

Matthew M. Payan and Dale Skarecky (editors)

*From the Black Forest to Pacific Palisades:  
The Life and Journey of Kurt Toppel (1932-2018)  
during and after World War II*

*Shelfmark*

California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).

The Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History.

Project: From Hitler's Europe to the Golden State [COPH OHP\_253].

O.H. 5318.

Oral Interview with Kurt Toppel, conducted by Sean Washburn,  
October 19, 2013, Pacific Palisades, California.

*Introduction*

The oral history interview transcribed below belongs to a collection held in CSUF's Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), titled "From Hitler's Europe to the Golden State" (OHP\_253), a project launched in 2011 and directed by Dr. Cora Granata, Professor of History (CSUF). As of 2019, approximately one hundred interviews have been recorded. The interview with Kurt Toppel was conducted by Sean Washburn, at the time a CSUF student, on October 19, 2013, in Pacific Palisades, California. The interview lasted 1 hour, 9 minutes, and 18 seconds, and is archived as a digital recording/audio file at COPH (see "Copyright Advisory" below). The verbatim transcript edited here was prepared in 2018 by Matthew M. Payan and Dale Skarecky.

Kurt Toppel was born on May 14, 1932, in Stuttgart, Germany. His interview discusses his father, his childhood in Nazi Germany, including a brief meeting with Adolph Hitler in 1942, and his harrowing experiences during World War II. Toppel's wartime recollections refer to air raids and evacuations, as well as service (at the age of twelve) at the Eastern Front in 1944. Toppel talks about Germany's post-war Allied occupation and de-Nazification, his education, his experiences as a 1952 Olympic hopeful in Finland, and his immigration to the U.S. in 1956, hoping to continue his education at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Toppel discusses his various jobs (for example at General Telephone and TRW), his living situation, his service in the U.S. National Guard, his eventual move to Pacific Palisades, and his community engagement.

Kurt Toppel's story reveals the varied experiences of those who had to live through World War II and the contributions of post-war expatriates to the history of California. His experiences on the Eastern Front provide details about child soldiers in the German Army, as well as the conditions in Europe at the end of the war. Toppel also gives insight into the mindset of post-war Germans trying to grapple with the realities of the Nazi regime. His post-war stories add to our understanding of southern California's history, particularly the aerospace

industry. As a leader of multiple organizations in Pacific Palisades, Toppel raised over a million dollars to build a community gym. He was a beloved member of the community. Kurt Toppel passed away on February 9, 2018.

ABOUT THE EDITOR: *Matthew M. Payan of Arcadia, California, completed his B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) (2012), where he is also a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society), and where he is currently pursuing an M.A. in History. He is writing a thesis that analyzes innovations in education by comparing the Ignatian pedagogical model to educational practices today. He is working as a teacher in the Garden Grove Unified School District. He also served as an editor for this volume of "The Welebaethan: A Journal of History."*

ABOUT THE EDITOR: *Dale Skarecky of Irvine, California, is currently finishing his B.A. in Philosophy and History from California State University Fullerton (2019). The primary-source edition published below originated in the "History and Editing" course offered by CSUF's History Department.*

### *Copyright Advisory*

To reference or quote from the verbatim transcript below in research intended for publication, authors must obtain permission/copyright clearance from California State University, Fullerton, The Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, P.O. Box 6846, Fullerton, California 92834-6846.

### *Verbatim Transcript (O.H. 5318)*

LAWRENCE DE GRAAF CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: Kurt Toppel [KT]

INTERVIEWER: Sean Washburn [SW]

DATE: October 19, 2013

LOCATION: Pacific Palisades, California

PROJECT: From Hitler's Europe to the Golden State [COPH OHP\_253]

TRANSCRIBERS: Matthew M. Payan and Dale Skarecky

KT: So, where do you wanna start?

SW: I'm starting right now. Okay, so today is Friday, October 19th, 2013. This is the interview with Kurt Toppel. Uh, the interviewer is Sean Washburn for Dr. Granata's, um, "From Hitler's Europe to the United States." So, simple question, when were you born?

KT: I was born in May 14th, 1932.

SW: Okay, and um, where were you born?

KT: I was born in Cologne, Germany.

SW: Okay, and um, uh, when was your father born?

KT: My father was born on December 29, 1899.

SW: Okay. And your mother?

KT: Was born on the 20th of February, 1902 —

SW: Okay, and —

- KT: – in Cologne.
- SW: Um, what were their occupations?
- KT: My father was (pauses) – and I have to say that because I refer to that later, he was at the end of the war a manager of a meat and sausage factory in Stuttgart.
- SW: Okay, and um, what can you tell me –
- KT: – My mother was housewife.
- SW: Yeah. And, uh, what can you tell me of your early childhood?
- KT: My early childhood? Okay, I was born in Cologne, while my father was working for a company called Gepag<sup>1</sup> –
- SW: Yep.
- KT: Uh, that was an organization that was founded by union members and it was (pauses) more Catholic than Protestant and they formed a corporation to have factories that made everything from noodles to meat and sausage products to be delivered to the co-ops. They had something like forty-two hundred co-ops, I believe, I can't remember exactly –
- SW: Uh, yeah.
- KT: – Uh, and they delivered that all through, *ja*, throughout Germany. So, –
- SW: Okay.
- KT: – That's basically it.
- SW: And um –
- KT: And then, later, in, when I was three years old, my father was transferred from Cologne to Mannheim, where he took a second position, uh, from the top and then two years later he became the first position at the meat and sausage factory in Stuttgart. My father's background is important, but should I, bring that up –
- SW: Yes, please, because yeah –
- KT: – Okay.
- SW: – Just because I was gonna ask.
- KT: My father, I think he was born in Braunschweig, I don't know that for a fact, and he lived with his, uh, mother and her sister, and he went to high school, and he volunteered with the German army when he was eighteen just at the end of the war in 1918, and he was immediately sent to the front lines and after, uh, about a three-day artillery duel between the two parties, uh, (pauses) he fell asleep and the German troops moved back and the English caught him and he became a prisoner of war, since he had learned, he liked English, so he had French and English, so he could be used as an interpreter in England for the British and the German prisoners of war. So that's where he learned even better English because he communicated –

---

<sup>1</sup> Gepag (“Grosseinkaufs- und Produktions-Aktiengesellschaft”), a German consumer cooperative (1923-1933), dissolved (as a stand-alone entity) by the Nazis.

SW: Yeah—

KT: —with the people in charge. And then when he joined that company in Cologne, they knew he spoke English very well and they financed and took his—care of his education, he became a doctor in economics (pauses). It was a very, very unique situation as far as everything was concerned and that's—from a background point of view—that was very important. My father also had other things that he could do as a private individual. He did poetry and other things and (inhales) he became part of the carnival's circuit in Cologne, and he became the prince of carnival, the first one after World War I<sup>2</sup>—

SW: Okay.

