WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Paula Isenberg

INTERVIEWER: Peggy Gardner

DATE: February 2, 2011

[Begin Interview]

PG: Okay, now let me start, and then I'll ask you those kinds of questions.

PI: Yeah.

PG: Today is February the 2nd, 2011, and I'm at the Givens Estate with Paula Isenberg. The Givens Estate is outside of Asheville, North Carolina, and we're here to talk with her experience in World War II, when she was a veteran. Can you hear me okay, Paula?

PI: Yes.

PG: Okay. I'm going to ask you to give me your complete name, and the first questions are background questions. When and where were you born?

PI: I was born on April 18th, 1912, in Brooklyn, New York at the Jewish Hospital.

PG: Can you tell us a little bit about your family and your parents?

PI: Yes.

PG: Your brothers and sisters if you had any?

PI: My father had been an intern at the Jewish Hospital, where he met my mother, who was a registered nurse there.

PG: Your father's a physician, a doctor? Your father was a doctor?

PI: Yes, my father was a family doctor, and he set up practice in Borough Park, in Brooklyn, one of the first doctors there to settle that part of the state.

PG: Did you live in Brooklyn most of your childhood?

PI: Yes. In fact, I had all my education through Brooklyn University, Brooklyn College as it was known then, and was all public education.

PG: And what year were you born, Paula? You told me you were born—

PI: 1912.

PG: 1912. So you're almost a hundred years old, congratulations. You say you went to college, you did attend college there, you went to the university there?

PI: Yes, I went all through elementary, high school, and also Brooklyn College, which at that time was part of Hunter College, later became an institution of its own.

PG: What did you study? What did you study, in college?

PI: I started in 193—1930. I'm sorry about these dates.

PG: Oh, that's okay.

PI: It was a little while ago.

PG: It's been a while, it has been. [both chuckle]

PI: Yes.

PG: So that was before you were in the service, that was way before.

PI: Oh, sure. There was no women's service when I entered, or before I entered.

PG: Right, right.

PI: In fact, the first organization of women veterans was the Women's [Auxiliary] Army Corps—there was another letter in there, it was W-A-A-C, and that became part of the military the same year that I entered, but there was a matter of a couple of months in there when they changed into the actual military and were recognized as part of the military.

PG: Now, what made you decide to join? Did you see posters?

PI: I could tell you the truth, or I could tell you a little story.

PG: You can tell me both if you would like. [laughter]

PI: Well, the truth, the hard truth, was that I was very anxious to get away from my family, and start my own life. But in those days, women didn't do that, they didn't leave home except, as my father said, a nice Jewish lady didn't leave home unless she was getting married.

PG: Not 'til they were married, right.

PI: So I didn't qualify, I wasn't quite ready for that. In the meantime, we had a Depression, the big one, they call, which I think was just as bad as the one we're going through now.

PG: Yes.

PI: But that's another story. Of course, I remember the newspapers at the time of the big Depression, which always featured people jumping out of windows.

PG: Oh my goodness, yeah.

PI: You don't see anything like that today.

PG: Well, I hope we won't, right.

PI: But heaven knows there's plenty of hardship existing today.

PG: There's some hard times, that's right. Well, now, when you were in college, I know that you became a court reporter. Did you train for that at Hunter College, or?

PI: Well, it all came about almost as something that was supposed to be. What happened was this. I went back to school, to just a class where they dictated and brought your speed up, because I had been promoted in the other job and I was writing my own letters.

PG: So that happened after you were in the service?

PI: No, this is all pre-service.

PG: Oh, before, okay.

PI: I haven't gotten that far yet.

PG: Okay.

PI: Anyway, the only—my only out was to join the service. That, my family could understand. So, yours truly went down and signed up and guess what? There was a minimum weight. Now, don't look at me too closely now, but try to think of me as fifty pounds lighter, and you know what? I only made ninety-nine and a half.

PG: Oh my goodness. And you had to be one hundred pounds?

PI: And I had to be a hundred.

