

From Coney Island to Columbia University

Interviewer

So this is Steven Levy.Â Iâ€™m here in Manhasset, New York, in one of the Center for Oral Historyâ€™s mobile studios, and Iâ€™m here with Lawrence Kaplan.Â Sir, could you please spell your name for the transcriber so they know how to spell your name out?

Lawrence Kaplan

Surely.Â My name is Lawrence, L-A-W-R-E-N-C-E.Â I usually use a middle initialâ€”J, which is short for J-A-Y, which is my middle name, actually.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s my brotherâ€™s middle name as well.

Lawrence Kaplan

Itâ€™s yours, too?

Interviewer

No, itâ€™s my brotherâ€™s.

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, your brother.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lawrence Kaplan

And the last name is Kaplan, K-A-P-L-A-N.

Interviewer

Okay.Â So, Lawrence, could you please tell me about your early lifeâ€”maybe a bit about where your family came from, or where you grew up?

Lawrence Kaplan

Surely.Â I was born in the Bronx, and at the age of three, my parents moved toâ€”of all placesâ€”Coney Island. And my father had a shop thereâ€”he handled tailoring; and his business actually was a seasonal business.Â In the summer, when everyone flocked to the Coney Island area, thatâ€™s when his business boomed.

Lawrence Kaplan

And so at age three, it was a sharp breakâ€”we moved quickly, and settled in Coney Island.Â And I had my elementary education at a school that looks very much like the Quaker building here on Northern Boulevardâ€”a wooden structure, all on one level.Â It had no central heat, so we had stoves.Â We had coal stoves in the classroom for the wintertime, and there was someone who went around and kept the fires going and kept the room warm.

Lawrence Kaplan

It was a crowded situationâ€”it wasnâ€™t a very fine, comfortable schoolâ€”it was crowded.Â I remember I had to share a seat, actually, in the last row, because every student in the class did not have an individual seat and desk, so there were two kids assigned to each desk.Â And Iâ€™d share it with another young man, but that didnâ€™t bother me, because I was interested in learning.Â And I did, indeed learn, and I enjoyed what I did thereâ€”so that was my elementary education.

Lawrence Kaplan

When I was in about the third year, they built a brick elementary school in Coney Island called Public School 188â€”a five-story structureâ€”and we all transferred from this little unusual type of a school for a city, and we moved to P.S. 188. And I spent my eightâ€”my remaining years, about four-five years, there.Â It was an eight-year program.Â And I want to say that Iâ€™d did very well.Â I graduated first in the class, and received aâ€”I recall I was the valedictorian at commencement, and I received a gold medalâ€”ten-karat gold Wickerman medal.Â And I still have itâ€”if you want to have a look at it, Iâ€™d be happy to show it to you.

Lawrence Kaplan

And then after elementary school, after I graduated, I had to make a choice between Utrecht High School and James Madison High School, which were two Lower Brooklyn high schools.Â I chose Utrecht because I preferred the travel, and it involved two trolley cars, which I felt of interest, and there was not that kind of a deal with the James Madison, which was my wifeâ€™s high school. I went to the Utrecht, and again, I mean Iâ€™m going toâ€”Iâ€™m trying to be modest, but my first semester, I came out, again, first in the class; and I earned a medal at Utrecht High School for scholarship, which I received.

Lawrence Kaplan

Well, that was onlyâ€”actually, at Utrecht, I was only there for one year, because then they built Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, in Brighton Beach, and I transferred to Abraham Lincoln and did the last three years at Abraham Lincoln.Â And finally, I graduated from Abraham Lincoln, and, again I did well.

Interviewer

Tell me?

Lawrence Kaplan

Iâ€™m trying to be modest, but my name is engraved in gold on the wall at the high school.Â Iâ€™m notâ€”I was notâ€”I donâ€™t knowâ€”I was first in the class or whatever it was, but itâ€™s there, and if you look at my class, which was class of â€™33. And then from Abraham Lincoln High School, I tried to determine where I could go for college, and I must admit that Iâ€™m my parents were unable to send me to a very fine college.Â It was not theâ€”it was not the first choice of the average person, but I did choose Brooklyn College, because there, if youâ€™re admitted, you had a four-year tuition scholarship.

Lawrence Kaplan

And so I went to Brooklyn College, and I was accepted, and I spent four years at Brooklyn Collegeâ€”graduated with honors.Â And immediately thereafter, I entered Columbia

University. A I workedâ€”I wasâ€”already had some jobs, and so forth. And I had a job up in the Catskills as a waiter, and I did extremely well.Â The tips were fine, and I encouraged my people and I developed their enjoyment of their vacations and so forth, and I received very fine tips.Â And at the end of the summer, I had enough money to pay all of my yearâ€™s tuition at Columbia for a masterâ€™s degree, and I received my masterâ€™s degree in one year later, I think.

Interviewer

What was your masterâ€™s degree in?

Lawrence Kaplan

In economics.Â I becameâ€”how I got to economicâ€”you know that was right after the Great Depression, and I was in school, and I was always curious to learn what was wrong with the economy and why it was in such bad shape, and why so many people were unemployed.Â And I found that the one discipline that studied this question was economics.Â And so I went into economics, and that was my major. So I took my masterâ€™s degree in economics also.Â And then after that, actually, I started to go to Columbia for my doctorateâ€”towards my doctorate.Â So that brought me to my firstâ€”after that, I began teaching in high school, in a city high school.

Lawrence Kaplan

What school was it?

Lawrence Kaplan

Well, I taught even at myâ€”the school from which I graduated.Â I had a job there for a while, and then I taught in Bayside High School in Queens.Â And I remember I used to go there at the beginning of the week.Â Iâ€™d take the Long Island Railroad and go to Bayside, and then I took a bus. And I stayed in aâ€”I lived in a house where they were able to rent a room to me, and they served breakfast.Â And I taught there for about a year, so I did get my early experience in teaching in high school.Â And Iâ€”and then by Friday, of course, when I finished the week, I traveled back to my home.

Lawrence Kaplan

By this point, my family moved from Coney Island to Avenue U in Brooklyn, and my parents lived thereâ€”they had an apartment.Â And so I returned thereâ€”I was living with my parents.Â And then Iâ€”at that point, it was about 1941, I guess, I took a job in Washington, D.C.

Interviewer

What were you working as?

Lawrence Kaplan

As an economist.Â I was able to get a job in my field, and I was able to earn a very fine salary. In thoseâ€”well, if I told you the rate of pay, I mean, in todayâ€™s standardsâ€”it didnâ€™t mean very much, but my salary was about \$2,000.00 a year.Â And on \$2,000.00, the average man could support a wife and a couple of kids, so I must say I was very successful.Â And I had that job until I was drafted for the U.S. Army.

Interviewer

Now, were you drafted for the U.S. Army, lâ€™™m assumingâ€™”was this after Pearl Harbor had happened already?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.

Interviewer

Now, do you remember where you were on Pearl Harbor and what you were doing that day?Â Do you remember the event at all?

Lawrence Kaplan

I sure do.Â I was sitting at my desk, working, and I gotâ€™”the news came over the radio.Â I didnâ€™™t have a radio on my desk, but someone came in and said we were bombed at Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Air Force. And weâ€™™re going to be declaring war against Japan and the Axis and Germany, so I was very well aware of thatâ€™”Pearl Harbor.

Interviewer

Now, prior to the actual attack on our shores, do you remember expecting that we would get involved in World War II?Â Did you think we would remain neutral?Â What did you think was going to happen?

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, I didnâ€™™t even think about that.Â I was notâ€™”it was far from my mind.Â I mean I didnâ€™™t know what war involved; I didnâ€™™t know anything about being drafted.Â I didnâ€™™t know anything about an army and getting into an army; serving in that capacity.Â I didnâ€™™tâ€™”I had no idea at all.

Interviewer

Did you have any family history of service?Â Did your father or grandfather fight in World War I, orâ€™”?

Lawrence Kaplan

No.Â My parents were not.Â And World War I was just about the time that I was born.Â And so I guess my father was able to claim dependency. Having a family, he was not drafted, so he didnâ€™™t serve.

Interviewer

Now, I have one other question about the days before you were drafted.Â From what I understand, you are a Jewish manâ€™”is that correct?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.

Interviewer

Now, growing up as a Jewish man, you graduated high school, you said, around 1933.

Lawrence Kaplan

â€™33.

Interviewer

So this was right around the time the Third Reich is really starting to start up.Â Around that time, do you remember paying any attention to what was happening across the pond in Germany?

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, I certainly was.Â I was very aware of it, because I realized that weâ€™re very fortunate that we werenâ€™t in the grip of this madman.Â And it was the beginning of concentration camps, and people were being disrupted from their lives and put away in these camps; moved.Â The families were broken up. And the reports that came through were very sinister, and I was fully aware of that;Â it disturbed me a great deal.

Interviewer

Did you have any family that was still in Europe at the time?

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, I was an only child, by the way, so lâ€™in fact, I even assumed a little bit of a responsibility ofâ€™I know that when I received my checks for teaching and so forth, I would always give a little portion of it to my mother.Â I felt I had to payâ€™I wanted to pay something for my room and board, so to speak.Â And I didnâ€™t even have my own room.Â It was a one-bedroom apartment that they lived in, but there was a sofa that opened up at night, and that was my residence.

Interviewer

What I was going to ask you before was you said you were an only child.

Lawrence Kaplan

Right.

Interviewer

Did you have any cousins, or did you have any of your ancestors that still live in Europe?

Lawrence Kaplan

No.Â Most of my familyâ€™and lâ€™m the family genealogist, by the way; that was one of my hobbies throughout life.Â They came to this country, but all of them cameâ€™they left no one behind.

Interviewer

Where did they come fromâ€™what country?

Lawrence Kaplan

My father, I would say, is Russian.Â My mother is more towards a little bit Polish, Poland.Â

So it was a mix of Russia and Poland. My mother was able to speak Russian and also Polish, and she was brought to this country at the age of three. And so her family was quite well-established, and they—I remember she told me they gave her piano lessons, and she was a wonderful pianist, which I enjoyed. And she insisted that I learn how to play the piano.

Interviewer

And I'd like to fast-forward a little bit now.

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.

Drafted: College with Kissinger, Driving School with MI-5
Interviewer

So you said you were drafted.

Lawrence Kaplan

Right.

Interviewer

And what date were you drafted on? Do you remember? Do you remember what?

Lawrence Kaplan

December 3rd, 1942.

Interviewer

So tell me the scene. When did you get the letter? When you formally find out, what happened?

Lawrence Kaplan

Well, by that point, the government had established a system of drafts. There was a draft system, and you—every young man had a number, and these numbers were picked at random, and lists were made by number. So when the number came up, if you held that number—or anyone who held that number—was called up. So while I was in Washington, I received a notice that I was being drafted. I had to go—well, I was not yet actually in Washington. It was before Washington. I was still teaching in one of the schools.