KT: —Which is a big, big thing.

SW: Yeah.

KT: And as far as the other thing is concerned, in 1933, while bowling—the Nazi Party was just starting out, uh, they decided to do something about the guy in charge in Cologne, uh, about, uh, recruitment—and the whole bowling, uh, club, at two o'clock in the morning they woke him up and insisted to become members in the Nazi Party. Not for any ideological reason but to—

SW: Hm, force, yeah.

KT: —get something on him. And, uh, that turned out to be not a very good decision much, much later downstream. But that's what had happened, okay.

SW: Okay.

KT: Now! Let's go from there.

SW: Yeah, now to (laughs), uh, you, um—

KT: My, my—I went to school in—I, I went to a public school in Ger—in Stuttgart. Now Stuttgart has a very different dialect from Cologne—

SW: Um-hm.

KT: —Very, very different there. At home I had to speak high German. In school, I had to speak with the kids, their dialect which is *Schwäbisch*,<sup>3</sup> and with the grown-ups who visited us I had to speak *high Schwäbisch* which was, uh, sort of closely coming to the high German but—

SW: Um-hm.

KT: —with my parents themselves I only spoke German. So, well, actually, there were three different languages here (laughs)—

SW: (laughs), yeah—

---

<sup>2</sup> The annual Cologne Carnival, known as the city's "fifth season" (from November 11 until Mardi Gras of the following year), is headed by an appointed, traditionally all-male triumvirate of maiden, prince, and peasant. Kurt Toppel's father, Kurt Töppel, served as Prince Kurt I during the 1925 Cologne Carnival.

<sup>3</sup> *Schwäbisch* (Swabian), a regional dialect spoken in parts of southwestern Germany.

- KT: –in case you wanna know that, and it’s quite different, I mean (pauses) it’s—I could make a point, but i, I’m not going to make that here—
- SW: (laughs).
- KT: –it’s just a different language.
- SW: (laughs). Okay, um, I what—besides, uh, the difference in language—what else can you tell me about—like education and under the Nazis?
- KT: Okay, under the Nazis. I went to school in (pauses) Stuttgart, Wangen<sup>4</sup> was the place and my schoolmates they were typically the, uh, well farmers, uh, butchers, whatever the—but they were not quite in my *class* of people. I was sort of a little bit isolated, which I worked very hard to overcome.
- SW: Um-hm.
- KT: And, uh, on the other side of the view—at the Neckar River. From our building you, you just had to practically go across the Neckar—about mile or, or two. That’s where the Mercedes factory was, which turned out to be very interesting during the war phase—
- SW: Yeah.
- KT: –Then when (pauses) I became a member of the pre-organization to the Hitler Youth—
- SW: Um-hm.
- KT: –when I was ten.
- SW: When you were ten.
- KT: Okay, I got a brown shirt and a thing to hold my, my pants up, and a belt buckle, which I shined profusely because I thought—My mother was very good at shining things, so—
- SW: (laughs).
- KT: –when Hitler came through Stuttgart, when I was just a little over ten years old—that had to be 1942—uh, my belt buckle was noticed by him and he asked me to come and shook my hand—I mean—
- SW: (laughs).
- KT: –screwy thing but, you know how that—which made me an instantaneous hero for a—
- SW: Um-hm.
- KT: –day or two.
- SW: Yeah, uh, how did you feel at the time?
- KT: I had no feeling—Hitler was just a boss, I mean—
- SW: Just a boss?
- KT: –I mean he was the *Führer*, that was it, the leader of Germany. Period—out. I had no other background or anything like that.
- SW: Yeah.
- KT: We did not talk about political things at home—

---

<sup>4</sup> Wangen, a district in the city of Stuttgart.

SW: Not at home?

KT: –because, uh, that was not a practical thing to do–

SW: Okay.

KT: –because other kids turned over their parents to the secret police because they were talking politics and I guess my father was too smart to get into that kind of thing–

SW: Um-hm.

KT: –and we had various people that we met–we were very Catholic at that time and we went to church and of course we knew the people in charge of the Catholic Church in Stuttgart-Wangen, which is in a suburb of Stuttgart itself and, uh, the guy who was in charge of the flak on top of the mountains surrounding us–he was also from Cologne, so the two of my father and him had a good relationship–and when the war started they, uh, put flak on our building which was flat-roofed. We had three eighty-eight millimeter–you know, *acht, acht Zentimeter*, eight centimeter guns, the big ones–

SW: Yeah.

KT: –and uh, four two-centimeter four barrels, and, and another, also four, and there were soldiers which were during the war stationed in a little shed that they built down in our yard.

SW: Yeah.

KT: And later on we had Russian criminal–uh, prisoners of war to bring them ammunition up and stuff like that. So that’s a little background.

SW: Yeah.

KT: In, uh, 1941, I believe it was–when Stuttgart had the first air raids (inhales)–that day, we had some hits on our house and some of the stuff burned down and, uh, I, my parents thought it would be better off to go away, uh, would be a little more secure and my sister was with me in the same place in Kirchheim Teck<sup>5</sup> which is about, uh, thirty mile-hike, uh, twenty-five miles away from Stuttgart itself.

SW: Okay.

KT: And then my school got hit by bombs and one of our classes, my class–and they had contact with me where I was, so we were shipped to a place in the Black Forest where our school was then one class, one teacher, and the organization was still paramilitary–

SW: Okay.

KT: –we had a guy from Czechoslovakia being in charge of all things (inhales), and um, (pauses) the war got worse and worse and at the (exhales)–in 1944, I mean, I’m telling you what I think you might want to know, I don’t know–

SW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We, we can go back and do it more in depth.

---

<sup>5</sup> Kirchheim unter Teck, a town in Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

[00:11:17]

KT: Okay. Uh, there was a young guy, was eighteen years old, he had killed two Russian tanks and he come to give us a speech. And he told us that the western front was sort-of, uh, sort-of alright but the eastern front it was *horrible!* It needed *every* body that could do something, and at the end of his talk he said, "Is there somebody who does *not* want to volunteer?" Well nobody stepped forward so he said, "Thank you very much for you to volunteer."

SW: (sniffles) Wow.

KT: And later in 1944 we had been trained with simple rifles—like the M1 in the U.S. Army at that time—

SW: Yeah.