PG: [laughs]

PI: Well, I guess the examiner realized that I might be an asset if I could get in.

PG: I'm sure they recognized that.

PI: So he said "Go out and drink as much water as you can and come right back here." Well, I did that, but you know—

PG: A whole pound worth.

PI: —I only made ninety-nine and a half. I was still shy [of] a hundred, but he fudged that.

PG: They wanted you.

PI: So actually, I was in service illegally for half a pound.

PG: Well, do you think you gained a little weight in the service, were you fed well?

PI: I gained a whole lot of weight! [chuckling]

PG: Some of the questions they have to ask you here—do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

PI: Oh, I remember that very well, in fact, my memory goes back as far as the Armistice Day of—

PG: Of World War I?

PI: Of World War I. [November 11, 1918]

PG: Good for you.

PI: Because everybody wanted to celebrate, but we got out the covers of the pots, for instance, anything that would make noise that we could bang at.

PG: That's wonderful.

PI: And I had my own little gadget to join, and that was my alarm clock, and those days we just had the wind-up type. So I wound mine up and set it to go off in a minute or so and I kept doing that until I got tired of it.

PG: [chuckles]

PI: So that was my experience.

PG: It would be a racket, a little racket to celebrate with, that's good. I know you were looking for a way to get out of your home, but did you feel like joining the military was also doing a service for—

PI: Oh, we were all very patriotic in those days.

PG: Yes, yes, that was one of the questions here.

PI: Yes.

PG: And what did your parents think when you—what did your parents say when you told them you were joining?

PI: Well, they thought—first of all, they figured I was too skinny to get in. But I was, actually. So that was one thing that wouldn't get me in, so they didn't worry about that. In fact, they didn't—they were so sure I wouldn't get in, that they didn't worry. They didn't think about it.

PG: They just didn't worry. Right.

PI: But I got in. Took a while, but I made it.

PG: So after you joined—do you remember where you went to join? Was it right in Brooklyn?

PI: I don't remember just where I was sworn in. It was part of a large group.

PG: And where did they send you?

PI: And then they sent me for basic training.

PG: Yes.

PI: To Massachusetts. [pause]

PG: Do you want to pause it?

PI: Shut it off while I think. [recording paused] Okay, I was sent to—for basic training, and right now I'm drawing a complete blank.

PG: Well, that's not required.

PI: Now, that I can look up.

PG: That's not required, that's right. We're more interested in your impressions of what it was like for you, what kind of experience you had.

PI: Well, of course, having lived at home until this time, I was a sort of sheltered individual, so that being thrown in with a group of girls from all over and that literally was so, it was a shock, really.

PG: I'm sure.

PI: There were people who came from the mountains, and they spoke so that I had trouble understanding them. That followed me for many years, being sent to different parts of the country.

PG: It's very different.

PI: And report their local idioms, and all the rest. It was wonderful.

PG: So you enjoyed that?

PI: Because it was so different. And basic training was just what you would expect, exercises, getting up at the godawful hour of five and five thirty in the morning to exercise. That was quite a shock. And chow lines, chow lines—

PG: How was the food?

PI: The food in basic was pretty bad, but at that age, didn't make too much difference, you know? If I had been a few years older, with more experience, I probably would have complained loudly. However, everything went pretty smoothly, and next thing I knew, I was into my first permanent station, which was Washington, D.C.

PG: Oh, nice.

PI: And we had barracks there, right on the fly line—not fly line—right on—

PG: Where the airplanes come?

PI: [pause] I wish there were a way to shut this off.

PG: Well, you don't need to, we can edit out the breaks where we're worried about it.

PI: Anyway, in Washington, D.C., I was part of a barracks which was situated right on the flight line. Noisy, you can imagine.

PG: Yes.

PI: Because the planes were coming and going all the time. And I was assigned to a branch of the service known as—it's hard to remember these things.

PG: That's okay.

PI: The air transport and—wait a second, it was a long—well, I was assigned to the air transport division, which had the duty of sending groups and individuals to study different problems that had to do with future landing sites, primarily. So I learned a little geography.

