

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

The Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview With  
Sheldon D. Gerson  
Cleveland, Ohio  
March 16, 2016  
9812 Technical Service Unit  
Worked on A-Bomb  
Uranium-235

My name is Richard Misenhimer: Today is March 16, 2016. I am interviewing Mr. Sheldon D. Gerson by telephone. His phone number is 440-460-0950. His address is 2112 Acacia Park Drive, #208, Cleveland, OH 44124.. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Nimitz Education and Research Center for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Sheldon, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today and I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Gerson:

Thank you.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, the first thing I need to do is read to you this agreement with the museum to make sure this is OK with you. So let me read this to you. (agreement read) Is that OK with you?

Mr. Gerson:

Yes, it is.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the next thing I'd like to do is get an alternative contact. We find out that sometimes several years down the road, we try to get back in contact with a veteran, he's moved or something. So do you have a son or daughter or some one we could contact if we needed to?

Mr. Gerson:

Yes, I could give you my daughter's phone number. Her name is Amy Gerson. Her phone number is 216-299-8266.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where does she live? What town?

Mr. Gerson:

She lives in Mayfield Heights, Ohio, which is a suburb of Cleveland.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Hopefully, we'll never need that but you never know. Now, what is your birth date?

Mr. Gerson:

August 17, 1925.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where were you born?

Mr. Gerson:

Cleveland, Ohio.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Gerson:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How many of each?

Mr. Gerson:

I have one sister, who is deceased, and one brother, who is also deceased.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was he in World War II?

Mr. Gerson:

No, he was not but my brother-in-law was, my sister's husband was. My brother was not.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Is your brother-in-law still living?

Mr. Gerson:

No, he's not.

Mr. Misenhimer:

If he were, I'd like to interview him. Now, what were your mother's and father's first names?

Mr. Gerson:

My father's name was Abe, and my mother's name was Anna.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, you grew up during the Depression. How did the Depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Gerson:

It was very important in our family. My father in fact started our family business in March of 1936. The name of the business was Corlett Lumber Company and we started out as a small retail lumberyard, lumber company, in the Cleveland area and I remember I was nine years old. I remember when he came home and said he'd bought a piece of land and he was going to start up his own company in the middle of the Depression and times were tough but we did and he did succeed and we did get through it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So he was able to keep earning money all during the Depression, then.

Mr. Gerson:

Yes. Minimal, but he was starting a new business.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have a garden or anything like that?

Mr. Gerson:

No, we did not.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You lived in town apparently.

Mr. Gerson:

Right.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then where did you go to high school?

Mr. Gerson:

Cleveland Heights High School.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What year did you graduate?

Mr. Gerson:

1942.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you do when you finished high school?

Mr. Gerson:

I enrolled in college, the University of Michigan, and in the chemical science program.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What happened there?

Mr. Gerson:

In college. I was at the University of Michigan for five semesters and then I was drafted in August of 1944. Then I went into the service.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you were drafted, did you have a choice of the branch of service?

Mr. Gerson:

No, I did not.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And you went into the Army?

Mr. Gerson:

Into the Army.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where did you go for your basic training?

Mr. Gerson:

Camp Joseph T. Robinson, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What all happened there?

Mr. Gerson:

I took infantry basic training preparing to enter combat. I was an expert rifleman and I was the acting platoon Sergeant of the First Platoon and I trained there from August of 1944 until June of 1945 when I got transferred out of there to something else.

Mr. Misenhimer:

In your basic training, were your drill instructors pretty tough on you?

Mr. Gerson:

(laughs) Were they? Yes. We were eighteen-year-olds and they were twenty-three so they were tough.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were they combat veterans?

Mr. Gerson:

As I recall, one or two were and the rest were not.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What were some of the things they did to you?

Mr. Gerson:

Well, you know, they were tough on the hikes and they were tough on our training. They certainly trained us. I had never fired a rifle before I was in the Army and after I learned how to fire the M-1 rifle, I was told that I was the second best shot in the rifle company and that was something that I figured I better learn how to do it if I ever got into combat.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have the infiltration course where you crawl under the machine gun firing over you?

Mr. Gerson:

Yes, we did during training with the machine gun over us, yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you think of that?

Mr. Gerson:

Scary, but I had confidence in the fact that the machine guns, they told us before we went in, that they would be mounted on a frame that they couldn't really do us any harm. They were not going

to be able to shoot any lower but all the machine gun shots were disturbing but we all made it through.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything particular stand out from your time in basic training?

Mr. Gerson:

I felt the training was very good but I was concerned about if I would survive if I were to be sent into combat because I felt that they were giving us the best possible training that they could and it was well done and we went through a lot of training and a lot of hiking and one thing and another but I had the natural concerns that all of us had that if they did go into combat I didn't which I'll get to a little bit later on. That it was going to be tough stuff.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened when you finished basic?

Mr. Gerson:

I was taken out of our company and I was transferred into the Army Specialized Training Program at Penn State University and I was reassigned there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What happened there?