KT: —and uh, two or three of us were trained as using so-called *Panzerfaust*, that was an anti-tank weapon, and, they were quite proficient. Uh, I think they had something that they, they could fire but, uh, nevermind—So in 1944, the end of 1944, we were asked to (pauses) live in, up to, to go to the eastern front, and they told us that the Russians were very particular as far as soldiers were concerned; you couldn't become a prisoner of war if you were not identified as (pauses) some sort of member of a German Army or official army. So we were given armbands. That was (pauses) a way so that the Russians if they caught you—otherwise they would shoot you as a partisan, that was, it. And we went to a place near Breslau<sup>6</sup> and I—don't know if you've ever have listened to artillery duels incessantly day and night, and day and night, and day and night. In late November, and, uh, it was colder than you can imagine. We had nothing but the most basic of food items, we had no tents, just some sort of shelter-half kind of thing to keep a little warm. We, we dug little holes which were (inhales) a foot deep, two foot deep and there was—we were on, on a slight incline and below was a farm (pauses) and then (exhales) (pauses) eventually the Russians came, we saw them arrive in the afternoon. We were told not to make *any* noise. Do nothing, see what would happen and, well, they shot the guy who was an old farmer. They shot him. And the wife was (exhales) nailed onto a barn door and (pauses) raped to death. This is not a very nice memory, I'm sorry to say—

SW: No, no.

KT: —and we didn't do anything that night and in the morning when they proceeded to move forward, we had the two tanks that they came with and they had the, uh, uh (inhales), the, the soldiers went with them. And (pauses) the first item was that the first tank shot at point-blank range—about five or six yards—our leader (inhales) who was, what? fifteen, or sixteen. He was nothing but little pieces of meat. And we (pauses), our

---

<sup>6</sup> Breslau, today Wrocław, Poland.

people who are the, the experts in the anti-tank weapons, they, they crippled the tanks enough that they couldn't move forward anymore on the chains and then—there's a battle that I can just barely remember, I fired standing half up and (inhales) when it was all over there were no more live Russians and (inhales) of us there was five or six people left. We didn't know what to do. There was no leadership, no nothing. And we knew that there was a road nearby with refugees, were moving. So we decided to individually (pauses) try to make it home to Stuttgart somehow. The big thing was when we joined the—when I joined the—because it's my, my memory—they had the guards, the chain guards, they had metal plates and with chains around. There were police and when they interrogated people on there if they found somebody who was a quote-unquote "deserter," —

SW: Um-hm.

KT: —they read him a little paragraph and hung him on the next tree. Every—almost every tree there had somebody hanging on it. It, it—the most *horrible* thing, there was no food, none of that, nothing—and then we had air raids daily, two, three, four times they were flying thirty feet above the street and (pauses) killed, and, I mean, it, it, it was a nightmare. But eventually, (pauses) I survived that trek and if you have never heard a, a, a horse cry that is hurt; it, it's the most *horrible, horrible, horrible* noise and the people and the dead bodies—

SW: Yeah.

KT: —it, it was a nightmare but (sniffles)—anyway I made it back into the Black Forest area where my sister was, and I stayed there until the war ended. When the war ended it was in (pauses) 1945, of course. I had heard some of the things what were going on but I had no impact, or no nothing—

SW: Yeah.

KT: —and I was still worried that I would be considered a deserter and hung—eh, it was the underlying thing, don't make any noise, don't—and, and I looked younger than my twelve and a half that I was. So nobody ever bothered me. That's about that part of life, okay? And—how do you wanna continue? Is—does that make sense?

SW: Yeah, um, yeah, the, um (laughs)—so you were twelve—

KT: Twelve and a half.

SW: —during '44, '45?

KT: Well, it's November, I mean, I was born in May (pauses) '32. Simple, that's '44.

SW: Yeah, yeah. That's a thought, wow. Um, if we can go back to a little bit more education before the war and during, I guess, because I know you said you were in the Black Forest and that school—

- KT: The Black Forest was a, uh, (pauses) a place that used to be a (pauses) *Wirtshaus*<sup>7</sup> with some rooms, so they had all of us, which was—God, I think it'd be, we were about thirty or so, thirty kids—
- SW: Thirty in one room?
- KT: Oh no. We had rooms, but we had triple beds. So we had up to nine people in a room. And, of course, there was only one toilet which was not a very nice thing (laughs).
- SW: (laughs).
- KT: Especially when at night you had to go to the toilet, there was no lights or with anything like—Anyway, so this was practically uneventful, we helped when they had harvests. There were local farmers and—
- SW: So you were put into, like, labor force?
- KT: Uh, we would supply its labor and we got slices of bread or other kinds of things as rewards, nothing more than that.
- SW: Okay.
- KT: And the food was mostly based on cabbage (laughs) and potatoes, and we had one slice of bread, which was *sort* of with margarine and the rest of it was just two other pieces of bread; that was it, that was breakfast. And the fake coffee which was made out of not real beans but the other kind called *Muckefuck*.<sup>8</sup> I hate to say that but that's it was called, that was the *Ersatzkaffee*.<sup>9</sup>
- SW: (laughs).
- KT: That was it, they came in big things and uh, we had three meals a day and we had exercise every morning. Marching and running and doing things like that to keep us in physical shape and then we had classes—
- SW: Um-hm.
- KT: —and we had to mend our own socks and all that kind of thing or whatever. And, as I say, we had our leader who was about fifteen or sixteen years old, and he was from Czechoslovakia (pauses) at that time.
- SW: Okay, um, there and before, did they, uh, did they push any, like the Nazi ideology in the courses? Or no?
- KT: No, we were knowing that there was a war going on of course. And, uh, a couple of times we had events where, uh, airplanes were shot down and all the various (pauses) groups in our kind of category we had to put uniforms and we were put into the forest to capture the pilots and stuff like that, which we did, a couple of times. Some of them, they were stupid, they were—God, they were nineteen, twenty, twenty-one—and they thought by pulling their gun laughing us off, that, that was not a very smart idea. So, anyway—it caused their own problems (laughs). You don't

---

<sup>7</sup> *Wirtshaus*, German word for “inn” or “tavern.”

<sup>8</sup> *Muckefuck*, German colloquial term (of debated origins) for a “coffee substitute.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ersatzkaffee*, German word for “substitute coffee.”

do that. Especially not under circumstances like that, when you've seen the cities that they burn up. And if you have been in the air raids—Stuttgart is, was just one of the place; I was in Cologne visiting my aunt and (pauses) some airplane threw a lighted device and that they had carpet bombing, never mind what everything down, and I was there when I was ten, to help collect the bodies, put 'em on stretchers and stuff like that. It was not a very nice time. It was *horrible* as a matter of fact! But death didn't make any difference any more.

[00:21:45]

SW: Yeah, yeah. Um, (pauses) (muttering and pencil tapping sounds), before—

KT: There was no ideology.

SW: No ideology whatsoever—

KT: I was taught that we were Germans period—

SW: Yeah.

