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## Rocky Schoenrock Memoir

**SCH63. Schoenrock, Rocky** b. 1922

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 30 mins., 10 pp.

### GERMAN-AMERICANS PROJECT

Schoenrock recalls WWII and the German-American community's reaction to the war. Also recalls experience with German prisoners while serving with the Navy during WWII.

Interview by Leslie Leamons, 1972

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For tape see Walter Baumhardt

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## Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by Leslie Leamons for the Oral History Office, Sangamon State University on March 2, 1972.

Mr. Schoenrock was born 1922 in New Richland, Minnesota of German-American parents. The interview focused on Mr. Schoenrock's recollections of World War II and the German-American community's reaction to entrance into the war. He served in the U. S. Navy and was interpreter for the German prisoners aboard his ship.

Readers of the 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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Rocky Schoenrock, March 2, 1972.

Leslie Leamons, Interviewer.

Q. This is Rocky Schoenrock, 50, who has agreed to this interview concerning his experiences as a German-American during World War II. Mr. Schoenrock, how long have you lived in Springfield?

A. Since 1945.

Q. Where did you live before that?

A. Well, prior to that I was in the navy for nearly 4 years and prior to that I lived in California, Washington, Oregon, Montana, about all of the western states. I just worked, traveled, worked and whenever I had enough money so I could go somewhere else I went. I worked in the lumber camps, I worked in sugar factories in San Francisco. Well, I had art in mind and I just couldn't afford to go to school at that time so I worked and saw the sights and I thought one day I would settle down and go to school which I did after I came out of the navy. I went into the navy shortly after World War II broke out and that is how I got to Springfield. Prior to that I came from Minnesota. Originally, I left Minnesota back in 1937 and the community that I grew up in was a German community surrounded by Irish, Polish, Swedes but primarily a German neighborhood where I lived. As a matter of fact, so German that most of the people spoke German. As a matter of fact I had to learn to speak American when I went to school, English or American.

Q. Can you say a little bit about the town you lived in?

A. Well, it was a little town called Richland which is in the southern part of Minnesota but even there I lived nine miles from the town, this was our post office. I lived in a farm out in the sticks. We used to get into town about once a year. Not having known what a city was I didn't miss it. We used to go in to get our teeth fixed once a year. That was the extent of going into the city.

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

A. My father came over, well my father didn't come over, he was born shortly after my grandfather came over. My grandfather and my grandmother came over here, it must have been the 1880's. My father was born about 1890 and they settled up in Minnesota.

My grandfather went back to Germany prior to World War II. As a matter of fact, my grandfather was very sympathetic with Hitler and went back. Took about \$80,000 out of the bank, not out of the bank so much as out of

the tomato cans in the back yard. Got on the ship Bremen and went back to Germany. Because he refused to believe what was being put out by the news media at that time. He had his own opinions of what was going on in Germany. As far as he was concerned it was something good and he wanted to be a part of it. At that time he was nearly 80 years old and he was killed there during the war.

Q. Do you remember an organization called the Bund?

A. Yes. But we have no connection with it whatsoever. As a matter of fact, my family, that is my father and as far as I know his brothers were opposed to the ideology of a Bund because actually we were opposed to the idea of Nazism. It was totalitarian as we saw it, however, my grandfather didn't realize this. Of course, he was not an educated man and I doubt whether he, well, he couldn't read the American papers, he was only reading a German newspaper he was getting and much of it was edited in the German circles in New York. I think the paper originated in New York. So he was getting his information from a German newspaper and it might have had some influence by the Bund. It was very possible. I was quite young and as I reflect now, I suppose it was pro-German.