Lawrence Kaplan

I had to go to the draft board to register, and I realized that it was a matter of time before I would be called up. For a period of time, I was what they call Class 3-A, which meant I said I helped my parents, so—that I was an only child, and I helped them—so they put me in the dependency class. But then, as the numbers started to increase—World War II, if you will recall from history, was a very total kind of a war.

Lawrence Kaplan

It involved practically all Americans, and by the end of the war, about 16.5 million

Americans were in uniform, helping in one way or another. Men, women. They had different Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines, and so forth. 16 1/2 million people, so that's a large number. And it was a very significant war. I want to go into the whole story with you?

Interviewer

Yeah, I'd love to hear that.

Lawrence Kaplan

My experience.

Interviewer

Yeah, please tell me.

Lawrence Kaplan

What's that?

Interviewer

I said please continue. Yeah, I'd love to hear that.

Lawrence Kaplan

You want me to go a little bit into the war?

Interviewer

Yeah, definitely.

Lawrence Kaplan

I see. And then, later on, I assume we'll go over it in more detail, is that it?

Interviewer

Well, let's actually go over it in detail, starting from the beginning.

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh.

Interviewer

So

Lawrence Kaplan

I was finally drafted. I went to the Board, and I finally got papers to report on December 3rd. They sent me to Camp Upton in Yaphank, Long Island, and that's where that was my first stop in the Army. I took the AGCT, and I think I did very well.

Interviewer

Now, just for the viewers who don't know, what is the AG?

Lawrence Kaplan

Whatâ€™s that?

Interviewer

You said the AGCT, you took?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes, I took the AGCT.

Interviewer

Yes.Â I said could you explain for the viewers who donâ€™t know, just generally what it is?

Lawrence Kaplan

The Army General Classification Test.

Interviewer

Yes. So itâ€™s basically kind of like an intelligence test, seeing different things about you in various ways, and then they slot you?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.Â But in spite of my great grades on the AGCT, they needed men for the 100th Infantry Division, and so I was assignedâ€”at Camp Upton, I was assigned to go to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, which was the home base of the 100th Infantry Division.Â And they assigned me to the Headquarters Company, and in addition to that, I was able to type.Â I tookâ€”when I was in high school, I took a typing course.Â I learned to type, which was very important.Â And with a high grade in AGCT, they didnâ€™t put me into an Infantry Companyâ€”I was in Headquarters.

Lawrence Kaplan

And I was assigned to some of the branches of the whatever it wasâ€”G-2, G-1, G3, supplies, or whatever it was. And I had to write reports on a regular basis; and I was able to type them up and so forth.Â So I went to the 100th Infantry Divisionâ€”I had Basic Training.Â I learned how to use a rifle.Â I learned the details of wartime activityâ€”hiking and cooking out in the field and so forth.Â And at the end of six months, I had my Basic Training, and at that time, the colleges of the country were beginning to hurt, because most of the young men were starting to flow into the Army.

Lawrence Kaplan

And so they arranged with the military to try to get young men from the Army to come to college, to fill up the colleges to keep the colleges functioning; that they called the Army Specialized Training Program.Â And so how do you get into that? Well, you didnâ€™t have to worry about getting in.Â They went back to the records in all of the Army in the divisions all over the country, and they selected people who would be eligible for the program, and I was selected for it.Â And they sent me to The Citadel, in Charleston, South Carolina, to be reclassified, and to determine what they would doâ€”which college they

would send me to and what I would study.

Lawrence Kaplan

And so they decided thatâ€”to send me to Lafayette College in eastern Pennsylvania, and I went there.Â I found it a very, very great experience.Â We had accommodations thereâ€”dormitories.Â We were sleeping in clean white sheets. We were eating at a cafeteria where the food was clean and served well, and it tasted good.Â And I always thought, I said, â€œGee whiz, this is the way to go to college.â€”Â Not like Brooklyn College.Â Brooklyn College, we didnâ€™t even have a campus when I attended.Â We had office buildings in downtown Brooklyn.

Lawrence Kaplan

One of the office buildings that myâ€”where I was in one classâ€”Brooklyn College on Lawrence Street, Willoughby Street, and across the street was the Star Burlesque.Â And the guys would sit at the window and watch the girls go intoâ€”through the stage door to do their dayâ€™s work.Â It was that kind of an atmosphere.Â And when the period ended, you had a class in another building, in Court Street or in Joralemon Street, or in Willoughby Streetâ€”they were in five different buildings.Â Here itâ€™s a beautiful college with a beautiful campus. And I always said, â€œGosh, if I had a son, I wish Iâ€™d be able to send him to a school like this.â€”Â And jumping ahead a little bit, I did eventually have a son, and he went to Lafayette College.

Interviewer

So tell me, what were you studying when the Army sent you there?Â What did they put you into?Â What did they have to give you?

Lawrence Kaplan

Okay, so here I was at Lafayette College, and they put me into the Spanish language program.Â I had to learn Spanish, and I had to become fluent in Spanish.Â I donâ€™t know why, because we werenâ€™t fighting Spain, we werenâ€™t in South America.Â If theyâ€™d put me into French or German or Japanese or Chinese, that would make more sense.Â But other colleges specialized in these other languages?I was in the Spanish program.Â So I studied Spanish, and at the end of that period, I was truly able to speak Spanish.

Interviewer

So you can speak Spanish today, still?Â Howâ€™s your Spanish?

Lawrence Kaplan

Itâ€™s kind of slipped my mindâ€”I could speak a little bit, but not like I used to speak in Spanish.

Interviewer

So you really were truly fluent.

Lawrence Kaplan

I was fluent in Spanish.

Interviewer

Wow.

Lawrence Kaplan

I learned the language in six months, and of course, I must say that I had a little background in Spanish, because that was one of my languages in high school. I had Latin and Spanish, so I had a little bit of a little head start. At any rate, the demand for soldiers became quite great, and they started to close—they decided to close the ASTP program—that was in December. And they—in my class, I must say I had some very famous people.

Interviewer

Yeah, who was in the class with you?

Lawrence Kaplan

Henry Kissinger, future Secretary of State. And another guy that was in it—Frank Church, who after the war became Senator from the state of Idaho. And then there was a third guy I remember well, Arch Moore, who became governor of West Virginia. All of these guys were in this ASTP program.

Lawrence Kaplan

So, a group from the Military Intelligence Service came around to the schools, and they were selecting people for Military Intelligence—they needed people. So they selected me and they selected Frank Church to go to the Military Intelligence Training Center in Camp Ritchie, Maryland.

Interviewer

Now, were there how many people were chosen out of your class?

Lawrence Kaplan

I would say about half a dozen.

Interviewer

Oh, so this is very few people, then, from this program.

Lawrence Kaplan

Very few people. There were—in the class, there must've been about 300—200—200, maybe—in the college, to keep the college going. But they only picked a handful of people, so Frank Church and I went into what's called the 15th Class, in Military Intelligence, and somehow or other, when I graduated from the Military Intelligence Training Center, they decided to send me to London—the Army decided, made the decision. They sent me to London to study intelligence of the British system—see what I could learn from the British Intelligence people. So I packed my bags and I was on a ship—they shipped me by transport to London, and there I was.

Interviewer

Could I actually quickly ask you—so this is your first time, I'm assuming, going

overseas.

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.

Interviewer

And you're going overseas through some very dangerous waters. There were U-boats still at the time?

Lawrence Kaplan

Absolutely. We were scared. We were always worried about that. We were aware of these U-boats and the sinking of transports, and thousands of men drowning.

Interviewer

So how long did it take you, about, to get across to England by boat?

Lawrence Kaplan

About a week.

Interviewer

So you were there in the water for a week?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yeah.

Interviewer

And you were scared at the time, I'm assuming.

Lawrence Kaplan

Absolutely.

Interviewer

Did you see any other foreigners, or not foreigners. Did you see any other enemies, like foreign nationals any of the other boats? Did you have any trouble on your way over?

Lawrence Kaplan

No, we had no problem. It was like we went through, we had. I think we had a Navy transport. No problem at all.

Interviewer

Do you remember did you still blackout your vessels at that time at night would you?

Lawrence Kaplan

Absolutely. Yeah, and the food, of course, was not the best. It was a British ship, and I don't know how to explain some of the food, but the breakfast food—the British. The British served a dish in the morning, it was like a piece of toast, and they pour some kind of cream sauce over it. And so the guys would say, "Well, what are they serving this morning?" And it was a four-letter word, started with S and ended with T, and they call it "son the shingle." That was the food. But nevertheless, when you're hungry for breakfast, you don't care too much about what's being served, you know? You eat it.

Interviewer

Yeah. So you survived the voyage, and the food?"

Lawrence Kaplan

Here we are in Liverpool.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lawrence Kaplan

And when I was in Basic Training, I had never driven a car before. They taught me how to drive. I admit that I was not the greatest driver in the world, and when the test finally came up—you had to take a test for driving—I took the test. The test consisted of driving this jeep that I learned in, taking it up a hill, stopping in the middle, putting on the brake, and then starting it up again and getting up to the rest of the way. I got to the middle alright, but I couldn't start—the car always started to roll back on the hill, and I just couldn't get the association between giving it some gas and covering the rest of the distance.

Lawrence Kaplan

So I got an F. I couldn't get the license. So I went back to my barracks. I was kind of solemn, depressed, sitting on my bunk, I remember. And one of the guys came over and said, "What's happening here?" I said, "Well, I just took my driving test. I got an F." He says, "Don't worry about it." He said, "I'll recommend the sergeant in the transportation section. I'm going to change your F to a B." And he did. So now I had a license granted to me for driving jeeps, 1 1/2-ton trucks, and I had that qualification.

Lawrence Kaplan

When I got to England, they said, "Let's see your license." So I took out my license—I had never driven before. That's all I had, this piece of paper. They said, "Fine." We need 50 men to go up to Liverpool. I'd been in London and I had finished my training with the British Intelligence. They said, "We need 50 men to go up to Liverpool and to meet the ship that's coming in with 50 trucks, and we want each of you to drive the truck from Liverpool to London." Nighttime driving, no lights—they assigned me to a truck. I had nobody with me. I was lucky I was able to start the truck, let alone drive it. One of the guys who I was with—he was Nate Levine, whom I got to know quite well. He was in my status, too, about driving.

Lawrence Kaplan

And we were going down from Liverpool to London—the sky was dark. We went through little British towns, all asleep in the middle of the night. Not even the moon was shining. And Nate Levine went over a car. Now, in those days, they built small, tiny cars—they didn't have big cars. He went over this car. It was like built on a slant, the whole car, and into the front. He went over car and flattened it like a pancake, and we continued on. But when we got to our destination, they took note of the fact that one of our drivers ran over a truck and flattened it. It turned out it belonged to a captain in the British Army, and he was suing the U.S. Army for damages—which, of course, was legitimate.