KT: —and we were involved in war.

SW: Um-hm.

KT: And that was it.

SW: Yeah. And yeah, you, and you were primarily in school during the war and not before, yeah—

KT: Exactly. We even were taught English, would you believe?

SW: Um-hm. Yeah. Um, (pauses) okay, um, and you said, said that you were in the, uh, in the youth organization before it was the Hitler Youth organization?

KT: Well, everybody had to be. Unless you were Jewish, I suppose. I had never met a Jew except I saw somebody went around with the thing,<sup>10</sup> and (pauses) they were just different people, I never talked to one, or never had had any kind of contacts, so. I met Jews *here*, lots of them (laughs). But that's neither here nor there.

SW: Yeah. Um, okay, we've already hit those. We've already talked about your experience during the war, unless there is anything else you wish to add about that?

KT: (exhales) There is really not much to add except when the war ended and things—

SW: Okay, please.

KT: Okay, the first thing that happened was that when we went back to Stuttgart, my father picked us up. Uh, he was in the Nazi Party, and, he said he was, and—they had the first people that we met were the French. The French didn't do anything much. They just let things sort of go. And then the Americans came, and we were kicked out of our house, which

---

<sup>10</sup> Presumably a reference to the (frequently yellow) Star-of-David badge that Jews in Nazi Germany had been ordered to wear under the Nuremberg Laws of 1935.

was, uh, out, out of the factory place where we lived, we were, uh, we were (exhales) sent to a place which was in the olden, olden days a banana cellar, of course nobody had seen a bananas for at least ten years, but that's neither here nor there. So, that's where we were. We had one little sink. My father was (pauses) taken in as a quote-unquote "war criminal," and he was put—he, he started out with being a little over two-hundred pounds and when he came back from that phase of his life he was down to about a-hundred-and-twenty pounds, and he was not treated very well, but that's neither here nor there and there are other things that I can mention that I know about, but, if you want to know —

SW: If you can please, please.

KT: There, for example, I had people who were, you know, cousins, brothers, older people they were, you know. They were seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old. They were in the army. When they came back, they became prisoners of war and then they were shipped on the Rhine River, I don't know if you ever heard about that.

SW: Very little actually.

KT: (inhales) So-called President Eisenhower, at the time. He put camps in there without latrines, without food, with anything. Just barbed wire around the machine guns. This for war criminal—and war, prisoners of war that had surrendered. They were young, they had—they died by the *thousands* because that was in November, the war was over in, in, in May, and they kept them in there until the new year started and they drowned—and they dug latrines and they drowned in their own latrines and stuff. It's (inhales) *horrible* and I don't know why Eisenhower did that. I have no clue and now they wanna make him a war hero? There's another thing, we had Russian criminals—uh, Russian prisoners of war, he sent three million of them back and they were all shot by Stalin. That is another thing that is historical and I *met* some of these people, they came back to Stuttgart in the place, they asked for me specific, because, why? I had obtained some sausage from the factory and gave it to them because they were hungry and they remembered that. They were just nice people—

SW: Um-hm.

KT: —and they were singing during the air raids, I mean, uh, strange stench<sup>11</sup> but—so, my father was gone, and I had to, my, my mother when we were kicked out of our (inhales) place where we stayed, we couldn't take anything with us, nothing. And, uh, we went to the banana cellar, and now I had to think, "how the hell do you feed a family?" —I had a sister three years younger—so I was at the time (pauses). Ten. She was ten. I was about thirteen and I had to find out we had—then after the French

---

<sup>11</sup> Presumably a reference to a smell during the interview.

- came, the American troops, and the first thing they did is we were shipped by busses to Dachau, and shown the places—
- SW: They shouldn't—
- KT: —how *horrible* we were and what *criminals* we were and, you know, it makes you real feel good, you know. You had nothing to do with it, but here you were, you were, (inhales)—well whatever. And it turns out much later that Cardinal Faulhaber<sup>12</sup> who was in charge of a Catholic Church in Munich—there *were no* gas chambers out in D—well, that's neither here nor there. It's just, things that couldn't possibly have happened there. And I know later on I found somebody who was stationed and his brother was shot and he came out as a (inhales), as a wounded *Waffen SS*<sup>13</sup> man who was there to protect the people who were in there, I mean (inhales) it's very strange, very strange. I never understood it, and I never want to understand it. Period—out!
- SW: Hm, okay.
- KT: And then school started again, and, uh, it was an American house. I knew very little about America. I knew some people who got care packages from their relatives here in the United States, and we had, uh, some of the contents, like toothpaste, was what we put on our sandwiches (laughs).
- SW: (laughs).
- KT: Well, it was sweet, and uh, the bread was one-third sawdust and the rest was flour and, uh, you know, they had to—it was a very strange time, I'll tell you that. And, uh, since I was still living inside this factory, which now was beginning to operate again, and my father was gone; no more. I rented out some of our space with chalk marks and said, "okay, you, Joe, friend, you can take care of the American soldiers throwing their butts<sup>14</sup> in that particular area and I charge you either a potato or, uh, something edible."
- SW: Yeah.
- KT: That was how *we* lived as a family. My mother went haywire over that. She never thought anything that my father was a criminal and stuff like that. And eventually there was de-Nazification—I don't know if you heard—
- SW: Yeah, yeah.
- KT: —about the term uh—I mean, so it turns out that the, the priests, the Catholic priests and others, they knew what my father was, that he was never a Nazi or stuff like that. So, he was rehabilitated *way* afterwards.

---

<sup>12</sup> Michael von Faulhaber (1869-1952), the Catholic Archbishop of Munich (1917-1952), regularly opposed Nazi policies but also criticized practices of the Allies after World War II.

<sup>13</sup> *Waffen SS* (1933-1945), the armed division of the German Nazi Party's paramilitary "Schutzstaffel" (SS).

<sup>14</sup> Cigarette butts.

Now he didn't know what the hell to do, so—maybe that's a little bit incoherent for you but, he went back to the company that originally had hired him, and they had become reinstated and there was—he was sent to Westphalia, which it was the English zone, and he became first the second and when his—the, the, the guy in charge passed away, he became in charge of that and they decided they had two meat and sausage factories within fifty kilometers, so they made it a seed and tea (pauses)—what is that (muttering) no not the real tea, the, the, uh, peppermint and—stuff like that.

[00:30:34]

SW: Okay.