Q. You wouldn't happen to remember the name of the newspaper?

A. I think the name was Deutsch Zietung, which would be just a German newspaper. I learned to read German and I used to read parts of it but at the time I was so young I didn't really know what I was reading. I was in grammar school and I remember some tremendous arguments that took place on Sunday afternoons at our home. My grandfather used to take the stand of the fatherland and of course, outside of one uncle that I had who was also sort of sympathetic, he had a sort of wait and see attitude. He was very much opposed to me going into the service later on. I understand that during World War II that he was quite vociferous about the fact that we were fighting these people and again I suppose looking in retrospect and seeing what takes place today, it's very possible that neither of us got all of the information because I am quite certain that today the people aren't getting information. The news media has a way of slanting things to either follow an administration that happens to be in power and so the news media has a tremendous influence on people. I think it can absolutely send people to war. I think it has that kind of power.

Q. What are your earliest recollections of Hitler?

A. Well, we used to listen to him on the radio. We had a little radio that we would hook up to the car battery and they would transmit shortwave from Germany and I remember William (last name inaudible) who was a reporter from Germany and he used to cover Hitler's speeches. They would be broadcasted and of course it scared me because here was a man who was able to collect hundreds of thousands of people into a metropolitan area such as Berlin and bring these people to a war-like nature. It's scary because it was quite evident that when I was old enough to recollect that there was such a thing as war.

However, at the time I felt like World War I was the war to end all wars and I couldn't believe that this country could get involved in another war because my uncles who had fought in it had told me it was horrendous. I just couldn't believe that humanity could get involved in another slaughter like that.

In 1932, 1933, I was ten or eleven years old, but living out in the country I think probably we were a little more sheltered yet than the people who were in the center of the cities who were maybe communicating a little bit more. Neighbors in a rural community like that rarely get together enough so that you can have an interchange of ideology so the only occasion when I used to get a gist of what is going on was when relatives would come over and we would discuss this in the family. But I remember that I had some uncles who, one had been in World War I and several others who had been keeping up with what was going on with the discussion, I could see that it was possible that this country could get embroiled into it.

Of course, at that time it was the big thing to be opposed to the British. It seemed in our neck of the woods that people were terrible opposed to the British and they were blaming the British for getting us into this thing. When they sunk the ship--there was one merchant ship sunk and a lot of people drowned on it by submarines. No, it wasn't the Lusitania. The Lusitania is another ship that sunk that hit the iceberg. No there was another ship that was sunk with a lot of passengers lost and the news media really played this up. Of course, then it became apparent that we were involved and then the news finally leaks out that submarines were seen in the area at the time. The best guess that they had was that it had been sunk by a torpedo. And of course it also mentioned the fact that our destroyers had been out there looking for the submarines at the time. It just looked like it was getting worse by the hour.

And then I remembered distinctly the night that Hitler made his push into the Polish corridor and we at home, we had some company that evening--I think they were relatives if I remember correctly--and we were terribly concerned because it looked like it was inevitable. But of course it wasn't then, I believe that this was 1938 then and it wasn't until 1941 that we got into it and it happened on the other side of the world, Pearl Harbor. But the Conscription Act had been signed by Roosevelt and young men were being drafted and some friends of mine were getting ready to go into the service because it looked like it was coming and so then of course events began to happen.

There were other incidents at sea and there were (inaudible) down in South America who fought the three British Battle Wagons and this was the big news of the time, it was one of those Packa Battle ships that had been marauding the Atlantic for British ships primarily. But again I'm sure that some of our own ships did get involved and certainly would have sooner or later. We had a lend-lease program and Hitler was making a big thing out of this because we were responsible for providing the necessary equipment for the British to go to war. And after Dunkirk, why it was obvious that England was going to have to get some help and it appeared that our diplomats in Washington were very sympathetic with

Britain and always the fact that we had a common language. At that time there was a real strong feeling by the government to be very pro-British, however, like I say in my own family we were rather opposed to the British.

Many of the servicemen in World War I, including some uncles of mine, had had some very unpleasant experiences with the British during World War I and this was partly why the attitude. They felt that Britain had dragged us into World War I. And here they were doing it again, that was the attitude that existed. Now whether it is true or not is beside the point--but that was the feeling throughout our community. I think it was quite prevalent in the nation of the rural people.

