. Yes, I was a farm boy. I worked on construction--of course, during that time there was the big Depression and there weren't many jobs, so you worked where you could. Just before the War started things started to get better, building hard roads and war factories for the war was about to start.

Q. Thank you, very much.

A. That's okay.

END OF TAPE