KT: Which was a very interesting thing and, I was caught by that whole thing, I finished high school and, uh, then I think when my father was sent to Westphalia, I had to do something because the school systems were such that in, I think in, in, uh, Stuttgart they had their—I, I changed school thirteen times just for the sake of argument, you know, from one school to the other when we had an emergency with him, and we stayed where the Russians had stayed, and the this and that and uh, my dad. But anyway, I, I ended up not being able to stay there because my mother wanted to be with my father, and he went, she went to Westphalia which was far away. So they decided to send me to a boarding school, a Jesuit boarding school, in Bavaria, so, I ended up in a Bavarian boarding school in Bavaria. And that's where—

SW: And what year was this?

KT: This was now, let's see (pauses) 1949, '50. That, that period of time. I have to do the math. I was eighteen when I graduated (pauses), but I did graduate. I, I did my first trip, foreign trip to go with the pilgrims from Bavaria to Rome for the Holy Year in 1950.

SW: And, um, just to backtrack just a little bit—

KT: Sure, go.

SW: Um, you said that you would, like, immediately at the end of the war you had gone back into school in the American house, and—

KT: Oh, this is—

SW: This is that? Oh, okay, okay.

KT: —in Stuttgart, you know—I was sent from school to school to school because we had to change from the banana cellar to a place where, uh, the—some Russians had lived, uh, with fleas and God knows what all but then neither—then with the political thing where the guy had been a real Nazi. So we had to go there, and every time I had to change schools again I ended up in another part of Stuttgart altogether. And I learned about the America house, you, first of all, you could sit quiet and read some simple books about, uh, what Americans had been doing. And furthermore,

before that even, the Americans stayed at our facility at the, at the factory and they had a paper cellar and they threw the books that were sent to the—for the soldiers, they threw them out and I picked them up and took them to school and we had assignments from these books that I found in the paper cellar and we learned English from that, which was one of the guys who had been an American prisoner of war. It was interesting. Very, very interesting—

SW: Yeah, very interesting.

KT: —These are all little things, they sort of hung together and that's how I learned English, and then when I finally graduated from high school in Bavaria in Illertissen near Ulm, uh, my father had come out of that, he was now in charge again. He said, "I give you a choice; first, you can either buy a used Volkswagen or I can send you to our company headquarters in England, in Manchester."—Where the headquarters of the co-op was—"You choose." Of course I chose—

SW: England (laughs).

KT: —England. And I learned English quite well. Which is quite different from American English. I didn't know some of the words, uh, they were told me, then they would use four letter words, which American soldiers used all the time.

SW: (laughs).

KT: And the English say, "Ah, terrible, terrible."

SW: (laughs).

KT: It was strange. And the fact that I had learned and, uh, read books in the America house, I had learned a little bit about America and what this was all about. This was partly a political kind of thing. They tried to, whatever—And, then, the, the, the consequence of that was, I was also a runner. I went to university after this high school thing and I took economics and I got a degree in economics from a German university after four years, and some idiot told me that you could be getting a master's degree at UCLA<sup>15</sup>—I didn't even know what UCLA stood for (laughs)—but within six months or so. So I thought, "Well hey"—American economics at that time was key, all the big professors were all here, and, uh, I decided to look for immigration kind of thing and at that time it was *possible*, but you had to sign certain things that when you got here, if you were below twenty-four you had to become a soldier and stuff like that. But that didn't make any damn difference, I signed, and I signed and I could at least get a job and stuff like that. I applied, and it took a few months and, lo and behold, I got my immigration papers and in '56, I came over here.

---

<sup>15</sup> University of California, Los Angeles.

SW: Okay. Well that answers the “why did you immigrate to the United States.” (laughs)

KT: Why? I wanted to get a master’s degree.

SW: You wanted to get a master’s?

KT: That was my key thing. Okay. I had never been to California obviously. I had a cousin who lived here, but her husband had just lost his job. It was not a very good thing to stay. So I got a—I came here and I looked for a job and the first thing that offered was on (pauses)—had no, no, no necessary, uh, requirement of being a citizen. Everything was—from Boeing to Douglas<sup>16</sup> they were all required citizenship. I couldn’t get a job. That was terrible. So I went to, uh, Santa Monica and (inhales) a friend of mine that I had met as a U.S. soldier in, when I was studying, and he says, “Hey, I give you a hundred dollars and you can do the test and you can become a dishwasher” and whatever is the thing after that, well, I didn’t pass the test. They gave me a test for a full-term bartender. I never heard what a Gibson<sup>17</sup> was or anything like that. I didn’t know the difference between a Stopover<sup>18</sup> and another one, I mean I knew what wines were but, uh, a bartender is supposed to know how many, uh—what with your gin martinis and vodka martinis, I mean obviously I, I flunked that. And, so, I was rid of my hundred dollars and now what? I needed a job. I needed *money!* And, uh, well, I came to Santa Monica area, the Wilshire area and Westwood—because I wanted to go to school at UCLA, and I talked to somebody at UCLA and I says, “Ah, no you have to get at least forty-three units,” and I says, “a unit, is that one per semester?” And he says, “yeah, forty-three is minimum, and you have to get *all* As and Bs.” So, it was a little discouraging. Then I looked around, I went to—got to the L.A. Times, went from one place to another place, all hitchhiking, and then I found that nobody would take me because I was not a citizen, I thought, “maybe General Telephone.” I saw a guy at General Telephone, I says, “Do you require citizenship?” and he says, “No, we don’t.” So he told me where the office was in Santa Monica on Sixth Street, and I went down there and I said, “I’m, I’m, I’m looking for a job,” and they says, “Well, what do you have in mind?” they said, “What is your background?” I says, “Well I have an economics degree.” And they said, “Have you ever worked in the United States?” I says “No.” “Well, what do you want to have? We, we, we start people out at sixty-five dollars a mon—a week.” I says, “Sixty-five dollars, well, I dunno, I was hoping to get a little more than sixty-five dollars.” He says, “Well only your college

---

<sup>16</sup> Boeing (founded 1916) and Douglas Aircraft company (1921-1967), U.S. American aerospace companies.

<sup>17</sup> Gibson, a (usually gin-based) cocktail.

<sup>18</sup> Stopover (or Layover), a (usually gin-based) cocktail.

could—you could go back to wherever you got your degree, so UCLA if they have something.” So I went back to UCLA and they told me that yes, you have the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree, so we can join you—we can take you into a program, of course that takes money, so I, I can only give you something that you are *equivalent* to. Fine. So I went back and showed him to that and says “okay.” I had to take a little test of some sort and that’s how I became a member of the Santa Monica outfit, its telephone company.