Lawrence Kaplan

When I saw Nate later on—somehow or another, I came up again with him, and he told me that the Army settled with him and they bought him a new car. But that was my driving—at any rate, before I drove this truck, they gave me a test to see if I can drive a 2 1/2-ton truck. So they put me in a 2 1/2-ton truck with a teacher, and they—I was in England, in London, at the time. I had to take this test in Knightsbridge, which is one of the areas that's like—it's like the department store section of London—people in great numbers passing across the street. The traffic was heavy; there are cars, there are people.

Lawrence Kaplan

I had to drive this truck, go in through Knightsbridge, and worry about not running over anybody or doing any damage. And I found that I managed to do that, believe it or not, not with like—lack of knowledge. So then they gave me a new license to drive not only 1 1/2-ton trucks, which I already had, but now to drive 2 1/2-ton trucks and tanks. Never drove a tank in my life—and so this was my license when they called me to go up to Liverpool to bring down some cars. So that's a story of how I learned to drive in the Army.

From D-Day to V-E Day
Lawrence Kaplan

So here we were in London. I completed my training with the British Intelligence. And they had to give me an assignment, and it turned out that they assigned me to the 6th Armored Division, which was a tank division. And—again, it was an assignment to the Division Headquarters, and they figured that I had now training in tanks—I was able to drive a tank if necessary.

Lawrence Kaplan

And I went up to a town called Batsford. It's a little town in England near Oxford. And the actual division was located in a place called Moreton-on-the-Marsh, Moreton-on-the-Marsh. It was also not far from Oxford, and on it was—Lord and Lady Dulverton were the masters of the area at Batsford; they permitted the Army to use their spacious estate, this park, and they took care of the brasserie, I recall, very well. They had luncheons and so forth, and tea time at the castle with Lord and Lady Dulverton.

Lawrence Kaplan

But there I was, now in Batsford, England, attached to the 6th Armored Division, which had been training in the United States and finally brought over to England. And D-Day was coming up, which we had some knowledge of, but you can't go with a tank division on D-Day. You can't land a tank in the water—you have to have a beachhead. So we

had go in on June 6, 1944, which was D-Day.

Lawrence Kaplan

I guess thank we were fortunate, because that was a really bloody battle there; we lost thousands of guys. And we did get in—we had to wait until we had a beachhead, and they—the Army, at Utah Beach—there were several beaches where the Americans were landing troops and cargo and so forth. We went the sixth week, and we went mid-July. We got orders to go to Southampton—drive to Southampton, and there we were put on ships to take us to Normandy.

Lawrence Kaplan

We went to Normandy; it was, again, a night trip. We landed in Normandy. The ships would let down the front of the ship, and it's a flap would come over, and so the trucks and the tanks could roll over onto a beachhead. And when we got there, they assembled the division at a town called Lessay, in France. It's a seaport town on the—I guess it's on the Mediterranean.

Lawrence Kaplan

And that's where we gathered. Then we got—I was—and this now was taken over by General Patton, and what we got was orders to break out of Lessay—break through the German lines, and to move down from the Normandy peninsula to the Brittany peninsula, which jutted out into the Atlantic, to get to the town of Brest.

Lawrence Kaplan

Brest is a seaport town right on the ocean, and it was a submarine base for the Germans. And it was very important for us to capture this beehive of submarines. Well, the division did indeed break out of Lessay, and we did 250 miles in the Brittany peninsula in 10 days. We captured thousands of German troops; we killed thousands. We captured the German General—his name was Spang, S-P-A-N-G. We captured the General. But as we broke through the German lines, they had instructions, by all means to support and defend Brest, because that was so important to the German Army—to their strategy.

Lawrence Kaplan

So we got to Brest, to the outskirts of Brest, and the whole German Army was following us. There we were, near Brest, surrounded by the German troops—a very dangerous situation. We couldn't break out of it by ourselves, and the sky was overcast—the Army Air Force was unable to come. But the weather cleared up very finally after a few days, and the Air Force planes came over in force, and they cut a hole in the German lines.

Lawrence Kaplan

And we were able to get out of our encirclement and to go on the southern coast of Brittany across northern France, all the way over across France to Alsace—Alsace-Lorraine, on the eastern portion of France. And we stayed there—we pitched a tent there. The reason we stopped was the fact that the supply lines of gasoline were insufficient to keep the tanks and our trucks rolling.

Lawrence Kaplan

So, at any rate, I was attached now to the 6th Armored Division. There was a—it was a six-man team. They sent six men, who received somewhat the same training as I did. We

were attached to the 6th Armored Division, and theyâ€™my specialization in Intelligence was called â€œphoto interpretation.â€

Lawrence Kaplan

We had to collect photographs of the lines in front of the division, which would be flown by the Air Force.Â They would take the airâ€™the pictures of the ground, of the land in front of us. And it was our job to find out where the enemy had his trucks, tanks, personnel, equipmentâ€™everything that was dangerous for our troops moving forward.

Lawrence Kaplan

We plotted this informationâ€™we used stereophonic lenses, by the way.Â You take two pictures, which we had in front of us.Â Youâ€™d put the stereophonic lens on top, and it comes out three-dimensional, so the hills rise up and valleys drop, and you get a beautiful picture of everything.Â You have to be very careful not to miss anything.Â And we studied that, and weâ€™d be on working all night.Â We had our own generator for electricity, this little group.

Lawrence Kaplan

We had a truck and a jeepâ€™those were our two vehicles.Â Weâ€™d work all night.Â We had to cover up so that there were no light shining through, because we were in enemy territory all the time.Â And we plotted this information on maps, which we then transportedâ€™which someone transported to the Air Force and to the artillery of the division. And before the division was able to move, they studied very carefully these locations, and after it wasâ€™after we softened up these areas in advance, the division would start to move.Â And that was my specialty in the Intelligence Service.

Lawrence Kaplan

So by the way, there were five campaigns in the European Theater of Operations: Normandy, which we were in; northern France; and then, in the middle of it all, you had the German attack in the Ardennes, the Battle of the Bulge, which was one of the largest battlesâ€™battles in the history of the Army. And this was in about mid-December, right before Christmastime.Â And they gathered the Germansâ€™they gathered a force of about 500,000 men, with their best tanks and personnel carriers, and they broke through the American lines and the British lines, which were very thin in that part of Belgium, because we didnâ€™t expect an attack of that type.

Lawrence Kaplan

And they came through, and they were ruthless; they would kill Americans left and right.Â But we fought back.Â And we had the American 101st Airborne Division, which was located in Bastogne, in Belgium, and they were surrounded.Â And the German Commander sent a letter to a General McNulty, who was in charge of the 101st Airborne, they said, â€œYouâ€™d better surrender, or weâ€™re going to kill the wholeâ€™wipe out the whole division.â€Â And General McAuliffe replied to the German Generalâ€™he wrote on a piece of paper, â€œNuts,â€ N-U-T-S.Â And the Germans didnâ€™t know what â€œnutsâ€ meant.Â â€œWas ist â€œnutsâ€?â€

Lawrence Kaplan

Well, they soon found out, because General Patton was called upon by the General of the Armyâ€™of the Armies in Europe: â€œWe have to get tanks immediately to the Battle of the

Bulge, including the 6th Armored Division.â€A Well, the generals assembled an attack force of 10 tank divisionsâ€”10 tank divisions, each division with about 10,000 men and hundreds of tank.â€ And we rolled all night, from Alsaceâ€”where we were after northern Franceâ€”we rolled to the Battle of the Bulge.

Lawrence Kaplan

And that battle took about till the middle of or towards the end, about January 25th, when we finally subdued the Germans, and we freed that territory.â€ And this was the biggest attempt of the Germans to defeat the Allied Forces, and they failed, so that we realized at this point that we were in pretty good shape.â€ Weâ€™re going to move now and finish this war.

Lawrence Kaplan

So after the Battle of the Bulge, we went to whatâ€™s called the Rhineland Campaign, and what we had to do was to go back, roughly, to where we were, and to find crossings across the Rhine River to get to Germany.â€ And we did; we built bridges.â€ I shouldâ€™ve told you about the help we got from the Free French, by the way, in the Battle of Northern France, where we broke through in Brittanyâ€”they were so helpful.

Interviewer

Yeah, yeah, tell me about it.

Lawrence Kaplan

The Free French.

Lawrence Kaplan

Yeah.

Lawrence Kaplan

These are the people who were fighting the Germans all along when the Germans were occupying France.â€ They helped us build bridges.â€ They helped us to make sure that we didnâ€™t fall into any German traps.â€ They knew where everything was located.â€ They were a great help to us, so thatâ€™s how we were able to make those 250 miles in 10 days.â€ Butâ€”and we owe them a great debt, really.

Lawrence Kaplan

So here we were, on the French side of the Rhine.â€ We built a bridge across the Rhine Riverâ€”my division, the 6th Armored Division.â€ We crossed the Rhine. And we put up a sign on the German soil: â€œYou are now entering Germany through the courtesy of the 6th Armored Division.â€â€ And we started to roll into Germany.â€ And then the fifth campaign was Central Europe, and eventually, the 6th Armored Division met the Russians in Czechoslovakia.â€ And that was when the war was finally over in Europe.

Interviewer

So you were in the division, and did you actually meet the Russians, and?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yeah, we met the Russians.

Interviewer

Describe the scene for me that day. What's going on here?

Lawrence Kaplan

Well, it was quite an exciting event, you know. After all, the Russian Army—they didn't know English, we didn't know Russian, but there they were—I mean these were the real people, who'd lost millions of people in Russia; their armies took a tremendous beating from the Germans. But we greeted them and they greeted us, and there was a lot of brotherly love expressed, and it was quite an exciting event.

Lawrence Kaplan

They used to send people from Hollywood to come to entertain the troops. Some of them, we had entertainment from them, and so forth, but we did meet the Russians. I think the town was Altenberg, in Czechoslovakia, and that was an exciting event.

“You'd Better Volunteer—Report to Le Visnet

Lawrence Kaplan

So then came V-E Day, but I immediately got a notice from Military Intelligence Headquarters, in a small town in France, outside of Paris. It's called Le Vesinet. That's where we had the Military Intelligence Headquarters. Well, I got a telephone call one day while I was in—in Altenberg, I guess. They said, “Listen, we're—we want you to volunteer to serve in your same capacity in the Far East. We will take you back home to America in a plane. We'll give you a 90-day furlough. And then we'll fly you to the Far East.” What was my response?

Interviewer

What was your response?