Now I know it was different in our government because Roosevelt was very pro-British and of course as time goes by now we see what those people in Germany were faced with. They had a choice between Communism and Nazism which was a very very bad choice. They had no choice so to speak. I think when you have to choose between Communism and Nazism that is no choice at all because both of them are totalitarian.

Hindenberg was an old man and left the office of president or chancellor or whatever they called it at that time so the door was open to criminal elements. Both criminal elements having caused so much trouble in Germany that the people were ready to toss in the towel for either one of them and it so happened they elected Hitler because he promised to stop all this trouble. But of course as we look back now he was the origin of it. He was the criminal that was causing it all.

There is quite a parallel in this country today. We have people here today who are causing trouble and they are saying elect me and we will stop it. We have exactly the same thing going on here today. I think McGovern fits that. I think McGovern is responsible for lives being lost in Viet Nam. His anti-Viet Nam attitude all during the time when we are supposed to be fighting over there, I think that Hanoi would have quit a long time ago if it had not been for the so-called "dove" element in this country. Those people in North Viet Nam couldn't help but believe that there was a revolution progressing here and that they succeeded. The same thing happened in France. They were kicked out of Viet Nam not by the Viet Cong, but this was by their own people. I remember that distinctly, so we see these parallels distinctly.

I think now as I look at this after having studied war considerably, wars are not just accidents. They happen deliberately. They are brought about by a group of people who hope to gain something from it. And some of them are supposedly our friends. They are people who you wouldn't even believe would want such a condition. But they are people who want power. And they will do anything to get it. I'm sure you can pinpoint a number of people who did everything in their power to get us into World War II. I think that is pretty well substantiated on the Pearl Harbor question.

Q. What were your feelings when we got into the war about Germany?

A. Well, of course, we were a very patriotic family. I think you will find this to be very true of German people. They are a nationalistic people. Probably more so than any other group of individuals. They have

a tremendous devotion to their country. You will find the German people who immigrate here now are tremendously nationalistic. Even the German people who have come over here since World War II are 100 percent Americans. And they have chosen this country and they have accepted it, and they are great people for a home, an individualistic life. They are a frugal people and they are security minded, tremendously security minded. I think the world in general looks at the German people as being militaristic. It isn't so much militaristic as it is for a feeling of security. I think German people have a tremendous desire to be left alone and they will fight to defend it.

Now I am not saying that that was the problem in World War II. Hitler was leading these people into something, I am not saying that there was not a legitimate cause for some of the things that he might have been asking for, I am not familiar with that. It is a part of geography and history--Alsace-Lorraine and all these things were a part of it. I understand that the people there were taken over by France or given to them in World War I and never settled. Just like in the Irish situation today. It was rotten. Maybe there was no right or wrong. But you can't lead people into a revolt unless it has some semblance of having reality.

I am sure the civil rights thing is the same. I think when Hitler started out, he must have had something to appeal to the people with, or he could not have gotten off the ground if he hadn't. Now I am sure that killing the Jews wasn't the thing that motivated the people. I'm sure that grabbing land that they thought was theirs probably was the thing. How he managed to twist this, blaming the Jewish people.

Well of course having talked to some of the German people and some of the German prisoners--I had over 300 German prisoners that we took off of submarines during World War II and I was the only one aboard the ship that could speak German. So I lived with them. And we got to be quite friendly, and I talked to them. They forgot that I was the enemy, having lived with them for weeks, and they talked openly about their feelings, and I recognized that the trend that took place--the Jewish people in Germany did have control of much of the wealth of the country--and the German people resented it. Now whether it was ill gotten or not, I don't know but at least they were blamed for that. And I think Hitler probably grabbed on to that and amplified it considerably. And whenever you get into people's pockets you--well it hurts. (laughter)

So if this is the ideology that he conveyed then I can see where maybe that brought ill feelings. There are people in this country that would probably feel the same way, that there's a select number of people who are monopolizing the finances of the country. But evidently it was obvious enough there that Hitler could capitalize on that. Every dictator has to grab onto something which has emotional appeal and Hitler was successful in doing that with those people. It is unfortunate that it happened--they had great potential. It provided the world with some of the greatest medical doctors, composers, artists, just great people in Germany. And 25 percent of the people in America today is German. They are the largest ethnic group here. I personally feel that the German people, at least in the way of industry, have made a tremendous contribution to America.