[00:40:14]

KT: And there was another thing, I didn’t have an apartment to stay, because I couldn’t stay then with my cousin, didn’t work, they were lived in the Valley anyway. So I (pauses) went to a real estate agency and I says, “Do you have any, anything where I can stay,” and he says, “*Yeah!* We have all kinds of things.” So they showed me a place on Wilshire Boulevard for eighty-five dollars a month. 10648 Wilshire, I’ll never forget. And I said, “Alright, that will be the first and the last months, and, uh, key deposit, and uh,” I says, “My God, I don’t have that much money.” He says, “You mean you don’t have that—*You get!*” And he slammed the Cadillac door—a lady, an elderly lady, and now I stood there in this department that, uh, that she was going to show me and I went to the manager there, an Irish couple, and she says, “What, you wanna move in here with, uh, (makes tongue sounds)” (laughs). I says “Well, can I see the owner of the building?” “The owner of the building? No you can’t. This is impossible.” I says, “But I insist on seeing the owner.” So they talked in very fast English that I couldn’t really follow and he says okay, sit down here, and they gave me a cup of coffee. An hour and a half later, a very expensive car drove up, chauffeur, an old lady about eighty-five, ninety, I don’t know how old she was, she was very old. And she wanted to see me. She says, “You want to live in one of my apartments for *free?*” I says, “No, of course I give you the money as soon as I make some money.” She says, “Have you got a job?” I says, “Yeah, I’ve just, uh, been hired by the phone company.” She says, “Where did you tell them that you lived?” I says, “I told them ‘nothing *yet.*’” Aw shucks. Great show. She says, “How long have you been here?” I says, “Well, uh, a week.” “Ugh, I’ll tell you what I’m gonna do. You can stay for *one* month at that apartment that he will show you. If by one month, you haven’t paid me, I *kick* you out! That’s it! (pauses) Show him his apartment!” With a garage, no car, nothing. That’s how I started out. On Wilshire Boulevard. And, uh, well, I had to go back to the office to tell them where I lived.

SW: (laughs).

KT: When the guy came, uh, I says I would like to have telephone service so that I know that I got a job from General Telephone and they says, “Where

- do you live?" and I says, "10648 Wilshire," "Oh, you don't need any pre-payment, it's, it's okay, we'll charge you when you've had your phone installed." The guy installed the phone, and two days later they told me that I indeed had a job. But of course they didn't pay right away; they had to wait for two weeks before you got your first paycheck. So I had a few dollars left, I bought at Ralph's ten cans of beans (pauses) – ten cents each.
- SW: That was your meal for the next two weeks.
- KT: And I hitchhiked to work. Twentieth Street from 10648, that's Westwood. Try to do that as a normal human being. Anyway, it worked, sort of. Later I got a bicycle, uh, sort of. Tremendous, horrible kind of thing that I got for nine dollars or something like that. Uh, but it, it, it pedaled. Okay, so I could get to the job. So I worked with General Telephone Company and since I'm an economist, I had to figure out where new central offices should be. I don't know if this interests you at all –
- SW: No, no, please, please, yeah.
- KT: –and, uh, well, as an economist you know that the cost of copper and (inaudible)\_\_\_\_\_ need two things, they had all kinds of plans, they had data where people might work to – go to and stuff like that. I absorbed all that and I made a little idea what, and I stayed since I didn't want to go and hitchhike back to my apartment. There was nothing to work with, I didn't even have a lamp in there. And I worked there and one night one of my bosses who I knew was my boss's boss says, "What are you doing here?" and I says, "Well, w-w-w-where I live, I, I, I do-don't have much, lov-light, and, you know so I think it's better for me to work here." "What the hell are you doing?" So I explained that to him and he says, "Can I see that?" So I showed him the data and he said, "May I have that?" (Stammering), "I-I-y-ya-yes, you can ha-have it." And he took my stuff and disappeared.
- SW: Never heard from him again?
- KT: And I tried to do whatever I had done, like again the next day, trying to get through. Two days later he came back and says, "I would like for you to meet somebody else." So, I met *his* supervisor who was pretty high up in General Telephone. Vice President Brett Housewright (?), and I told him what I do and why I did it and so on and so forth and then says, "Who is your supervisor?" I give the guy's name. He says, "What has he told you?" "Nothing." "Uh huh, alright, you'll hear from us. Here's your stuff back." Well, two days later I got the job of my supervisor, for a ten dollar raise. I was now making ninety-five dollars a week. Now I had enough money to pay my rent, now I, I even bought a car from a guy down the street on Twentieth Street (inhales). Horrible car, but that was neither here nor there – it broke down the first two days I had it. It was one of these old Studebaker things. Only six of the eight cylinders worked, but I, didn't know the difference. I, I, I had driven a Volkswagen before,

but nothing like that, anyway. So, that's what—how it all started. And, I paid my landlady. She was very proud that I had gotten a job, that I paid her and she even took me to dinner at a very nice place. My friend who was trying to get me into the union, he said, "Well, let's stay friends." So, we did. And then there was one other item. I was good enough to be the third in line in West Germany for the mile, for the, for the fifteen-hundred meters. So in that particular year, in 1952, the Eastern part of Germany joined the Western part. The result was that I was no longer number three, I was number five and not qualified to go to Helsinki. But, through my stay in England I had met the head of the Finnish co-op and they arranged for me to come over for the Olympics. It was nice.

SW: Yeah, tell me about that.

KT: That was in '52. I went—I got a stay with the family Hietanen<sup>19</sup> and, uh—he became a bigshot later in the Finnish government, but that's neither here nor there. So, uh, (pauses) I was working as an interpreter and sales assistant at one of their department stores, *Oy Sokos Ab*.<sup>20</sup> And, uh, the interesting thing was I didn't have enough money to really do what I wanted. Helsinki was a pretty expensive place and (pauses), uh, so I remember two things first of all—the *Uusi Suomi*<sup>21</sup> which was the major newspaper in Helsinki. I met one of their people and he says "Can you give us an interview with the (pauses) Czech runner."<sup>22</sup> Uh, there was—I says, "Well, I don't know the man, I, I don't speak Czech." He says, "Yeah, but you're a runner so maybe he talks to you." He turned out to get three gold medals later on. But, and I met him, I went to the Olympic Village and the guy said, "I speak through an interpreter, I don't speak English, don't speak German, don't speak anything, Czech." Fine. Then I told the interpreter that I was a runner and that I was supposed to be there, and (pauses) all of a sudden, he could remember German. And he says, "You're a runner, why don't you train with me and see how good you are?" So I trained with him. God, what's this guy's, guy's name?<sup>23</sup> He was the biggest runner in '52, I can't even remember his name, terrible. So, that was one thing. I trained with him. What he did was, he ran one lap in exactly one minute, then he walked one-half lap, and he did the same thing fifty times, *five-zero* times. I could stay up for about ten, that was it.

[00:50:27]

---

<sup>19</sup> Lauri Bernhard Hietanen (1902-1971), Finnish Minister of Social Affairs (1953) and Finance (1957-1958).

<sup>20</sup> *Oy Sokos Ab*, Finnish department store.