PG: Were you doing research for them?

PI: Not research, just reporting.

PG: Reporting.

PI: What they found out, what they said about what they knew about the future.

PG: So you had—

PI: Part of it was top secret.

PG: Yes. You were trained as a court reporter, so that was your job in the military as well.

PI: That was my job, yes. And in between, I did regular stenography for members of the unit that I was with.

PG: How long were you in Washington?

PI: All these dates without [unclear]—I've got some of them here.

PG: That's okay.

PI: [unclear]

PG: That tells all the dates? We don't need the exact dates.

PI: It's for human interest that you're asking.

PG: It's more about your own experience, as a woman in the military.

PI: Then began a series of making beds. I wish I had kept track of the number of beds that I had to make, because each place that I was sent to, I was part of the first contingent of women to join that group. And the first thing you fix are beds. So I never want to see another bed, not a military bed anyway. Beds are still good. Anyway, we were at—in Washington for a matter of quite a few months, in fact, it was more than a year, because I can remember decorating the day room for Christmas. From there, we were sent for overseas training in California at Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base, which is between San Francisco, and what's the capital of California? [now Travis Air Force Base, near San Francisco and Sacramento]

PG: Is it Sacramento? Is it Sacramento?

PI: No, no. Oh, maybe it is.

PG: I'm not sure either. [chuckles]

PI: Anyway, which is—Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base was just being set up, it was a new unit. And we continued to have all kinds of exercise programs, and supposedly getting us ready for overseas. We were asked then where we would like to go overseas. I said Alaska. I ended up in Hawaii.

PG: You went to Hawaii?

PI: Yes. I was in Hawaii for—about fifteen months. That was a wonderful experience. When we got there, we were just sort of dumped from these busses and told "You see those houses over there, and the barracks? Well, go and find yourself a place."

PG: Just find your own place?

PI: We found our own places, which was nice in a way, because most of us ended up with a friend. And I became very close with one gal, who—

PG: Did you stay in touch with her?

PI: Eh?

PG: Did you stay in touch with her for a long time? Were you in touch with her for many years after that?

PI: Well, altogether, I was there for twenty-seven months, I was in service. But that included—

PG: The time in Hawaii.

PI: A lot of other stuff, yes. Anyway, getting to know Hawaii, on our days off, we would go into town, but we always had to be with another military human being.

PG: Never by yourself.

PI: Never by ourselves.

PG: Were the men allowed to go by themselves, or did they have to also?

PI: Yes, oh, the men had all kinds of freedom. But we contrived a lot of stuff which helped us along. We—we, in my intimate group, which was, oh, about six, eight people at different times, the men were—some were enlisted and some were officers, we kept that all hidden, you know. To the outside eye, we were living very legally. Well, this native—not a native woman, but anyway, a resident of Hawaii became a friend of our gang, she entertained us at her home. And we didn't suffer anything bad, it was all good. I have some pictures, which I will show you later, of when we celebrated our first year there. We had a big to-do and you can see our area with all the tables set up, and we had a lot of fun.

PG: Gave yourself a party.

PI: Yeah. By that time, there was no problem in getting boyfriends, because the proportion of women to men, you can imagine.

PG: Very easy, I guess.

PI: In fact, after we, the women, got settled, and we had a telephone that never stopped ringing because they gave our hometowns, and everybody from wherever you were called to try to meet you.

PG: And you—oh, so did you meet a lot of people there that you—

PI: Yes, yes.

PG: That you'd known before?

PI: In our work, we worked with the men, and—

PG: Would you go dancing a lot?

PI: Would we what?

PG: Did you go out dancing a lot?

PI: Oh yes. We did everything that normal human beings do.

PG: Right, right.

PI: Of course, we didn't have the freedom to come and go as we would like, but we made up the difference, I'd say, to phrase it nicely. And—now, I have some human interest stories that I'd like for you to get in.

PG: Okay, we would like that.

PI: One of them is in the interview with Verve. [http://www.vervemag.com/august-2010/2010/7/29/for-the-record.html]

PG: Okay.