Lawrence Kaplan

No. That was my mistake. I said, “Listen,” I said, “I've had so much. I've seen so much. I've been through so much. I really—I don't have it; I'm tired. I want to just get home and get back to my life.” Well, so the next day, orders came through: “Report to Le Vesinet.” So I knew that I was defeated right away. I was on the first step.

Interviewer

So basically, they had said to you, “You should volunteer.” You had refused, but then they had sent it to you anyway. It was pretty much, you know, “You'd better volunteer.”

Lawrence Kaplan

You can't say “no” in the Army, you know? You don't—you can't say “no,” because they're in charge of you—your life, your body—and they do whatever they want. You're just another pawn on a big chessboard.

Lawrence Kaplan

So they packed me up, and I had trucks, and I had all kinds of rides. I finally got to Le Vesinet in France, and there I was, and they told me what my assignment was going to be. And I had to get ready now—they took away all of the nice things they wanted off of me. They're not flying me back to America, and they're not giving me a furlough. They're putting me on a troop ship again to get back to America. So they sent me to—they sent me to—what's the name of the town in France, the big seaport town where the ships land? Anyway, they sent me there, where the Army troop ships pick you up. It was not Brest. I can't think of that name.

Interviewer

Yeah, but it's okay, though.

Lawrence Kaplan

It's in my notes somewhere.

Interviewer

That's fine. We can probably find it out later.

Lawrence Kaplan

Anyway, so at any rate, there I was, on a ship—oh, and at the port, they had a big—they had signs—how many miles it is to California; how many miles it is from here to Minnesota; how much to New York; just to let the guys know that they're moving back. And there were people, after V-E Day, who were able to get back to the States, because you had to have a certain number of points. You gathered points by being in campaigns and serving in the Army.

Interviewer

Now, you had, of course?

Lawrence Kaplan

I had all the points I needed.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lawrence Kaplan

So I was ready to go back and get discharged, but that was not to be. So I got on board a ship—I guess it was the Anderson? I think it was an American ship this time; a troop ship. And we landed in New York. We came to New York, and when we got off the ship, the first thing they offered us was a half a pint of milk. And we hadn't had milk for a year and a half—real milk, ice-cold—so refreshing.

Lawrence Kaplan

And on the ship—oh, I remember, I developed a huge boil on my knee. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to get off the ship, even, but I somehow managed to get off. And we went to this camp. And in the meantime, the United States bombed the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing thousands of Japanese. And the Japanese surrendered,

and V-J Day was coming, and here I was already in the United States. So they had no further need for me. And I had a furlough for about 60 days, and then they sent me to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and I was discharged from there, and that was the end of my military career.

Interviewer

Now, I would like to ask you—we ask everyone that we interview that was alive during the time—where they were when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. So could you?

Lawrence Kaplan

One was in?

Interviewer

Oh no, yes. I know—I meant where were you?

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, when the bombs were dropped.

Interviewer

Yes.

Lawrence Kaplan

I think I was still in Europe.

Interviewer

Now?

Lawrence Kaplan

Before I was actually on the ship.

Interviewer

Really?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yeah.

Interviewer

So these bombs are dropped. It was not public knowledge that we had them. Do you remember how you reacted when you found out we'd developed this kind of superweapon?

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, I wasn't familiar with the bomb that they already had ready, and I wasn't familiar with—afterwards, we heard on the radio that the bomb had been dropped. Two times—twice, two cities: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And we realized at that point that

thisâ€”the Japanese canâ€™t continue under conditions like this.â A They had to retire.â They had to quit.â They had to surrender.â And thatâ€™s what they did.

Interviewer

Do you remember at all if you thought it was a good decision to drop the bombs, or did you think that it was?

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, I didnâ€™t have no knowledge of that.â I didnâ€™t evenâ€”I didnâ€™t know that they had a bombâ€”a bomb ready.

Interviewer

Oh, no, I know.â What I meant was in the aftermathâ€”so now itâ€™s public knowledge, you know. The bombs have been dropped.â Did you think at the time that it was the right decision?

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, yeah, because that, in effect, spelled conclusion for me in the Army.â I didnâ€™t think of the damage that was done and the people that were killed.â None of those things were important to me at that time.â Now, you donâ€™t think about things like that.â If you survive, youâ€™re successful.â Youâ€™re unsuccessful if you get killed.â But I was successful, so I was happy.

From Brooklyn to D.C. and Back Again with â€œMy Favorite Wifeâ€

Interviewer

Okay, so weâ€™re going to ask some questions relating to the war a little bit later, in a more structured fashion. But for now, could you continue with your professional career, which, from what I understand, eventually gets you at John Jay and then West Point, actually.

Lawrence Kaplan

Yeah.

Interviewer

Yeah, please begin, and weâ€™ll go through this.

Lawrence Kaplan

Alright.â So I was discharged November 18, 1945.â I was short about twelve days to make it an even three years of service.â It was one and one half years in the States and one and a half years in Europe.â I got five battle stars for my five campaigns of service.â Subsequently, I got the New York State Conspicuous Service Award; and I got a Citation from the Republic of France for my service in Normandy and northern France and so forth; and winning back Franceâ€”driving the Germans out of France.â So those are my honors which I got for my service.

Lawrence Kaplan

And then I came out; it was 1945, November 1945, and about six months later, I met this

young lady, quite by accident. It's a whole story "you want me to go into it? I was living with my parents now; I was discharged. I had to make a few dollars. I wanted to go back to school and take courses and work on my Ph.D. So I had a license to teach which I used to have, and I could only go in as a substitute, and pick up a nice bit of money for the day's work.

Lawrence Kaplan

So I got on the bus, and there was Jeanie, carrying a big, huge cake, and having a great time with people that she knew on the bus. And I was standing there, watching them all having a good time. The bus took us from where I lived to Lafayette High School in Brooklyn.

Lawrence Kaplan

And all of the people got off that were going to teach, including me, and we walked as "not as a group, actually. We didn't know each other at that point. But then I went into that school, I got a day's work, that's why I went there, and then for lunchtime I went down to lunch. And I was sitting in the lunchroom, and Jeanie was also sitting there, and someone came over to me and said, "Would you like to meet a nice young lady?" And, "Sure."

Lawrence Kaplan

She was sitting at a table having her lunch. She brought this cake with her, and her sister was married a few days before. Her mother couldn't keep the cake in the freezer "she didn't have enough room for it. So she gave it to Jeanie to take to school and share it with all the teachers. So I came over there and they offered me a piece of cake, and I had the opportunity to meet Jeanie. And I did, and I found out how she goes home "she was on the same bus, I remember that. We met after school, and we walked and we talked. Things were going great, and I said, "Gee whiz, she's a great gal for me."

Lawrence Kaplan

You know, I was anxious to get married after the war. So in seven weeks "seven weeks, I proposed to her, and we got married. That was a very short courtship. And we've been married now for 65 years. We have three children, seven grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. So, it's been a successful marriage, and it's a wonderful experience "so here we are "my favorite wife.

Interviewer

So tell me "you get married. How old are you now, about?

Lawrence Kaplan

30.

Interviewer

About 30 years old.

Lawrence Kaplan

Yeah. Three years in the Army.

Interviewer

You're working as a substitute teacher.

Lawrence Kaplan

Right.

Interviewer

What happens next? Where do you go from there?

Lawrence Kaplan

Alright, so I had a job in Washington. That is, before I was drafted, I had what you would call tenure in the Federal Government service. I was working in the War Production Board. But now you don't need War Production any more—the war is over—so they changed that organization to the Civilian Production Administration. And that's where I had a job.

Lawrence Kaplan

So after we were married, I told Jeanie—even before we were married, I told her I have a job in Washington. She had never been away from home in Brooklyn. We told her parents that we were going to live in Washington, and I remember her mother was very disturbed at this, because Jeanie was the baby of three girls, and they were both married, and now she was losing her last child, in a sense. But we did go to Washington; I had a job at the Civilian Production Administration. That didn't last very long. They issued what they called "leave without pay." So immediately, I picked up another job—this time in the Bureau of the Census, which is in Suitland, Maryland. And so while we were in Washington, for about five months I worked in Suitland, Maryland.

Lawrence Kaplan

And then, after that sort of—I didn't—it was not particularly in my interest, so I got a job in the National Housing Agency. And I worked there for about a year and a half, because one of the great problems in the post-World War II economy was a lack of housing for G.I.s. G.I.s were returning in hordes and thousands, and they had no place to live. They got married; they wanted to start a family; so we had to try to figure out how to get the housing market going. And that's what I was—as an economist, I was involved in the Housing Agency.

Lawrence Kaplan

So I married Jean, and the date is June 8, 1946. And I was working in Washington, but her mother didn't give up on her pressure to get us back to New York. And I always had a love for the City of New York. I wanted to be here, I wanted to live here, so I said, "Alright, I'm going to quit my tenure and my job in Washington. I'm going to start a career in New York City."

Lawrence Kaplan

So I went back to New York City, and how did I get this job? One of the people in the Civilian—in the Housing Agency was also a New York person, whom I knew from my substitute teaching. When I taught at Abraham Lincoln, he taught there, too, in economics,

and here he was in Washington, very close.

Lawrence Kaplan

And he said, "You know, I'm going back as the director of an organization called 'Organization for Rehabilitation through Training.' That was an organization which took these Jewish survivors of the concentration camps, and any other young people who needed training. This is an organization which provided that training. It's called the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training. It'd teach you how to be a bricklayer, a plumber, an electrician, a carpenter—whatever interested you in a trade; and that's what they did.

Lawrence Kaplan

So we had a central office here in New York City, on 72nd Street in Manhattan. And I served as Chief of what you call the Statistical Analysis Section. I was supposed to gather the statistics of schools which were operating all over Europe, and in terms of how much we were spending, how many people registered, the courses that they were taking, and so forth, and put it all together for the management. And then my first child was born, Harriet; the oldest of mine, January 5, 1948. But then—but then after two years, they said, "We're going to close the New York office" of ORT, it's called ORT—and we're moving to Geneva.

Lawrence Kaplan

"You can have your job. You're free to come with us and take a job in Geneva, Switzerland." That didn't appeal to me. I didn't want to go back to Europe. I didn't care for Europe from my war experience. I never wanted to go back. Not that I never did go back—we did, but at that time, I didn't want to. So I decided to change altogether. I had a Federal background, so I went into the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and there, I served for about eight years.

Lawrence Kaplan

And I had a series of experiences there in eight years. I learned a lot—"Regional Construction Analyst, Productivity Analyst. I finally became Chief Information Officer, where I had to know all of the programs of the BLS and to provide this information to people who call up for information about different problems they had about the statistics, etc." And I started to teach after my son was born, and in October, 1950, I really needed—"oh, oh"—have to tell you a little bit about how we got a place to live in New York. As I said, there was no housing, but we—very fortunately, we were able to get a place in Washington through a friend. We had an apartment in Washington when I went, after we were married, on Ontario Road NW.