<sup>21</sup> *Uusi Suomi*, Finnish daily newspaper (1919-1991).

<sup>22</sup> Emil Zátopek (1922-2000), a Czechoslovak runner and triple gold-medalist at the 1952 Helsinki Summer Olympics.

<sup>23</sup> Emil Zátopek.

SW: Wow.

KT: And, uh, another thing was, the family where I stayed I had my own room later on. Took billiards, got to cook—I, Finnish is a very, very tough language. (inhales) So, I worked on, on, as a sideline at—they had sort of a like Tivoli in Denmark, you know like sort of a fair kind of thing and I made some extra money there. And, I went to some social events. This fellow where I stayed, the son of it—uh, of, uh, the family. He took me to where Miss Finland was—Miss Universe and I sat with her, but I only knew like three words, like: *Peruna*, potato, I love you, *minä rakastan sinua*, (laughs), another one, which was a swear word that I couldn't use. You can't have a conversation—and she spoke only Finnish, not Swedish, no nothing. What a beautiful girl and *nothing* and you sit there, and you're frustrated, you can't do a damn thing about it. Anyway, so after that was—Norway had a very interesting relationship with Germany after the war.

SW: Um-hm.

KT: And, uh, I wanted to see, to get a visa to go from Finland into Norway, the backcountry. And, uh, didn't work. Because the guy was never there or he says he can't talk to you or won't talk you and I got real mad and I says, "I'm going to sit here until the man comes out"—the Consul General. Finally, he came out, he says, "What do you want? You know that you can't get a visa into Norway. We *don't*, we don't do that." I says, "Who's *we*?" He says, "I don't know how old *you* were when the war ended," I says, "I was twelve and a half and I was certainly not a Nazi *dammit!* I almost died!" So one led to the next and we had a very interesting discussion and he says, "Okay, you go to dinner with me,"—nice restaurant—"I give you your visa." He gave me a visa. I went into Norway after Helsinki. I went all the way up. That's yet a totally different story. So, I—that was in 1952. Now '56 I'm here.

SW: Mm-hm.

KT: And I've been a runner, mind you. So when I hitchhiked and when I jaywalked—General Telephone—I was, I moved into an apartment closer by so that I could be there. And Twentieth Street, about a block away from General Telephone there was an alley, and there was next to Santa Monica Boulevard, so I took the end of the alley, walked across the street when there was no traffic—so I saw this cop having parked his vehicle there and, in uniform, and so I was too late before I recognized him and he started running after me. So, (laughs) I don't know why he does that, but, he didn't say stop or anything, he just ran. I said, now I've had enough, so I took off.

SW: (laughs).

KT: Next morning he was there, and he said, "Who the hell are you?" I said, (stammering for effect) "The, the, the, m-m-my name—you jaywalked,"

- and he says, "Well, yes I guess that's what you call, but you ran away from me!" "So?" He says, "I'm the fastest runner in the Santa Monica Police Department" (laughs). Well, to make a long story short, we became friends.
- SW: (laughs).
- KT: We tracked out how fast we could run on a track (laughs) on fifteen-hundred meters or the mile I was about a hundred and fifty yards ahead of him! (laughs)
- SW: (laughs).
- KT: I was in good shape.
- SW: Yeah.
- KT: So, now comes—going back, I'm there in General Telephone and six months I get a letter from President Eisenhower at the time, that I had to serve my country and that I would either be drafted or I could volunteer. Well. I didn't think I wanted to be drafted so I went to the National Guard thing here in Santa Monica, and I was there at two o'clock in the morning. There was not a soul there. First ones showed up about seven, seven-thirty. And then a sergeant came, and he said, "Who was here first?" They point me out. "When were you here?" "Two o'clock." "Oh, alright, come in here." There was sort of a room where we could gather. He says, "Is there anybody here who is in communication?" "Telephone company." "Ok, you, you, you," he says, "Where are you, where is you background?" I says, "I work for General Telephone Company." He says, "Alright, I think you are our guy, here's ten dollars, go across the street to the doctor and get yourself a health certificate. I think that should be alright, you others you can go home." So I became a member of the artillery.
- SW: Artillery?
- KT: And what did they put me in, communication of course.
- SW: Mm-hm.
- KT: Me, six months here. It was interesting. But, uh, I ended up in—my, my unit was already over in Korea, so I went after that, uh, which is all my data, which is neither here nor there. And then, later on, in 1960, I found out I was recalled to active duty for the Berlin Crisis. So, I did my thing. And it took me seven years to get my degree. I worked at the UCLA and then I went to Cal State because they had—they were cheaper, and they had a full, full program. And I was the first one that got a master's degree in economics from Cal State. Everybody who was interested and had anything to do with economics was there and asked questions, but I passed. I even got a-an A on my paper which was supposed to be on gold, I couldn't do it; I had to write it on a different topic, which I am not going to go into.
- SW: (laughs). Alright, um, will you —

KT: So, that's basically all. Then I had one other thing in the telephone company still. They ask if anybody was interested in an exam. I says, "What kind of exam?" They says, "It's given by IBM, but if you pass it, you're gonna be a programmer." I didn't know what a programmer was, I had no clue. Nothing. So, I volunteered to take the test. I was one of ten that made it. And I became a programmer and I was in the part of data processing. Then after that, which is again a strange thing. I started my own company. And everything worked fine, I had a beautiful system for doctor and dentist and billing accounting. And, the Bank of America competed directly that they hired my supervisor, got all the people and offered to them for free. But that's – that's Bank of America.

SW: (laughs).

KT: And then I had to get – needed a job, and I had done some little things for TRW<sup>24</sup> Systems so I went down, back to TRW in Redondo Beach. I said, "Do you need any people?" They says, "Yeah, we know who you are. You can program, you can do this, you can do that, we hire you as a management position." (pauses) They couldn't define exactly what I should do. But, I'm not going to go into the things I did; I did some very interesting things. They were dealing mostly with space things at the Air Force. Air Force mostly, the management of programs that the Air Force had. And my boss came in with an RFP, a "Request for Proposal," from the Army, and I says, "That's exactly what we do for the Air Force." They said, "Yeah, but they know who we are, we don't deal with the Army," and I says, "And why not? They the same people, same everything, same resources." "Ah, do you wanna do the – answer the RFP to it?" I says, "Yeah I would." He says, "Ok, fine." So, I got thirty-five thousand dollars to do that. We did get the contract, why? Because, how the hell do you interest the people who look at the Request for Proposal to be interested in that? I can tell you that, but I don't wanna have that on the machine! (laughs).

SW: (laughs). Okay. Um, you know earlier –

KT: We got the contract.

SW: You got the contract?