PI: But there's another one that I would—which would go in here better.

PG: Okay.

PI: And wouldn't go in there.

PG: Well, please tell us about it.

PI: It so happened that we were billeted in different groups, some of us has officer's quarters, and they turned all their rooms, of course, into spaces for us. Well, many things happened, many of them very funny. There was the one where we were entertaining VIPs, something we did regularly, they all had to see how the women lived, you know? And this one gal had bought some sheets, bedsheets, and from them made a curtain to cover her clothes hanging up on a rod. Fine. Well, she was escorting a group of VIPs through the WAC quarters, and lo and behold, one guy had to see what was behind the curtain. So he pulled the curtain aside, and lo and behold, there was a lifesize cutout in cardboard of a character called Nosy.

PG: Nosy?

PI: And that's what he saw. Well, he didn't look for any others after that.

PG: [laughs]

PI: There were many funny things that happened. The funniest was one night, during the night, this girl was awake and something awakened her. And she saw this man kneeling alongside the bed with one shoe off.

PG: That's not good.

PI: Well, of course, she jumped up, he jumped up, and was out the door before you could say "boo". But that wasn't the end of the story. He got out, all right, there was never—they never bothered to find him, let's put it that way, even though they had one shoe.

PG: That doesn't seem too hard to find that person.

PI: Well, let's say they didn't try too hard.

PG: Right, right.

PI: He got away, they never did get anybody. But as she went through the door, all she had on her was a sheet wrapped around her, that she'd grabbed as she got out of bed. Lo and behold, it got stuck on a nail, and there she was.

PG: That's not good, either.

PI: She didn't go any further.

PG: [laughs]

PI: This is a true story.

PG: How many women were in the same room in the barracks?

PI: In the barracks—well, the barracks, gosh, I guess there must have been about fifteen, I think. Funny, I don't remember. See, I was lucky, I got one of the officer's rooms.

PG: You had smaller quarters? Did you have a room of your own?

PI: So there were two girls downstairs and two girls upstairs, and—

PG: You had one room?

PI: It was a small cottage-like, and—but we did have our own bathroom for these few girls rather than the whole barracks. So that was the end of that story.

PG: So you were at the officer level? Were you—

PI: No.

PG: You were not—

PI: I was—reason I couldn't be an officer was this. Every company had its own TI[?], the number of—well, everybody had a position, I'll put it that way. There was never a position for a reporter. I was classified as a stenographer.

PG: Stenographer.

PI: It was the only thing available, but, well, I didn't have the right pull, I guess, or I would have made something there. What I did was after I got out of the service, I went into the reserves and became an—[unclear]

PG: An officer level?

PI: What?

PG: At an officer level in the reserves?

PI: It's—means a—[means an additional file?], because you can—you can see, you can spend time with either officers or enlisted, which was perfect for me [warrant officer, possibly?]. But that was after—

PG: That was after—

PI: When I became a veteran.

PG: Okay. You joined the reserves.

PI: Yeah, went into the reserves.

PG: I see. Okay. Well, when you were in the service, did you think about making it a career? Were you encouraged for that?

PI: To make—yes, of course.

PG: You were, yes?

PI: It irked me that some of these imbecilic individuals had high grades and I was only a stenographer.

PG: Those were the men?

PI: Hmm?

PG: Were they the men?

PI: The same thing.

PG: Yes.

PI: I mean, I muffed one chance to make it, was my own fault. But that's another story.

PG: Well, we're interested in all these stories, so.

PI: Yeah, well, I'm trying to think what else. Of course, in our free time, we did manage to get to some of the other islands, did some sightseeing.

PG: For pleasure?

PI: Yeah.

PG: What was your day-to-day job like, there? When you were acting as a court reporter in Hawaii—

PI: Yes.

PG: What kinds of situations?

PI: Well, there are three grades of court martial in the army, depending on the gravity of the situation, and the only one that had to be reported verbatim was the highest one that they had. I'm forgetting—I'm really beginning to lose it, now.