Lawrence Kaplan

And we figured, "Well, how can we get an apartment in New York? We're going back." So we arranged to look for what's called an apartment exchange. We're going to advertise in the paper. We had to get permission from where we were living to accept a new tenant so we can go to that apartment and make an exchange. So we advertised, and we found an apartment at 800 West End Avenue, corner of 99th Street. And this woman was going back with her husband to Washington for some kind of a job, so we were able to make a trade. So our buses—"trucks"—moving trucks crossed on the road to Washington. So we went to New York, they went there, so we had an apartment.

Buoyed by the G.I Bill
Lawrence Kaplan

Alright, so then I figured, "Well, since I have an apartment, what Federal agency can I go to," and I discovered the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And I went there, and they accepted me. So I had a job now in the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and I served them for, as I said, eight years.

Interviewer

Yes.

Lawrence Kaplan

At the same time that I was working there, I had to have money, now, to support a house, and we had two children, so I started teaching at night at Baruch College in Manhattan, part of the City University. And I taught statistics, which was one of my favorite subjects, as well as all forms of economics—different branches of economics—banking principles, etc.

Lawrence Kaplan

So I was teaching at Baruch College, and I taught there, believe it or not, about 18 years, part-time, in the evening. That is, I'd finish my work at the BLS, I'd pick myself up, and I'd most of the time walked from where we were on 9th Avenue in the '30s to 23rd Street and Lexington, where Baruch was. And then I would grab a quick bite—a hot dog, or whatever it was—and I'd go into the classroom. And I had one or two classes every night, so I had a double salary, and I was really fortunate now to take care of my family properly.

Lawrence Kaplan

So that worked out pretty well, and then I got my Ph.D. in the meantime. In 1958, I earned my Ph.D.—it was a long haul—but I must say I owed a lot to the Army for the G.I. Bill of Rights. They really took care of us when we came back from World War II. Number one, I was able to buy a house. And they guaranteed a 4% 30-year mortgage—4% and 30 years. So we bought a house with a small down payment of about \$1,000.00 in Queens. We bought a house in 1950.

Lawrence Kaplan

My son was born in 1950. We bought a car in 1950, so we were able now to drive around a little bit. And after my son was born, we found that this apartment in Manhattan was a little bit crowded, so we decided to buy a house. And the government offered me this mortgage, which I accepted. We bought a house in Bayside, and in addition to that, they also were willing to pay for my Ph.D. courses at Columbia, and that was a great help.

Lawrence Kaplan

So I took those benefits, and I finished my Ph.D., eventually—it took me a long time; it was a big job. But my work at the Bureau of Labor Statistics helped me in selecting a topic for my thesis: "Factors Affecting Productivity in the Home-Building Industry." And with my background in housing and experience—I was able to write a Ph.D. which was accepted at Columbia. So I got my Ph.D. in 1958, and I said, "Look, I can stay here at BLS as long as—for the rest of my life, if I wanted to." But I wanted to pay back a little

bit the City of New York for giving me all the benefits that it gave me: a free college education, all of my education in New York in public schools.

Lawrence Kaplan

And I decided to leave BLS and to take a job. My first job in the city was at City Planning, and there I worked for about three and a half yearsâ€”Department of City Planningâ€”as an economist.Â And then I went on to the Department of Real Estate, another two or three years; and then to the Department of Relocationâ€”always with a very wonderful Director of Research and Planning.Â That was my field.

Lawrence Kaplan

And I wrote many, many books and studies.Â I did a demographic study committee for the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies.Â They wanted to know where the Jewish people were living and moving to, because they wanted to build a hospital.Â They didnâ€™t know where to put it. And they wanted to see where the Jewish people was moving, so I undertook that study for them.Â And as a result of that, I had a book which I put together, giving the statistics, and it was a very interesting study.Â I could go into it if you want me to.

Interviewer

Yeah, sure, briefly. Please go over it.

Lawrence Kaplan

It was called â€œthe Yom Kippur method.â€Â Jewish kids didnâ€™t go to school on Yom Kippur.Â Theyâ€™re supposed to be praying in the synagogue.Â We took every school in New York Cityâ€”we divided up the city into planning areas.Â We tookâ€”from every school, every elementary schoolâ€”the drop in attendance between the regular schedule and what happened on Yom Kippurâ€”how many stayed home?Â Itâ€™s not a perfect method, because a lot of non-Jewish kids always took off on Yom Kippur, too. It wasâ€”you know, they didnâ€™t do very much.Â It was sort of a holiday.

Lawrence Kaplan

We estimated the number of people dropping off, and we found the number of people in the elementary school, letâ€™s say from ages 10 to 14.Â From that segment, we were able to estimate the number of people in each of the age segments of the population.Â So for every planning area in New York City, we were able to give you a count of how many Jewish people were living there.Â Now, the question is how many live there in that area, letâ€™s say over a ten-year period?Â Well, the Census Bureauâ€”we took an estimate of the people who were living in that area before and after we had our study.

Lawrence Kaplan

So we were able to estimate the number of people who were leaving the city. We estimated that, and we found out that the people in Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, were moving eastward, into Queens and Nassau County.Â But the flow to Queens was the heaviest, and so they decided to build the Long Island Jewish Hospital where it is now located, becauseâ€”as a result of our study.Â So I think that was a big plus.Â The other plus Iâ€™m happy about isâ€”going back a minute, I didnâ€™t tell you about Buchenwald Concentration Camp.

Interviewer

Yeah, tell me.

Horrors of War
Lawrence Kaplan

My division liberated the Buchenwald Concentration Camp on April 11, 1945. When we got there, there were about 20,000 survivors. Most of them were near death, were close to death. We brought in our medics and our medical trucks, and we carted all those people out to field hospitals, where we gave them love, compassion, and most important of all: food. We nourished them back to health, and saved thousands of people, and for that, I'm very, very proud of. That was a great accomplishment, just as the same as building the Long Island Jewish Hospital.

Interviewer

You know, I'd like to ask you "your division, you said, liberated the concentration camp.

Lawrence Kaplan

Right.

Interviewer

You obviously saw these people; you saw them in the hospitals; you saw them, just in general. And you're a Jewish man living in a different nation, but at some level, these are people who are "they're of your faith. Even if they're not of your faith, you're witnessing some horrible atrocities that these people"

Lawrence Kaplan

Right.

Interviewer

What were your feelings at the time, or what do you remember thinking?

Lawrence Kaplan

Unbelievable. I took pictures; I couldn't believe it. I went into the crematorium, where they burned people up "dead bodies, throwing them into the fire. And all that came out was ashes of all these people. And the people were so mistreated. It was "you can't believe what I saw in that concentration camp. I took pictures of the crematoria. I even took pictures of some of the inmates, and how they looked. Most of them had to be carried out on stretchers.

Interviewer

Now, in general, something that we ask a lot of veterans is, generally speaking, how the war affected you religiously. Some veterans say it made them more religious. Some say it made them a lot less religious. Some, it had no effect. For your case, not only did you see the horrors of war, but you also saw atrocities against, you know, members of your own religion.

Lawrence Kaplan

Innocent people, right.

Interviewer

But whatâ€”did that have any effect onâ€”being a Jewish man?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.

Interviewer

Did you still believe? Did you believe stronger?

Lawrence Kaplan

I still believe strongly. I still believe that this is something that should not have happened. I blame the Germans. I have never stepped foot in Germany since the war. I donâ€™t want to travel there or do anything, have anything to do with the culture. â€™Cause, you knowâ€”and yet, I know a lot of German people now that are very nice and decent people. I canâ€™t understand how a people like the Germans could do what they did. But this is a new generation. They donâ€™t even remember what their forefathers were doingâ€”killing people at random.

Lawrence Kaplan

But you canâ€™t blame the young generation, and I know young people, maybe your age, or younger, even, or older, who are really great people. But theyâ€™re removedâ€”that is, they donâ€™t have the memories and pictures of the things that I remember, and I canâ€™t hold it against them. So I know I have to accept them. But as far as I was concerned, personally, we were always members of a congregation. When I got outâ€”we were married by a rabbi.

Lawrence Kaplan

All of our children received Hebrew educationsâ€”three children.â€” One of them married out of the religionâ€”one out of the three.â€” The others, they were married at one time. One is still marriedâ€”the other oneâ€™s separated.â€” But as far as grandchildren are concernedâ€”different story, new generation, so I donâ€™t have to go into that.

John Jayâ€™s One Man Department of Economics
Interviewer

Butâ€”yeah. So Iâ€™d like to speak a little bit now about your time as a professor at John Jay.

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, John Jay College.

Interviewer

Yeah, the work you did at West Point, and then weâ€™re going to get back into the war after we take a quick break. So for now, letâ€™s discuss what you did there, what you did at West Point, and then weâ€™ll break, and then weâ€™ll go back to more stuff.

Lawrence Kaplan

Okay.

Interviewer

So tell me about John Jay

Lawrence Kaplan

I was teaching at Baruch College. I was teaching statistics, and one of my colleagues in statistics was offered a job at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. It was called, at that time, College of Police Science. And he was being offered the job of Dean of Faculty, and he knew me very well. And they needed a person in economics, and he said to me, "Larry, would you be interested in full-time teaching at John Jay?" I'm going to be Dean of Faculty. I can get you a job. I said, "Sure, I'd be interested." And so he arranged an interview for me with the acting president, at that time a guy by the name of Michael Murphy.

Lawrence Kaplan

He looked at my background. I had a Ph.D., which was very much a plus. I had a tremendous background in writing in the field of economics. And I had a background of teaching. I'd been teaching all these years at Baruch. So I was immediately hired, so I was the one-man Department of Economics for many years at John Jay.

Interviewer

So you're at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice now, and?

Lawrence Kaplan

The name was changed.

Interviewer

Yeah, and became?

Lawrence Kaplan

Well, at the beginning, it was only for police. Police, as you know, work around the clock. They have eight-hour shifts: 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM, 4:00 PM to midnight, midnight to 8:00 AM. And their tours rotate; that is, you always don't have the same tour. Every two weeks, you shift into the next category. So they couldn't get a college education, because the courses were given. If they were working during the day from 8:00 to 4:00, they couldn't go to school in the daytime. They had to go at night. But if you worked from midnight to 8:00, you could go in the morning. Before you go home.

Lawrence Kaplan

So we set up the college in such a way that policemen could get a college education by giving the same course in the morning and in the evening. And the person could come to either class to get full credit, because you're giving the same lecture in the morning and in the evening. And hundreds of police registered for the bachelor's degree, which they could never acquire elsewhere, and we educated hundreds of police, and they're wonderful students. They're very conscientious. They worked hard;

they learned a lot. It was a wonderful experience.

