

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Lewis Lubka
Narrator

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Interviewer

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SM: First of all, this is an interview with Lewis Lubka in Fargo, North Dakota, and it is June 28, 2011.

LL: I was born in New York City. I had no choice in the matter. I did not pick my parents. I did not pick my mother tongue. I did not pick the color of my skin. I did not pick my gender. It was all given.

My parents were progressive people, community activists, and I learned from them about becoming involved in society and not being a bystander or an onlooker, but being a participant. When I was about six years old, you got to realize I was born in '26, millions of people out of work. And there was hunger. One night, my mother did not come home, and I asked my dad, "where's my mother?" And he said, "She was arrested. She's in jail because they were protesting conditions." And millions of people were on the move. And so, that was my background, you might say.

And then I went through the public schools of New York. For those that know New York, I graduated from Stuyvesant High School, which was a technical scientific school, and I went on to Syracuse University.

I was one of the youngest to ever arrive there. I graduated high school ... I was 15. And then I turned 16 when I was a freshman in Syracuse. After two years there, I received a notice from my neighbors, the draft board, saying I was drafted and report for induction to the U. S. Army and I reported.

I was inducted and sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey, where I got my uniform and other things. I was put on a troop train. Of course we didn't know where we were going, we watched the stations, trying to figure out, and we ended up in

Florida. A place called Camp Blanding, Florida, where I got my basic training as a rifleman.

I did all the training, and it was 17 weeks of tough training. We learned to use weapons, and that kind of thing – tried to make a soldier out of me. Well they never did. I was a civilian in uniform throughout my Army career. I never was a true soldier, although I obeyed orders and did what I was supposed to do.

One day there was a Lieutenant Schafer (sp?); he gave me an order. And I said, “This is stupid.” And he said, “It’s an order. If you don’t do it, you can be shot. You can be in prison.” I said, “Yes, sir.” And I did what I was ordered to do. Three days later we passed and he said, “Lubka, you were right, it was stupid.” But you wouldn’t find many officers that would admit it.

Long story short, as my training was ending as an infantryman, a group came along from the Airborne; and they were looking for volunteers to be parachutists. And I said to myself, maybe this is the outfit I need to be in because it was getting toward the end of the war; and there were a lot of people that were scraping the bottom of the barrel.

I said, “If I’m going to serve, I want to serve with guys that, you know, had a lot going for them.” So they shipped me to Fort Benning, Georgia, where there was this place called the parachute school. And I made five jumps out of perfectly good planes and that qualified me as a parachutist ... five jumps. And then you got on what they called “jump status,” which means you got a bonus every month for being a parachutist; and we trained and one of my more – shall we say – some people would say exciting, some people would say dangerous.

We parachuted onto an island, called Dog Island, which is in the Gulf of Mexico. And, of course, they set up these exercises. We were engaging the 999th Imperial Japanese Marines that were, supposedly, dug in on the island. I parachuted out my plane and looked down, and all I could see was water, and it was a strong wind. We had certain measures where you could do small things to control the parachute. And I monkeyed around with it and managed to land in about three feet of water on the shore of the island, Dog Island. We lost about twelve guys who drowned. I remember when we jumped we had all this equipment on us, strapped including what they call a “Mae West,” which is a lifejacket. And I was trying to reach for my Mae West. There was so much gear, I couldn’t even find the strings to pull to inflate the Mae West, I landed in about three feet of water, up to my chest, crawled onto the shore.

And then we tried to reassemble. There was eight or nine of my group that were drowned. The funny part is I had written my parents about that exercise; and they saw in the New York Times “nine drowned in exercise.” And they didn’t know if I was one of them; but I managed to get a message back to them that I was okay. Anyway, the war was ending and, frankly, I was very happy about it.

I remember toward the end of my service, we were called to an assembly of the troops of my company and lined up in formation and the lieutenant said, “I have some terrible news. Our Commander-in-Chief has died.” And, that was Franklin D. Roosevelt, who we all loved and it was terrible. We went on and, eventually, it was time to get out and I was eager to get back to school.