KT: And we got follow-up contracts. We – I ended up running a program called the AAFSS – the Advanced Aerial Fire Support System. Which turned out a multi-billion dollar program.

[01:00:19]

SW: Uh-huh.

KT: So, anyway. I always loved the Palisades. Now that's going back the different thing. And, uh, I had a house here, I had saved from my income

---

<sup>24</sup> TRW (Thompson Ramo Wooldridge).

from the telephone company, three-thousand dollars. I bought my first house for twenty-four thousand five-hundred dollars. And, my parents were going to come over and I wanted to impress 'em. That I had, quote-unquote "made it." And at—by that time Pacific Palisades was sort of a backwater, the people had chickens and stuff like that. And I, I looked at this house on, uh, at that time. And it was open, uh, it was open for, that they wanted fifty-nine thousand five-hundred in 1960. I came in and I saw that house, I saw the fireplace going the beautiful view, I said, "I want that house," and my real estate broker said, "Kurt, you can't afford that. You *cannot* afford that." I says, "I didn't ask you whether I can afford it, make an offer!" And he says, "An offer for *what*? I have no paperwork!" I says, "Here's a napkin, (pounding on the table) write down my name, your name, the date, and this is it. And I offer fifty-two thousand five-hundred dollars." This was within three minutes of open house open. I gave it to the guy, the guy said, "Give it to my wife." His wife looked at it and said, "Let him have it. I don't like all these people in the house." On a napkin, I got this house in 1960 for fifty-two thousand five-hundred. (laughs)

SW: (laughs).

KT: And I've lived here all the time. And later on I got married, but that's a different story.

SW: (laughs).

KT: So, what else do you want to know.

SW: Um, I was just gonna backtrack actually —

KT: Yeah, okay, backtrack.

SW: —the military, the Army had sent you to Berlin to handle—to be part of the crisis. Can you talk about a little bit more about that?

KT: Well, the first war I had I was still part of the artillery. Okay. And they sent me all over trying to find my unit and, uh, the Chinese hadn't heard that the war was over, but that's neither here nor there. It was, it was one of the strangest things. So, my six-months term was over. And I was still of course, and I went to Fort Ord<sup>25</sup> to start off with to get my basic training. Which we now know as park. And it was very simple. I was the fastest, I had more points in GPA—in, in, in the, the tests that they took, I thought I was going to become an officer but they told me I was the alien, you can't be an officer, are you outta your mind? So I didn't become an officer. I made it up to spec 4 to be frank. When the thing came when we were redrafted, and this is a very strange thing, we went to Fort—uh, (trying to recall) San Francisco.<sup>26</sup> What was it? At the Golden Gate Bridge, what was—that was the Army at the time.

SW: I know exactly what you're —

---

<sup>25</sup> Fort Ord, U.S. Army post (1917-1994), Monterey Bay, California.

<sup>26</sup> Presidio, U.S. Army fort (1776-1994), San Francisco, California.

KT: I can't think of it. I mean, my mind—I guess when you're eighty-one things slip—Anyway that's—

SW: I'll—I can look it up for you.

KT: (stammering) Please look it up. Uh, and I never forget the array of cars that drove up to San Francisco, and the first thing was they needed people to drive the troops to their stations. So, we were lined up and he says, "I need, four bus drivers, you, you, you, you." I says, "I had never driven," "You have a driver's license right?" "Yeah but the busses" — "You're a bus driver, you go to the motor pool, and you learn how to drive a bus," that simple. Which happened. And then, the next day the general was visiting. So, here we are lined up, standing at attention and he comes to our sergeant and he says, "Son, before you were recalled back to active duty, what did you do?" I says, "I was a, a salesman." "What did you sell?" I says, "Computers, sir." "How much did you make last year?" I says, "About two-hundred and fifty-six thousand dollars, sir." The general's face turned white, red, white again. He let the guys stand there, walked away (laughs). Never saw him again.

SW: (laughs).

KT: But we did our job. I became a bus driver. And, we were thinking that things would become very, very serious but we stayed at—Presidio is the name of the place. Presidio.

SW: Yeah.

SW: Okay, um—

KT: Okay, so does that help?

KT: And when I was done I got a dishon—(stammering) an *hon-honorable* discharge. Not dishonorable (laughs). Honorable discharge of the Army, and I finished my studies and I became a master's in economics, which I've never used this—that they could tell me that I could work at a bank and (makes a sarcastic lip trill sound). I wasn't interested in that.

SW: That's when you went into the programming?

KT: Programming and, uh, well, I ran a show which was quite interesting. I ended up with quite a few people, and I had an office here in Redondo Beach, I had one in St. Louis, and I had one in Washington, D.C. I got the biggest IBM machine and—it worked. And then I had cancer.

SW: Oh.

KT: Oh yeah. That, is a thing (exhales loudly). But, the guy I talked to, a Mexican, he was into peach kernels. I talked to him and he says, "You know, your problem (laughs) it's called stress. And you have two options: either you die within six months—that's your one option and I guarantee you that that's what's gonna happen or maybe you die further—earlier than that—*Or*, you're going to change jobs." I says, "Well I'm going to be a vice president very shortly." And he says, "Make up your mind. Become vice president (in a high-pitch, silly voice), anything is fine." So I stayed

there for about six weeks and then I decided to step back from TRW Systems. I joined Computer Systems and others and started my own company. But, I don't know if I did the right thing. And of course I have— had good contacts from ski club to German club, because I am German and I enjoy some other tourists to speak the languages and, uh, other things, I am very community oriented. I've got the money here for the new gym. Million and a half, which is not easy to get. I had never gotten that, I ran the Santa Monica Red Cross for ten years. (exhales) I have done about everything in it has been done here: running the community council to, you name it. That's about the end of my story. I have a son.<sup>27</sup> Who is six-foot-nine.

SW: (laughs).

KT: He was the best volleyball player in America. According to the newspaper.

SW: Nice.

KT: And he got a scholarship at Stanford. Now he's thirty-three. I don't know how old you are.

SW: I am twenty-six.

KT: Twenty-six, oh yeah, I remember. Now he is trying to find a job that equals what he used to make overseas. There is no such thing, you have to start from scratch.

SW: Yeah.

KT: Anyway, what else can I tell you?

SW: Um, I'm—you pretty much got it all in. I think it's a pretty good time to, uh, end unless there's anything else you would like to add that, I mean, I think you pretty much got it—

KT: These are all personal things.

SW: Hmm. Okay. Alrighty, uh, this was the interview with Kurt Toppel, uh, interviewer was Sean Washburn. Today's date is Friday, October 19th, 2013.

[01:09:18]

END OF INTERVIEW

---

<sup>27</sup> Curt Toppel (b. 1980).