Interviewer

So you have years, I'm sure, at John Jay. And then, eventually, from what I understand, West Point actually wanted you to help them in some way. Could you speak to that?

Lawrence Kaplan

Sure. They registered it as a Military Academy, and they're interested in people who were in criminal justice and who have knowledge and background in criminal justice. So they came to our college and spoke to our president, and said that they would like to have an exchange of professors.

Lawrence Kaplan

That is, they want us to send our professors to West Point, not to teach the cadets, because they had a standard program, they had a professor. This was for the military who were stationed at West Point, to train whatever they did as jobs in the Army, to train the cadets in military matters. Those people needed an opportunity to get a college education.

Lawrence Kaplan

And so the president had to determine to get people, which people and which courses, to get to teach them what they had to know in order to help them to get credit for college courses. Which eventually they could acquire to help them professionally. So I was selected to go up to West Point. I used to go up to West Point, let's say if I had to give lectures on Friday. I'd go up Thursday night. I stayed at the Hotel Thayer overnight. In the morning, someone would pick me up for breakfast, and then I would go into an auditorium, and there they were.

Lawrence Kaplan

The courses they wanted, particularly of interest to these people: personal finance and money management. Military people don't have too much background or knowledge of that. And so what I would do is I would lecture all day Friday. Every Friday, they got, oh, about three-four weeks of college work, and so I taught them that was my job. And I took it readily—they relieved me of a course at John Jay to give this. There was no—I didn't have to change—no salary change or anything like that. I divided my time between West Point and John Jay [College], and that's how I got involved.

Paying back the Army, Giving back to Brooklyn College

Interviewer

So you're obviously doing something, at this point in your life. You know, to a certain extent, I suppose you're actually paying back the Army, in some way, because you are, as you said before, you were grateful to the military because they'd given you a very, very, very generous loan, with a very low payment in terms of interest, for a car, for housing. Did you feel, as you were doing this work for West Point, that you were giving back to a certain extent? Or did that not really cross your mind?

Lawrence Kaplan

It did. I always—in fact, all of the time that I worked for the City of New York, it was a period of giving back. I even gave back to Brooklyn College. I went back to Brooklyn

College to celebrate the 50th anniversary of my graduation. I graduated in 1937 from Brooklyn College. 50 years later, it was 1987. I said to the people at Brooklyn College, I said, "Look, these people have never been members of the Alumni Association, most of them.

Lawrence Kaplan

Most of them didn't become members. I said, "Let's get these people to become members of the Alumni Association. We'll call this group 'The Post-50th Alumni'—people who have already enjoyed 50 years of benefits for the education they received for free. And now, here's an opportunity for them to become alumni, and to help the college, and to help themselves."

Lawrence Kaplan

So we organized a luncheon, which we had for every class that hit their 50th anniversary were invited to this luncheon. They paid; they brought their wives, their children, their grandchildren. We had a beautiful luncheon at Brooklyn College. They became part of a new group called "The Post-50th Alumni," and they're still members. Now you can tap them for money, because all of them feel they have a debt to the college. And that was my payback.

Interviewer

Now, from what I understand, you're also involved, somewhat, in Manhasset today, where you retired, in World War II-related matters; in memorials?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.

Interviewer

And various things. Could you speak to that?

Lawrence Kaplan

Since I live in Manhasset, which is—let me see. We moved here in 1977.

Interviewer

Yes.

Lawrence Kaplan

So that's what, 34 years? About 34 years in Manhasset. I said, "Why isn't there a memorial for World War II?" I looked around; I studied all of the memorials that were built by the American Legion. I'm a lifetime member of the American Legion. I'm a lifetime member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I'm a lifetime member of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States. I paid up all my dues—I'm free for the rest of my life. I said, "Why don't we have a memorial?"

Lawrence Kaplan

So I went—I worked hard. I studied memorials. I said, "They have two memorials for World War I—not one memorial for World War II." I went to them; I made a presentation

to the Board of Trustees. They were all in agreement. They all wanted toâ€”â€œYes, letâ€™s do it,â€ because I went to the Park Commissioner, I said,

Lawrence Kaplan

â€œHow do we do that?â€ He said, â€œWell, we have the power to do that, but we have to get the direction from a veteransâ€™ group.â€ So I went to them, and I said, â€œLook, all I ask you to do is to vote â€”yesâ€ on a memorial for World War II.â€ They were all nodding their heads â€”yeah,â€ but one guy, one fellow, got up and said, â€œJust a minute.â€ Richard Miller.

Lawrence Kaplan

He didnâ€™t want to have this memorial. â€œThere are too many memorials in Manhassetâ€”we donâ€™t need any more memorials.â€ And he nixed the whole thing. I was very much upset. They turned me down. So I went to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and I made the same presentation. But they bought it full, and they supported itâ€”we sent a letter to the Park Commissioner, we said, â€œWeâ€™reâ€”Veterans of Foreign Wars supports a memorial.â€ And they said, â€œOkay.â€ The Park Department had the land, and they had the money, and they wereâ€”we wereâ€”they were able to build this memorial at no expense to the veteransâ€™ groups. What did they have to lose?

Lawrence Kaplan

I was very upset. I never went to an American Legion meeting again since then. At any rate, the memorial is now under construction. Itâ€™s being built for Manhasset, onâ€”you know where Shelter Rock Road is?

Interviewer

Yes.

Lawrence Kaplan

Do you know where Lord & Taylor is?

Interviewer

Yes, I do.

Lawrence Kaplan

If you look south from Lord & Taylor, thereâ€™s a long strip of land, which is parkland owned by the town of Manhasset. And the Park Department has jurisdiction over that.Â They built, already, a gold star memorial on that site, with fountains, waterfalls; listing every name of every G.I. that was killed in war since the Civil War.Â About 100 feet south of that, thereâ€™s a plot of land with nothing on it.Â And this one Park Commissioner, Bernie Rolston, is the one who took it under advisement, and heâ€™s the one whoâ€™s supervising.

Lawrence Kaplan

He designed the memorial, and heâ€™s supervising the constructionâ€”Bernie Rolston.Â And it should be readyâ€”weâ€™re shooting for Labor Day, and thatâ€™s where we stand.Â Itâ€™s going to be a big dedication ceremony, and thatâ€™s what weâ€™re looking forward to.

Interviewer

Alright, so let's break here, and then we'll come back, and we're going to focus more on the war and your wartime experiences, okay?

Lawrence Kaplan

Okay. So how much?

Searing Memories of Pearl Harbor, 9/11, and their Aftermaths

Interviewer

Ok, so now we're rolling. We're back. And the first thing that we ask everyone is there's a special archive at West Point dedicated to fallen soldiers. Did you know anyone that you'd like to speak about, kind of as a memorial to them, that fell, that was part of your unit that you knew? That was in your unit, perhaps?

Lawrence Kaplan

I can't say that I can. I knew many, many men who lost their lives in my unit and in Intelligence, in Military Intelligence. There used to be a group in Intelligence that used to lead a tank column. Now, imagine: men in tanks, protected. They take this person because he spoke German fluently. They put this person in a jeep, with no protection, to lead the column of tanks, in enemy territory, in order to talk to the soldiers, the German soldiers who were there, to ask them to surrender, and not to subject themselves to the dangers of war of death. Many of them were shot. They didn't even want to hear the message. They killed them.

Interviewer

And you knew some of these men that were killed like this.

Lawrence Kaplan

They were in Intelligence; they were in a different group. They were in a group called Interrogation of Prisoners of War. That is, when we took prisoners, we would interrogate them in order to improve our knowledge of the organization and missions of various German troop divisions. That was a specialty, and we would put all this information they'd give us the name of the division, of the unit. We would ask them for the names of the people who were in charge, how many men they had, how well they were fed. Do they have any gripes?

Lawrence Kaplan

All things of that sort, which improve our knowledge of the people in front of us, in terms of intelligence as to who they are, what they are, and what we could expect. So these were people who spoke German fluently, because they interrogated the prisoners.

Interviewer

And just invariably, because of their skill set and what they were sent to do, a lot of them, a lot of these men, fell?

Lawrence Kaplan

That's it, yeah.

Interviewer

So something else we ask everyoneâ€”thereâ€™s a special archive on the site thatâ€™s related to the recentâ€”what Bush referred to as the War on Terror.â€” It deals with the start of that warâ€”9/11.â€” Where were you on 9/11, and what happened that day for you?

Lawrence Kaplan

I think I was home.â€” I was watching television.â€” And they brought television cameras there to photograph what was happening, so I kept up to date.â€” I think theyâ€”thatâ€™sâ€”I donâ€™t recall why I was home, but I remember viewing it all on tape, on television, as it was going on.â€” â€œBreaking newsâ€”they call it â€œbreaking news.â€” So I sawâ€”I knew what was happening.â€” I didnâ€™t expect that the buildings would collapse, and that so many people would lose their lives, but apparently thatâ€™s what happened.

Interviewer

Do you remember where you were when you found out Bin Laden had been killed?

Lawrence Kaplan

Who?

Interviewer

Do you remember where you were when you found out that Bin Laden had been killed?

Lawrence Kaplan

I think also watching a TV programâ€”a news program.â€” I was very happy about that, because he was a very mean individual.â€” And evenâ€”to the very end of his life, he was only planning how to kill more people.

Interviewer

Now, youâ€™ve actually lived through the two most recent attacks on America.â€” You lived through Pearl Harbor, and then the 9/11 attacks.

Interviewer

Right.

Interviewer

Did youâ€”did you feel similarly about those two events, or did they feel very different to you?

Lawrence Kaplan

I was upset.â€” I was certainly upset by it.â€” I mean Americaâ€”I mean I remember Pearl Harbor very well.â€” I remember the 9/11 very well.â€” I follow up allâ€”itâ€™s very disturbing to me.â€” I know what it means, I mean, taking innocent lives; and I realize that we have an obligation to fight this kind of terror, as a nation.â€” And I think weâ€”the wars that weâ€™ve had, in fighting theseâ€”Afghanistan, Iraq?

Lawrence Kaplan

The soldiers who are fighting in these wars are not getting the proper attention that they deserve.Â The country is not upset by whatâ€™s going on in those countriesâ€”in general.Â You have to live through something like this to understand whatâ€™s going on.Â But these soldiers come homeâ€”many of them are broken people.Â They arenâ€™t able to do anything constructive.

Interviewer

Did you have a similar experienceâ€”not necessarily having PTSD when you came back from Europe, but did you feel traumatized and changed at all?