And there was a Sergeant Doody, I’ll never forget him, d-o-o-d-y. And he said, “Lubka, the Army has great hopes for your future. We want to send you to Warrant Officer’s School. We’re going to do this and that to you.” I said, “Look, I just want to go home. I want to go back to college. I want my discharge papers. Let me go.” And he haggled around with me and tried to convince me to stay in the Army. He said, “Look, the Army’s giving you a home, shoes, a bed, three meals a day.” I said, “Look. I . . .” He kept trying to get me to sign up and I kept telling him, “No.” I remember I finally told him, “Look,” I said, “Sergeant, I’ll be picking shit with the chickens before I stay in this Army. Just give me my discharge papers, I want to go home. I want to go back to college.” And so, finally, he agreed.

I had my discharge papers. I got on a train, had to change trains in Washington, DC, to go back to New York. And I passed the lieutenant and he said, “Soldier, you didn’t salute me,” and I said, “I’m out of the Army, now.” And he said, “Let’s see your discharge papers.” I showed it to him. He said, “You’re still under Army jurisdiction for 24-48 hours from your discharge.” I said, “Yes, sir.” And I saluted him. And I got out and I got back home.

Six months later, I was on the campus of Syracuse University and a ROTC captain was coming down the road, down the sidewalk. And I jumped into the bushes so I wouldn’t have to salute him and after I got in the bushes, I realized that I don’t have to worry about this. I’m out of the Army. And so it took me a long time to get over the brainwashing that I had in the military for two years.

Anyway, that essentially is the brief and not very adventurous story of my military service. I did make twelve jumps. Each jump was risking your life, and I did all the training. They trained me as a demolitions expert and I qualified on all the guns which, of course, have served me well; because when

I was involved in the civil rights movement in the south, and we were doing some civil rights activities, the racists shot at us and we shot back. So my gun experience was useful. And that's a brief overview of the whole situation.

Oh, I might say that those two years of service to my country, I wasn't subject to hostile gunfire. I never even left the States. And when I got discharged, waiting for me was the G. I. Bill, which was the best thing that ever happened to me and to millions of other servicemen that came home, servicewomen. They paid for my entire college education, tuition, books, lab equipment and a living stipend, so prior to my first two years at college, I worked in the dining services at the U and I did all kinds of menial work to support myself to pay for school. But the last two years was covered by Uncle Sam, who took care of us. And I have a small service-connected disability, and I will say that the VA has been taking care of me here in Fargo. I get all my prescriptions. Eight dollars a prescription, even though one little thing I take once a month. It's something for bone health; costs \$119 and I get it for \$8. And so I would say that the Army, the government, has taken good care of me since I was discharged. Questions?

SM: I have lots of questions if that's okay. When you were growing up tell me a little bit about your activism of your parents, because I'm quite curious about that.

LL: Well my parents were very unusual and wonderful people. They were vegetarian. I didn't eat my first piece of meat until I was 12. I can give you a story on that but I won't bother now. They were pacifists. They didn't believe in war or killing. They were nudists, which was fun to me as a kid growing up. And they were socialists, so I had a real, shall we say, alternate view of the world through my parents. And they were wonderful people. They spoke [unclear] languages and I picked up some of my language skills from them.

SM: What languages did they speak?

LL: My mother was Russian, so she spoke Russian and English and French. My father was Polish. He spoke Polish, and he spoke a beautiful German, which I picked up a lot from him. And he spoke Russian, too.

SM: And was your father's family of German-Russian or from Germany?

LL: From Poland ... from a place called, "woodzh", Ł-ó-d-ź, "woodzh", which was one of the later industrial towns of Poland. They had the textile industry grew up there. The town was built after the railroad system was laid out so

they had to run a spur into Łódź, and in Poland I'm called "z Łódź" meaning "from Łódź."

SM: And so was that part of the territory that went back and forth between Germany and the First World War, or how did your father learn German?

LL: He was interned and captured somehow. He was in the Polish Army, brought to Germany as a prisoner; and he was there for a couple of years, and he picked up German.

SM: Oh, my gosh, so your father was in World War I then?

LL: Yes.

SM: Did he talk about his World War I experience at all?

LL: No, he was interned. He was just a prisoner. He worked. I don't know. We didn't talk much about it. You know, you wish your parents were alive so you could ask a thousand questions that you never thought of while, you know, they were alive.

SM: Did you ever get a sense of whether he was treated well or not?

LL: Well, he was treated okay. He never complained so; I think if he had he would have, you know. Yes.

SM: So where in New York City were you born or lived?

LL: I was actually born in the Bronx. They say near the zoo. Near the monkey house. Then we moved to Manhattan when I was a little boy and that's where I went to high school, and all of that, until I graduated and then I went on to Syracuse University.