PG: Oh, I think you're doing fine.

PI: Now, let's see. It was the summary, that you just—summary, I have to look these up.

PG: Well, that's okay, and I'm not familiar with the terms myself to help you, I'm sorry.

PI: But anyway, there are the three different grades.

PG: Right.

PI: And only the highest one—

PG: For the seriousness of the crime.

PI: —has to actually be recorded verbatim.

PG: Right. And you did that level.

PI: I did that, yes. And in between, whenever I wasn't doing a court martial—there weren't that many, you know, I went into the pool with the other stenographers and did regular legal work, you know, whatever we had in our offices, two—usually, four legal offices, officers. Most of them had been lawyers in their regular lives, some were just students at the time.

PG: Law students?

PI: Yeah, that's where I got my practice.

PG: You did?

PI: Because after all, I never—I never specifically did any study, except on my own. There were the phrases that you use all the time, and you had to either use your own or someone else's, I had other people's booklets on this stuff—adopt some of these. Because the way---should I go into this?

PG: I think you should, yes.

PI: The way the stenotype machine is set up, it's—there's a left bank of number—keys, four middle that you use your thumbs on, which are the vowels, and then a final consonant bank. And that's set up, of course, according to the way those letters—those words occur in the language that you speak. So you had your own series of—

PG: Shortcuts, or abbreviations?

PI: Short forms that you use, that's one of the ways that you got your speed up. Stenographer doesn't have—use many of those, they may have a few, but the reporter would have a whole book full of special phrases that they would use.

PG: Right. Did you write one of those books yourself, did you make a book?

PI: I didn't write one, no, but I think I still have my book.

PG: You have your own—you had your own way of doing it.

PI: That I had made up, yeah.

PG: Oh, that's nice.

PI: And—oh, yeah, each type of case that you had, for instance, you went to the Census Bureau for something. By the time you got through in a couple of days of that, you had your own list of special words that come back very often, and you use quickly and—

PG: Well, it's sort of an art form.

PI: For instance, is that you have been—that doesn't make much sense, but you could have that, and that you can all do in one stroke.

PG: Wow.

PI: Is or as—you is just a u, the f is for v or f, have, been—b, and so it goes.

PG: So you just go really quickly.

PI: Yeah, well.

PG: That's amazing, I think.

PI: You've got to be able to respond with your—

PG: Your brain has to be very sharp, which yours still is.

PI: It's a challenge.

PG: Right. That's pretty neat. So after Hawaii, where were you next?

PI: After Hawaii, that was towards the end of the war, World War II, I was sent back to the west coast. Air Transport Command had several stations, and they had three close to each other in California, so I was sent back supposedly to cover all three for courts martial. Incidentally, the plural of that is "courts" with an S.

PG: Courts martial. It's not at the end.

PI: Martial doesn't become plural, just the court.

PG: Okay.

PI: So that you've got it right.

PG: Well, you'd have to know that, right?

PI: Oh, yes, got to have that right. Yeah. And I think that I've forgotten everything.

PG: No. Well, now—

PI: I'm trying to think of some other—

PG: On the west coast of California did you—

PI: Eh?

PG: When you went to the west coast, what were the—what was the situation there?

PI: It was three different stations—it was great, because any time they called me for one station, say they had something that I had to do, I just happened to be busy with doing something for the other station.

PG: [laughs]

PI: It worked out very nicely.

PG: That sounds okay. I know that you did some very hard work that I read about in the Verve article?

PI: The what?

PG: I know you did some very difficult work when you had to cover some Nazi trials.

PI: That was after the war.

PG: That was after the war.

PI: Yeah. I'm trying to think of anything else to finish up with.

PG: Okay.

PI: No human stories. But I took my discharge in California, and illegally—shouldn't say that—used my discharge papers to get me home for free.

PG: I think a lot of people did creative things like that, right? You had to.

PI: You had to, you had to or you never got anywhere.