Lawrence Kaplan

Iâ€™”I was changed, because I saw so much destruction of human life, of human beings, which was very disturbing to me.Â Itâ€™”the kind of thing that gives nightmaresâ€”you get nightmares.Â But as I said a lot before, if youâ€™”re surviving, you feel successfulâ€”to that extent, you can continue your own life.

Lawrence Kaplan

But it didnâ€™t disturb me to the point where I was unable to think, or to concentrate, or to make my own plans, or to know in my own mind what I wanted to do.Â I always wanted to complete my Ph.D.Â I mean that was my agenda.Â I knew, also, that someday I wanted to teach full-time in a college.Â I had experience teachingâ€”I enjoy the field.Â I was successful in that.Â I got my Ph.D., thanks to Army help.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lawrence Kaplan

So Iâ€™”these things have bothered me, but not to the point where I came back so traumatized that I was unable to function.

Interviewer

Did any of the images really stick with you in particular that you saw, or is there anything that you rememberâ€”sights, smells, soundsâ€”what really stuck with you, or even sticks with you today?

Lawrence Kaplan

You wouldnâ€™t believe it, but Iâ€™”ve seen bodies.Â For example, I see an enemy tank and someone from in the tank coming out and getting shot, and standing next to the tank, with one leg off.Â I mean thatâ€™s a scene I canâ€™t forget.Â People whose arms, bodiesâ€”some people shot in the abdomen, and their intestines spilling out on the ground.Â These are pictures that I remember.

Interviewer

And this is with your own eyes, while itâ€™s happening.Â This is literally in combat youâ€™”ve seen these things.

Lawrence Kaplan

Yeah, right.

Interviewer

How many times did you really come under fire?Â Like did you really find yourself where you were thinking that, you know, “This is bad?”

Lawrence Kaplan

Well, you remember when we were surrounded in Brest, for example.

Interviewer

Yes.

Lawrence Kaplan

Wherever we went, I lived in a foxhole.Â I had to dig a foxhole.Â It’s about four feet deep in the ground, but it had to be big enough so my whole body could fit into it, with my head below, to protect ourselves.Â There were times when I thought this was the end for us, actually—like in Brest.Â But we were saved—we were saved by the Air Force that came over and knocked out a section.

Interviewer

Do you remember the time during the war when you were most terrified?

Lawrence Kaplan

I would say that situation in Brest.Â It’s one that I remember so very well.Â But we were always—I mean wherever we went, wherever we stopped, we had to dig a foxhole.Â That was part of the routine, shall we say.Â We had bedrolls, which we unfolded in the field, wherever we were—on grass, in mud, whatever, where we had to unfold.Â I was always fearful that the—a tank would roll over me at night.Â You know, you can’t see such fine details as someone sleeping in the sleeping bag.

Interviewer

But—and accidents like that really did happen, from what I understand.Â Like I’m sure—did anything happen like that—like your friend, for example?

Lawrence Kaplan

No.

Interviewer

You said ran over the—

Lawrence Kaplan

No, not the—no one that I know.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lawrence Kaplan

It didn't happen to anyone that I know, but I was fearful of that, because we slept out in the open. And there's always tanks moving around, and in a sense I was in Headquarters, and that's a protected group—the generals, the high brass. They have to be together to lay out all the things, to lay out the maps, the strategy—where do you move, and which direction to move.

Lawrence Kaplan

And so when we moved, the Headquarters Company was between two columns of tanks. They may have been five miles away on a road, and the other one could be five miles away on another road, but there were two—and Headquarters—and our trucks would move on another road, between the two. So in that sense, we were protected. They protected the leaders of the division. There are 15,000 men in the division with hundreds of tanks. And there's as I said, that's the way we moved forward. They had to be parallel roads.

Interviewer

Yes.

Lawrence Kaplan

For us to move in the middle.

Lawrence Kaplan

Now, another area I'm interested in is the relations between the British and the Americans before we had the special relationship we do today. So when you were younger—even growing up—the British still had the British Empire. And did you view them the same way we view them today? Did you personally see them as our very close allies, or was it much different then?

War is Hell

Lawrence Kaplan

It didn't mean much to me. But when I was overseas, I was in England, and I met soldiers in uniform. When we were in Normandy or in Brittany, I saw British soldiers. I had a chance to talk to them. I visited homes when I was in England where somebody was in uniform. Several people in a family could be in uniform. So I had a chance to meet the people. And I got to see that—what was going on when I was in Europe in battle—five campaigns. I realized that war is—war is hell—that a civilized people should do anything possible to avoid war, because it's so damaging to people.

Lawrence Kaplan

And that's why I'm concerned about our soldiers today. See, in those days—in World War II, everybody in America was involved.

Interviewer

And today we have a volunteer Army, so it's very different.

Lawrence Kaplan

Very different. Now, all of the rest of us go around doing our own business, but the soldiers are fighting there—we didn't even have a G.I. Bill for these returning soldiers to give them all of the wonderful benefits that we had after World War II. I think now we have something.

Interviewer

Do you think that—well, first I'd like to ask you this: what did you feel like you were fighting for during World War II? What did you think was on the line, personally, but also for the nation as a whole, or for the world?

Lawrence Kaplan

Right.

Interviewer

What did you think you were fighting for?

Lawrence Kaplan

I—we in America are a democracy. What we were fighting was a form of despotism. It was the Nazis, the Germans, who were killing people—thousands and thousands of people—six million people killed, Jewish people killed, during World War II. It horrifies me. So as far as our mission is concerned, I was very happy to serve, because I felt that I was fighting this kind of despotism. We had to defeat them. Just think if they were victorious, the kind of society—what kind of society would we be living in today?

Lawrence Kaplan

They'd dominate the world and live with that kind of philosophy, where they, at random, kill innocent people. And I said, "This must be defeated." We couldn't survive as a nation if they won.

Interviewer

Now, if you were ever captured, you probably would've been in a great deal of danger.

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.

Interviewer

Did this ever cross your mind, because you were a Jewish man, and—

Lawrence Kaplan

Oh, yes, of course it was, because on my dog tags I had imprinted "H," Hebrew. If I were—if I were captured, I'd be dead. I would end up in a concentration camp.

Interviewer

Now, what rank were you? What was your actual title?

Lawrence Kaplan

Technician 3rd Grade.Â You see, in Military Intelligence, rank is very, very insignificant.Â I studied in Camp Richard with all the top Army brassâ€”colonels, majors, captains, privates were all together.Â It didnâ€™t matter.Â Now, they offered to send me to infantry training, to give me a commission, but you had to leave wherever you were.Â I didnâ€™t want to leave; I was doing work that I enjoyed.Â I was in a unit.Â I knew what I was doing.

Lawrence Kaplan

If I left and went to school, letâ€™s say, back in the States, to become a ranking officer, Iâ€™m not sure that the Army would send me back to where I was.Â Theyâ€™d get somebody else to fill my seat.Â They wouldnâ€™t need me in this particular function or division or unit.Â I didnâ€™t accept it.

Interviewer

Yeah.Â So Iâ€™d also like to ask you this: youâ€™re an economist.Â You had an economic background before the war.Â You got your Ph.D. after the war.Â But even going into the war, you had a good base in economicsâ€”you know, the foundations of capitalism, the way it works.Â While you knew all these things, we were also allies with a Communist stateâ€”the Soviet Union.Â And you said that during V-E Day, you viewed the Soviets as your brothers.Â They were a different nation, but you saw?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yeah, you are.Â If youâ€™re fighting on the same side, you view the people that are on your side as brothers.

Interviewer

Yes.Â Now, my question is before the war, before the war broke out, what did you think of the Soviet Union?Â Did it enter your consciousness the way that Germany did, or not so much?

Lawrence Kaplan

I didnâ€™t like the system.Â My forbearers would not have come to America if they were comfortable living in the Russian domain.Â Theyâ€™the anti-Semitism in those nations was unbearable.Â They were pushed around; they were killed.Â There were pogromsâ€”what they calledâ€”just for no reason at all.Â A batch of soldiers would come in and kill and rape and destroy innocent lives.

Interviewer

Soâ€™

Lawrence Kaplan

I was not in favor of it, no.

Interviewer

And then during the war, you said, you go through these things together with your allies.Â Your feelings change, and you really respected them for what they had gone through and what they had fought back against.

Lawrence Kaplan

Right.

Interviewer

But after the war, when the Cold War restarted again, did your feelings revert back to, not necessarily the same thing, but did they change insofar as you didn't view them as, I mean, brothers, like you had in the past?

Lawrence Kaplan

I was—I still recognized the fact that they were not a democracy—that the people in those countries were not free. And I recognized that, yes. I didn't feel towards them as brothers in the sense that you would, let's say, someone in England. England is a democracy. If you travel to England—which we've done. We went back. I took Jeanie; I showed her where I studied in Knightsbridge. I took her to the department stores that I knew there, and so forth. You feel a kinship.

Lawrence Kaplan

But I did not go back to Germany—I would not step foot in Germany again, because the ground literally is dripping with blood, and I can't. I can't—I wouldn't buy—all my life, I would never buy a Mercedes Benz, for example—assuming I could afford one—because it's German. I have no desire to go back there and see any of the sights. If I went to Europe, I would only visit France, for example, which is—I don't know today how friendly they are toward America. But in those days, they were very friendly to America, which was—France was actually a democracy—England.

Democracy for All: An Unattainable Ideal

Interviewer

Now, you said a bit earlier—back to this concept of being like brothers-in-arms, —cause you said you respected the Soviets during the wartime because they'd gone through something that was similar. Generally speaking, what did you think it is that brings men so close together in wartime? Is it the proximity to danger? Is it the fact that you have similar experiences? What, for you, or what in general, do you think makes men become brothers like this?

Lawrence Kaplan

Being on the same side in a war will bring people together, because the dangers, the feeling you have—have an impact. And you forget about the other things. If you look at China today, for example, the Chinese people don't have democracy. Yet they accept their situation overwhelmingly. Why?

Lawrence Kaplan

Because they have the feeling that what's happening in China is so great, is helping so many people in so many ways, that they're willing to keep the system that they have—the undemocratic system, and to maintain those people in power, because they're doing such good for the nation as a nation.

Lawrence Kaplan

So there—it's like in a war, they're—you're on the same side with them, so

theyâ€™re not clamoring for the right to have a vote, to support political parties, to make decisions of the people. They accept what they have, because whatâ€™s leading them, whatâ€™s guiding them, is they haveâ€”thatâ€™s what they want. They want to see China grow. They want to see buildings go up. They want to see job opportunities grow. And so theyâ€™re accepting.

Lawrence Kaplan

How I felt toward Russia, for example. People there are not living freely. They donâ€™t have what we would call a true democracy. So today, I donâ€™t feel that way about them as a people. I have no desire to go back. Some people ifâ€”actually, â€œWell, my father comes from Russia, so Iâ€™d like to see where he comes from.â€ I have no desire to go back. If they came here, itâ€™s because they had to go out. They had to leave. They were not welcome. So why should I go back?