SM: Where in the city of Manhattan did you live then?

LL: What is called the "Lower East Side," which is a melting pot of immigrants from all over the world. On my last trip there – I still have a few friends still alive from my youth. Most of them are dead. It was mainly Slavs, Polish, Russian, then Jews, then Puerto Ricans and now it's Arab. So neighborhoods change. There are mosques there where there were Catholic churches, and it's quite changed. The basic street layout is there but the people who live there have changed.

SM: Are some of your friends from growing up, still living in the same neighborhood?

LL: Yes. Well I have a cousin. She's still there, where she's always been. And other people, but most, you know, when you're pushing 85, most of your childhood friends are dead. That's one of the downsides of being older.

SM: Yes, I'm sure that's very true.

LL: Yes. You lose your friends when they die.

SM: It must be difficult.

LL: Well, that's the way it goes.

SM: When was your birthday and the year that you were born?

LL: July 14th.

SM: So how did you feel about joining the military given your pacifist background?

LL: Well, I was glad to be in because the country was at war. The Nazis were all over the place. The Japanese were invading island after island and I wanted to participate. I had mixed feelings. I was not a military mind.

I have a cousin who just died recently, who liked to kill people. He was a lieutenant colonel of the Marines, and he enjoyed killing people. That was he was a killer. And he's dead now. He won the Silver Star in Korea for killing Koreans. Then he went to Vietnam and was a big killer there. Some guy at NDSU approached me, a student, and said, "Do you know, Basile Lubka, Colonel Basile Lubka?" I said, "Yes, my cousin." He said, "We tried to frag him." Fragging was an act of the military, of junior members in the military killing their officer when he was vicious and so forth. They dropped a grenade in his tent, but he went to the toilet and that's why he still lived. Anyway, he died this year.

SM: So they tried to frag him?

LL: Frag him. If an officer got too overbearing and too crazy, the men had their own code.

SM: And so, how would they cover it up?

LL: Who knows who did it? It could have been an enemy, you know?

SM: So it's hard to prove?

LL: Hard to prove, yes.

SM: So he was a really, really vicious to the actual, his men or . . .

LL: Well, that's what I understand. I never served under him, so I don't know, but he cut himself off from the family for 30 years. We had no contact with him because we didn't particularly like killers.

SM: When you say he was a killer, did he enjoyed it, did he brag about his killing, or how did you know that he liked killing?

LL: Yes, I saw him many, many years ago when we still had contact and he just bragged on all the killing he had done and you know. Yes. C'est la vie.

SM: C'est la vie. Yes, okay. What day were you inducted into the Army, approximately?

LL: I've got my discharge downstairs. About September 1, 1944 and I stayed until about September 1946, two years.

SM: So you were discharged right after . . .

LL: August 1946, in time to go back to college, that's September of '46.

SM: And what did you study in Syracuse before you went to the war?

LL: I studied chemical engineering. Essentially, I went to the New York State College of Forestry, which is a wonderful school. The first year, we all studied about forests. And the second year, you had to make a choice in utilization of wood or taking care of forests: forest entomology, forest pathology, the tree as tree.

The second division was utilization, and you could go into what they called lumberyard management or home construction, or pulp and paper manufacturing. I went into pulp and paper manufacturing. And that was, basically, chemical engineering and I worked at some paper mills and worked in the paper mill in Wisconsin.

SM: Where did you first start at?

LL: New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse University. It was one of the colleges. Yeah, they had a Medical College, they had a Law College and I went to a College of Forestry.

I was drafted just about the end of my second year, and then came back two years later and finished. Yes.

SM: What year did you finish in '48, in the spring of '48? Or that would have been '45-'46, '46-'47, the spring of '47?

LL: I think I graduated in about '49.

SM: Forty-nine?

LL: About then.

SM: With your undergraduate degree?

LL: Yes.

SM: And then you went to go work in Wisconsin?

LL: Yes one year and then I decided – I didn't know what I wanted. So I spent 10 years trying to figure out who I was and what I wanted to do. Traveled and did this and did that, got involved in the civil rights movement. And then, I decided to get a master's and I went to Georgia Tech for a Master's in City Planning.

SM: And when did you go to Georgia Tech?

LL: Approximately in 1950.

SM: Nineteen-fifty?

LL: Approximately, yes. I think I should do memoirs so I can get it all sorted out.