PG: Right. Well—

PI: Sure, I didn't tell you about when I was in Hawaii, one of our favorite illegal things was a shrimp dinner. Well, we were at Pearl Harbor, that's where we were stationed. And the fellas used to, in their free time, go fishing.

PG: That'd be great.

PI: Well, they managed to get all the shrimp we could possibly eat. They had one type that I've never seen anywhere else, delicious. Anyway, our fellas made a steamer out of a couple of empty gasoline tanks, I guess they were, heaven knows. They didn't taste of anything but regular water, they did a good cleaning job.

PG: That's good.

PI: We had those, and we couldn't get any liquor on our own, as enlisted people, so we had to invite an officer. [laughs] And he would bring the liquor.

PG: They would supply the liquor?

PI: Yes. That's the way we had our bashes.

PG: That's interesting. [unclear] party.

PI: And, I mean, what do you do, you come back, you're way past bedtime, you know, whatever you do to get back. You just bring the C.O., the company [sic, commanding] officer some shrimp. That takes care of that.

PG: [laughs] Get to sleep in if you do that.

PI: Yeah. I mean, those are important.

PG: Right, right.

PI: I think they made for good reading, if they—if we have to put them in space[?], you know, so they keep people's interest, you know.

PG: That's right. Well, some of the questions we have here, they want to know, did you think of yourself as an independent person before you joined the military?

PI: Did I what?

PG: Did you have an independent spirit? Do you think you had an independent spirit?

PI: Oh, spirit?

PG: Yes.

PI: Well, I came back, and you know, jobs were hard to get. But I managed to get—what'd I do for—I floated around for a while, from job to job, looking for something. And then I got a call from Washington, did I want to go to—where was it. Vietnam.

PG: Oh, really?

PI: They were having trials there. I didn't want to go to Vietnam.

PG: You didn't do that.

PI: Temperature, the—it wasn't—so I just told them that I had made commitments for the next month, and I couldn't leave until they were over. The meantime, I got another call

from Washington, did I want to go to Germany. [whispers] [unclear] wanted to go to Germany. So that begins the next series of my life. Let's take a break.

PG: You want to take a break? Okay, I'll turn that off, here.

PI: —what I was.

PG: So, you were part of the Women's Auxiliary Air Corps, that was formed right then—

PI: Yeah.

PG: In response to the need.

PI: Women's Auxiliary Air Corps. When it became part of the military.

PG: Okay. Well, I'm just going to record, here, that I want to—I'm going to thank you for what we've done so far today.

PI: Oh, don't worry about that, you can do that when you finish.

PG: [laughs] But I would like to pick this up again—next week, and do the—do another part about your war crimes experience.

PI: A lot of that, it's even going to be done with this.

PG: Right, right. So—

PI: And [unclear] tedious work.

PG: Right, I know, it is.

[recording stopped, presumably starts again the next week]

PG: [comments about recorder redacted] But your voice was very clear last time, so I think we're all right to go, so. Today is February the 11th, and this is the second part of our interview. I'm here today with Paula Isenberg again, at her residence at the Givens Estate. And in our last interview, she told me all about before the war and during the war, and today I want to start with asking you, do you remember when you heard about VE [Victory in Europe] Day, and where you were and what your celebration might have been? Or VJ [Victory in Japan] Day? Towards the end of the war, can you tell me about your experiences?

PI: Oh, you're already at the end of the war.

PG: Well, we did—

PI: Yes, all right.

PG: —now, would you like to go—

PI: Okay, yes, I do remember VJ Day. I was in San Francisco at the time, and of course, it was bedlam everywhere. I can't remember doing anything specifically, except just joining with everybody on the street and exclaiming how happy we were that the war was over.

PG: Well, it was a big deal. [laughs]

PI: Yes, it was a very big deal. And I was glad that I was not on duty at that time, and free to just make noise or join others in celebrating.

PG: Yes. Now, you continued, and stayed in the service after that, were you continued on?

PI: Well, that was in, what was it, August.

PG: August, I think.