Interviewer

I do want to ask youâ€”you said you were fightingâ€”you said this earlier in the interview, that when you were fighting against Germany, you thought you were fighting against despotism. Did you think that democracy would spread in the post-war world? In other words, did you think that you were making the world safe, to an extent, for democracy? Was that something that you believed?

Lawrence Kaplan

I hoped that as the result of all of this sacrifice, as a result of all these struggles, that the world would go in that direction. In the same way, for example, that the groups in Libya, Tunisia, Syria, those people in the streets, the demonstrationsâ€”these people want democracy. But Iâ€™m not sureâ€”Iâ€™m not sure that they really know what democracy is. I donâ€™t know whatâ€”what the end result is going to be when they overthrow these despots. Will there be a true democracy or not? We donâ€™t know. We have no knowledge.

Interviewer

Did you believe that the Germans would develop a democracy in the aftermath of the war? Were you skeptical?

Lawrence Kaplan

Iâ€™”I neverâ€”from what I saw, my feeling would be that they would never go in that directionâ€”that they canâ€™t possibly understand it. How they are today, I donâ€™t know. I donâ€™t know what they have there. But from what I saw, and from the experiences that I had there, I justâ€”I just donâ€™t want to be part of it orâ€”itâ€™s beyond my understanding.

Avoid War at any Costs

Interviewer

So, on a slightly different topic, you talked about your training a lot. Do you think that your training prepared you for when you actually were under attack, or also for when you were not under attack, but you were fulfilling your role, say, analyzing the photographs, when you were talking about the 3-D maps that you were looking at, the 3-D photos, rather? Do you think that your training prepared you for the tasks that you eventually did?

Lawrence Kaplan

You mean as a photo interpreter?

Interviewer

Well, that, but also more generally just your Basic Training as a soldier. Did you feel prepared if you were, say, surrounded and under fire in one of the foxholes?

Lawrence Kaplan

Youâ€™re neverâ€”you never enjoy that. You never accept that. There were times when I saidâ€”when the bullets were flying all around me, and I was under fire, Iâ€™d ask myselfâ€”whatâ€”I said, â€œWhat the hell am I doing here? How did I get here? Whatâ€™s going on?â€ I didâ€”you know, I couldnâ€™t understand what my destiny was, that I was to be in this situation. I did not accept it. I was not? I was unhappy about it. I said, â€œIf a guy told me, â€˜Gee whiz, what are you doing in a war?â€™ You know, theyâ€™re at home, going about their day-to-day business, free civilâ€”whatever they were. Iâ€™d think, â€œGee whiz, that guyâ€™s lucky.â€

Lawrence Kaplan

There were times when Iâ€™d say, â€œTheyâ€™re lucky. Iâ€™m not lucky. Iâ€™m doing my job, and I know that what Iâ€™m doing is important.â€ Iâ€™m not sure that I would want to leave and let the other guys do it for me. But I know that I was doing an important job. The war that we were fighting had a mission. We had to destroy despotism, and I wanted to see that accomplished.

Interviewer

You said it never gets, you know? you said it certainly never gets fun. It never gets easy in any wartime scenario, no matter what.

Lawrence Kaplan

Right.

Interviewer

But does it get easier, you think, the more that youâ€™re under attack and you have that experience, the fear of the bullets flying around youâ€”does it get easier to deal with, or does it still remain pretty much the same?

Lawrence Kaplan

Iâ€™m not sure I understand.

Interviewer

So, letâ€™s say youâ€™re under attack for the first time.

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.â I was riding, letâ€™s say, in a truck.

Interviewer

Yes.

Lawrence Kaplan

And I was under attack.Â Iâ€™d ask myselfâ€œGee whiz, howâ€™d I get into this?â€

Interviewer

But what I was saying was the next?like as the years went by, and you came under attack more and more frequently, or more times, did it get easier for you to deal with the kind of stress?

Lawrence Kaplan

To be in, while I was in the Army, you mean?

Interviewer

Yes, yes, yes.

Lawrence Kaplan

You get used to your lot in life?yes, you do.Â I mean after all, you say, â€œWell, this is? this is the way Iâ€™m living.Â This is the way itâ€™s supposed to be.â€Â And you accept it.Â Yes, you become accustomed to it.

Interviewer

So, for some closing questions, what lessons do you think we can learn specifically from World War II?

Lawrence Kaplan

I would generalize and say from any war.

Interviewer

Yes.

Lawrence Kaplan

I would say that a nation, an intelligent nation, should by all means avoid war.Â War is destructive of life, of people, of property.Â Iâ€™m not sureâ€œfor example, we fought World War I to save the world for democracy, but we didnâ€™t have that in the world after World War I, because we had to have World War II to start over again, to clean up the mess.Â So wars donâ€™t always accomplish their mission, their goals, and if thereâ€™s any better way?a better way would be to use peaceful methods to turn peopleâ€™s thinking around.

Lawrence Kaplan

For example, the demonstrations that are taking place today are peaceful methods for bringing?itâ€™s not?youâ€™re not bringing in an Army to replace Gaddafi, although I think maybe thatâ€™s the way to go, because heâ€™s?heâ€™s not quitting.Â But the point is, the people there might be able to dislodge him just in a peaceful manner.Â I mean heâ€™s firing?heâ€™s killing people, because theyâ€™re opposing him.Â He doesnâ€™t hesitate to send an army group into them and shoot innocent people who are

trying to better their lives.Â But thatâ€™sâ€”at least the destruction is minimal as compared to a war.

Lawrence Kaplan

Take the Battle of the Bulge, for example.Â Thousands, thousandsâ€”the Germans captured people, and they just massacred them.Â We have instances where they killed people only because they werenâ€™t wearing the uniform, doing a job? innocent people.

Interviewer

Speaking of which, do you remember at all the Nuremberg Trials?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yes.

Interviewer

Did you remember them at the time?Â Were you paying attention to them?

Lawrence Kaplan

I think I did, yes.Â I did, because these were evil people, and I wanted to see justice done.

Interviewer

Did you want toâ€”basically what Iâ€™m curious about is, you know, the Nuremberg Trials took place in the form of a trial.Â There were different options at the time that the Americans, the British, the Soviets were weighing.Â The British had some plans where they just said, â€œWe should justâ€”we should just kill these people.Â You know, we shouldnâ€™t even put them on trial.â€”Â Did you, at the time?is that what you wanted?Â Did you want them to be put on trial, or just punished, or what?what were your feelings towards that?

Lawrence Kaplan

I think that the procedure was the right way for a democracy to go.Â You have to give even these people, these evil people, you still have to give them the right to defend themselves, or to explain what their motives were.Â And so I thought that was the right way.Â It wouldâ€™ve been evil if you just took these people and shot them. In the case of Bin Laden, there was no way to do that, because weâ€”we couldnâ€™tâ€”you couldnâ€™t even send an army in to do this.Â You didnâ€™t know where he was.Â But when he was discovered, we?we knocked him out.Â I mean the point is?and with minimal damage.Â I mean we didnâ€™t lose any troops.Â We didnâ€™t have any headaches.Â We got rid of him, and thatâ€™s all.

Interviewer

The last things Iâ€™d like to ask you are just about different social issues that were happening in the Army while you were there.Â So, after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese-Americans of the West Coast are interned,Â and a lot of them are given the opportunity to? instead of being interned, to actually serve in the Armed Forces.Â Did you serve with any Japanese-Americans?

Lawrence Kaplan

No. No, I didn't meet any Japanese-Americans. No.

Interviewer

Do you remember what the reaction was at the time to the internment policies that our country was basically put into effect after Pearl Harbor?

Lawrence Kaplan

Say that again, please, Steve.

Interviewer

Yeah, sure. I said do you remember what the reaction was to the internment policies of Japanese-Americans.

Lawrence Kaplan

Right.

Interviewer

I'm assuming there were mixed feelings where some people were probably very strongly supportive? some are more probably strongly against. Do you remember your own feelings at the time?

Lawrence Kaplan

I accepted that, because I felt that, again, it was an evil spirit. There was an evil nation and that here they were they could be a fifth column within our democracy, which would seek to undermine the system, or to become terrorists, or god knows what. Even though there were some people in there that were good people, I mean for the general safety of the nation, I think the policy was correct, to intern them.

Interviewer

Now, another type of social issue that happened revolving around the Army was black Americans and white Americans both fighting in World War II. My first question is, did you fight with any African-Americans, or black Americans, rather, at any point?

Lawrence Kaplan

No. It's interesting, no, but no. There were blacks in the Army. There were units that were black. But I didn't have any close association with them. The 6th Armored Division had no black soldiers in it. It was all white.

Interviewer

Another question is, today, Don't Ask, Don't Tell was recently overturned. It was one of I'm sure as you know, Obama recently reversed the policy's not in effect yet, but essentially, you can be openly gay in the Army. Was there what was it like at the time? Was anyone openly homosexual? I mean, not even in your unit, but just in general at that time period in the Army?

Lawrence Kaplan

I remember, I remember one guy in my barracks who I think was a gay. A He—he was a very nice guy, but I think—he showed me pictures of him wearing a dress. I didn't know how to react, you know? I mean I thought that was sort of peculiar. But I recognized some abnormality here. But I didn't ostracize him. I mean, I felt, look, he's a soldier. He's under the same fire that I'm under, and I accepted it. What could—you know, I didn't fight him or want to hurt him in any way.

Interviewer

Yeah. Was there—was there a policy at that time against gay Americans serving? I'm honestly not sure—I don't know.

Lawrence Kaplan

I'm not sure. How—he get in there?

Interviewer

But there's certainly—you're saying this man is an exception, so at the time, at least?

Lawrence Kaplan

Yeah.

Interviewer

If people were gay in the Army, they definitely were not open about it, for the most part? at least in your experiences.

Lawrence Kaplan

In my experience. Look, there was a guy in the barracks with all the other soldiers—maybe he'd find a partner someplace—I don't know.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lawrence Kaplan

You know.

Interviewer

So in closing, the final question: do you have a message from your war experiences, or something you'd like to say to close the interview?

Lawrence Kaplan

I would like to say, that avoid war at any cost. War is hell, for everybody—the combatants, the non-combatants. It destroys people. And sometimes you don't gain your objectives through war. There must be a better way of doing things, and I think—I'm not sure that the world has yet discovered how to do it. But I'm certainly hopeful that maybe they will learn how to deal with issues between men, between nations, between countries, that could avoid the horrors of war. That's my message to the next generation. Stay away from it. Try to seek peace at any cost.

Interviewer

Alright, well, thank you very much for doing this.