Q. As a German-American did you feel any prejudice or hard feelings toward you?

A. Never. I have never at one instance ever had any slur been thrown at me for being a German. In fact, I have often wondered--there are stories about Poles, about Irish, Jews, but there are very few stories about the German people. And I have often wondered why that was. I personally am not that serious a person that I cannot take a joke. I love to tell them, and I tell them on myself. I do know a few German stories and I don't hesitate to tell them because I think without a sense of humor you really don't enjoy life. I hope I always maintain a good sense of humor. But it is strange that there are so few stories about the German people and I wonder sometimes if this is because they can't find them to be a scapegoat or something.

I have never been slurred at for being German and I have made no bones about my German heritage ever. As a matter of fact I go around and talk it rather lightly that I am German. And I often kid about it because--well the thick-headed German and all this. And I accept all that--outside of jests from other people--I have never had anybody accuse me of being a Nazi or anything like that.

Now the German prisoners that we took had difficulty ascertaining why I, as a full blooded German, was fighting for this side (meant the U. S.). They didn't understand the melting pot idea in America. Because there were very few ethnic groups in Germany. They were all Germans. Well of course here we contend with all the other races and so they just didn't understand. So when I had these prisoners locked up, I had guards all around them with machine guns guarding the place because at one time we had over one hundred on board. And I introduced these German prisoners to my shipmates, and one of them was Jewish and one was Polish, and another was Irish. And they couldn't understand how we could get along aboard ship with all these different people. And they asked, "Don't you fight every day among yourselves?" And they just couldn't understand how we could possibly have a shipload of all these different ethnic groups on board and get along.

Q. I have one last question. You said you returned to Springfield in 1945. Do you remember in 1945 or about that time any of the German-American political figures here in Springfield?

A. No, I wasn't active in the so-called political arena at that time and now we did have a mayor--what was his name. (pause) I believe the mayor was of German descent. But I can't think of that name now. The mayor right after Buddy Capp. He lives down in Florida now. Gee, I can't think of his name, but I am certain he was a German man, but I'm sure there were a number of them around. I can't even name people in politics now that were in at that time.

I got out of the service and came to Springfield and for a couple of years I didn't get involved in anything. I was like the typical veteran I was so damn glad to get out and just live for a change that I didn't want to get involved in anything. After four years of service you throw your wings out and fly for a couple of years. And then you get down to more

serious things again, but I can't think of this mayor's name.

But anyhow there certainly are a lot of German people involved in politics today. Nixon's administration, now there is a misnomer there. There are people there that are Jews with German names. They are actually Jews, whether you want to make the distinction or not that may be beyond the point. But Kissinger is not German but he is a German Jew and I think there again you have another ethnic group. I don't think it is fair to call him German. Because he actually is a Jew whether he was born in Germany is beside the point. I don't know about the rest of them. Erlichmann, I don't know whether he is a Jew or not--but there is often reference made to Kissinger being German. Well he is German. That is a fact, but actually if you were to ask him whether he was German or Jewish he would say Jew because that's what he is. And there is a difference.

The reason a lot of the German people have, the Jews from Germany, have German names is as I understand it in history the Jews at one time did not have last names. And it wasn't until they settled in Germany, in early Prussia, I understand that they were allowed to have a last name-- German names. Now whether this is true or not I don't know. It is just as I understand the story. At one time the Jews did not have last names and that is the reason why they picked up a lot of the German names, because it was in Germany where they were allowed to have a last name.

Q. Well, thank you. This has been very interesting and I appreciate your helping.

A. I was happy to do it.

END OF TAPE