PI: Yeah. And I was not discharged until late that fall, it must have been about November that I took my discharge, and of course, there was a problem of how to get back home, and a lot of us put back on our regular uniforms, and not—what we called the ruptured duck. That was a little piece of—supposedly, a duck, that dischargees[sic] were given at the time of their discharge, and supposedly put on their uniforms. [This refers to the honorable discharge badge or patch which allowed discharged military personnel to continue wearing their uniform until obtaining civilian clothes, but be identified as discharged and in transit rather than absent without leave. The insignia is an eagle, colloquially referred to as "The Ruptured Duck".] Well, it had a bad effect, in that if you wanted to travel free, you didn't want to show the ruptured duck, because you were no longer a member of the military. So you took your duck off, and—

PG: Was it a little badge, or like a—

PI: It was a little plaque, just a little bit of a thing. Anyway—in fact, I don't know what I've done with mine.

PG: [chuckles]

PI: Anyway, what I was trying to get across was that I wanted to get home from California without spending all the money that one had to as a civilian. So I took off the ruptured duck and just went down to the flight lines of different places and bummed rides. Well, this first one I thought was taking me to California—no, excuse me, the first one, I thought was taking me to Baltimore area, but after I got on it and it was in the air, it turned out it was going to Florida, which put a few extra miles on my travel which I hadn't expected. But I went where it went, the plane, and ended up in a company—a

female company somewhere in Florida, and I'm sorry but I don't remember where. And I pulled the same idea of removing the ruptured duck and, well, I finally managed, after a few extra days, to get into the New York area. So that was my first stop, was to get home.

PG: How long had—I guess it had been quite a few years since you had been home at all? Or did you get to go back and forth sometimes?

PI: No, I had been home once in that time.

PG: Did you go back to your parents' home, then?

PI: Yes, I did.

PG: And then you continued as a court reporter?

PI: No, I was not a court reporter. I had no job, I was unemployed.

PG: You had no job?

PI: Unemployed, yes, and the first job I had was in a law office, which at least kept me at the machine, and lo and behold, the army got in touch with me, did I want to go to Korea, and I said no, I couldn't, because I'd made arrangements to go back home—see, and that time—the next time, about—after my discharge, I ended up visiting several cities, but then I said, when I was contacted by the army to go to Korea, that I couldn't because I had made plans for a job in New York City which I had to appear for. Well, that worked, and I told them I was still interested in going overseas as a reporter, and it wasn't too long before they contacted me to go to Germany, and that I was eager for. So—

PG: Had you been to Europe before?

PI: Yes, I'd been with my family for six months in several European cities. My dad had gone to study in Vienna, and he said we were such bad children that nobody would take us—

PG: [laughs]

PI: —for the supposed year that we were supposed to go there. But, anyway—

PG: So you didn't stay?

PI: We did get to Vienna, where I didn't do much reporting, just hither and yon. We traveled with another doctor's family, so we had a bunch of teenagers, really. But anyway.

PG: But it made you want to go back, when you got asked you come to Germany, you were anxious to go?

PI: Oh, yes. I accepted the invitation to Germany very eagerly.

PG: Did you speak any German?

PI: I understood some of it, having been forced to take it in school.

PG: You had?

PI: Well, Brooklyn College was part of City College, and believe it or not, German was a requirement for graduation. I never could understand that, especially after World War I. But it was a requirement.

PG: That's interesting.

PI: So I had the basis of grammar, but very little else. It was a chance which I did not use properly, because I had six months of doing nothing but enjoying myself. Which I've regretted ever since.

PG: You mean right after your service, before you went to Germany, or? What six months are you talking about.

PI: The six months we spent in Germany.

PG: Oh, with your family.

PI: With my family.

PG: Oh, I see, okay.

PI: And did some traveling then.

PG: Okay. And you were a teenager, right?

PI: Late teenager.

PG: Late teenager.

PI: A teenager.

PG: So, was it about 1947, and the American Military Tribunal asked you to be a court reporter, is that correct?

PI: Well, let's see. That's a part of my life I can't tell you anything about, I don't remember much of it.

PG: Well, I just—I read that in the article, that the woman did. [Refers to the Verve Magazine article on Paula Isenberg.]

PI: Oh, that, yeah.

PG: So you were asked to come cover some Nazi trials?

PI: Now, the first trials that I covered, we do affectionately—which is a funny word to use there—as the [pause]—can you turn it off?

PG: Oh, sure. You don't have to remember exactly, Paula, don't worry.

PI: Yes, but I want to think of the name, what did we call it. I'm trying to think of the name of it. I've got it written down all over the place, but not where I can find it.

PG: That's okay.

PI: [turning pages]

PG: Now, they called—you didn't go to Korea when they asked.

PI: No.

PG: But then they asked you to come to Germany.

PI: To Germany, I said yes.

PG: And you said okay.

PI: Yeah.

PG: I'm going to turn it back on. And so, you flew over there, were you with any other service?

PI: We didn't fly, we didn't fly, we went the slow way.

PG: Oh, you went the slow way?

PI: Yes. We went by boat, we carried a lot of bombs[?] and things like that.

PG: Were you with other—

PI: So we were told.

PG: Were you with other women that were going for the same job?

PI: Yes, there were a few other women, not many, it was a small group that went over. [unclear] Well, we'll have to put it in later, I guess.

PG: We can do that, that's no problem.

PI: Because I can't for the life of me—

PG: Your first assignment, was that what you're trying to remember?

PI: Yes.

PG: Okay. And that was different?

PI: I was assigned to the judge advocate general's office.

PG: There you go. [laughs] And that was sitting—

PI: That had to do with the fact that I was supposedly a reporter but there was very little reporting to do, so I did general office work. There were a group of trials that came up. These had to do with American officers, flight officers, who were shot down and taken as prisoners and they had—not grand—they didn't have the most severe court trials, they were just summarized and they were imprisoned, I guess, for the rest of the war. They didn't have anything to do with them after that. They were known as—we called them, affectionately, the "Shot-down Flyers", shot-down flyers, and I can't think of the name. They were—it's a group of similar offenses, all of shot-down flyers, where they had gotten enough evidence to hold these trials. These were part of the American war crimes trials. Had nothing to do with Nuremberg, Nuremberg was an international court.

PG: Right. So that was different.

PI: Yeah, it was different.

PG: But these were before Nuremberg.

PI: Hm?

PG: Before those, this happened before the Nuremberg trials.

PI: They were contemporaneous.

PG: About the same time, okay.

PI: Part of them were, I don't know when Nuremberg started.

PG: I think I read 1949 [1945], but, so that would have been a little later, but—

PI: No, it was earlier than that.

PG: I thought it was sooner, too. Okay.

PI: Anyway, my next assignment was to the American War Crimes Trials, which included the Buchenwald concentration camp. In fact, that was the most famous trial that the American War Crimes Trials held. I'll get to that.

PG: Okay.

PI: However, this was at Dachau. Dachau was a concentration camp, in fact, it was the first of the concentration camps. It was not primarily a death camp, primarily a work camp where they worked you to death.

PG: Right.

PI: So what the difference was is not considerably—considerable.

PG: Did you know much about these camps before you went on this assignment?

PI: The amazing part of it is how little was known about them, not only by people who were right there, but people all over the world. For a long time, these camps were just not talked about, and weren't known. It was later, when they went in for the death camps that they became so famous. Well, the situation was thus. People, Jewish people, were called up to be at a certain railroad station at a certain time, certain date. And they were told that they were going to be taken to another part of the world, of Europe, to work, as workers. This was not so at all. They were taken as laborers, very famous people. In fact, the trial of Buchenwald was known as—shut it off, I've got to get this. I've got to get this straight.

PG: Okay, we'll take a little break, and—

PI: Yeah. [recording paused?]

PG: Let's see, you made some notes of things you'd like to tell me, is that what your notes are?

PI: No, no, these were when I enlisted and telephone numbers that I've been looking for. Now, wait a second, let me just—

[End of Recording]