Mr. Gerson:

Well, I was there for about four months, studying electrical engineering and studying the principles of electrical engineering applied to power and electronics. So I was, are you familiar with the Army Specialized Training Program, the ASTP?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, I am, right.



Mr. Gerson:

Well, it had been suspended and then it got reinstated again and I was one of the lucky guys to get picked just before our outfit was ready to get overseas and I spent four months at Penn State University.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So about when did you finish up at Penn State?

Mr. Gerson:

I got there in January of 1945 and in April of 1945 I got transferred to work on the atom bomb.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tell me about that.

Mr. Gerson:

Well, during our time at Penn State University, there were about 1200 of us in the unit, going to school and I remember very clearly, 21 of us were called into a room by ourselves and a civilian asked us if we would be interested in doing something scientific and being in the Army but not in a command unit. We all said yes. The next thing we knew we were given secret orders to go to the U.S.O. in Knoxville, Tennessee with no information other than that. They gave us a ticket and said, "You be at the U.S.O. in Knoxville, Tennessee at the train station by such and such a date." That's what we did. That's what I did and the others did the same.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Gerson:

We were put into Army vehicles with the canvas sides down so we couldn't see out. We were driven about 50 miles and then when we got to Oak Ridge, Tennessee they said, OK, get out of

the truck and we were assigned to barracks at Oak Ridge, Tennessee and that's where I spent my first night, in the barracks. Want me to continue?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, go ahead and continue. Go right ahead.

Mr. Gerson:

The next morning I was told to report to one of the areas at Oak Ridge. By the way as soon as we got off the trucks, we were told that you are in a secret facility. We're just going to give you the name: it's Oak Ridge, Tennessee. We're not telling you anything about it except you don't know it exists. You're just here, top secret, and no talking about it among yourselves and of course no leaving the post and no talking about it to your families. You're here and that's all we were told.

The next morning I was told to report to one of the buildings at Oak Ridge and I was interviewed by a civilian as a matter of fact who asked me if I knew anything about atomic energy. I said a little bit. He says, "You know anything about splitting the atom?" I said, "Not very much." He says, "You don't have to know but that's what we're doing here and we're going to be making an atomic bomb. How do you feel about that?" I said, "I'm amazed. What are you telling me?" He says, "Well, this is a top secret installation. It's a top secret part of the company. It's called The Manhattan District. You'll be in the Army, you'll be in uniform, you'll continue to be a Private First Class but you will be assigned to a chemical engineering job with the intention of working with other people to develop and produce an atomic bomb. How do you feel about it?" I said, "I'm ready to do it. I'll contribute whatever scientific knowledge I have." He says, "You're going to be surrounded by the finest and the best chemical engineers in the United States and the World, so you'll have good company." Then he laughed. He handed me a slip of paper and he says, "You report to Building K-25 tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock. They'll be waiting for you

and then they'll give you a further assignment from there." They did. I was assigned to be one of four managers of the laboratory at Unit K-25 which was the gaseous diffusion procedures to separate Uranium 235 which is radioactive from Uranium 238 which is not. I was assigned to the lab right across the street from the main building and I was told that what's going to happen is, you're going to have about 50 or 60 people working in the lab. Periodically every day you're going to be sent over samples of Uranium which has been converted to a gas Uranium hexafluoride. You'll be given samples. Those will go through the lab where the lab will analyze the amount of Uranium 235 has been separated. You will then report that information by telephone to one of the plant managers and the plant managers and the technical people over there and you, you will give them the information you have as to the results of the lab examination and then they will know how to recirculate Uranium hexafluoride within the plant. In other words, the gas was pumped into the plant and through porous barrier tubes, recycled and recycled and recycled and recycled until a little tiny fractional amount of the U-235 was captured and that was what our project was. So for the time I was there at Oak Ridge, I was in charge of this laboratory. My job was mainly to report the results and to make discussions with the plant managing people as to how the recycling of the Uranium within the plant should be in order to enrich the Uranium to the beginning of the building of an atomic bomb. After I was there for about seven months, it began to get routine. In other words, the plant began to learn or continue to learn how they had to recycle the Uranium hexafluoride in order to purify the Uranium 235 so they really didn't need samples any more. They were able to determine without our lab really doing any of the work so our lab was going to be shut down and I no longer was going to have that job. I says, "OK, what's next?" Three or four days later they said, "You're going to be shipped to another ultra-secretive facility in New Mexico. You're going to be going to Santa Fe,

New Mexico. Here's your train ticket. Again this is top secret. You're not to tell anybody where you are." They gave us false orders so that in case we were stopped by an MP or anybody else in the military it would be that we were assigned to a fort some place. I don't remember what it was but you were to be secretive. Here's a train ticket. You're to go to Santa Fe, New Mexico. There were six of us that were sent over there at the same time. You were to report to such and such an address in Santa Fe, New Mexico, top secret and when you get there, they'll tell you what's next. So we got on the train and it took two nights, I think, something like that, the six of us. We got to Santa Fe and then we went to this office where we were then told to "wait here" and a bus would be coming for us and take us up to where we were going. So we waited and the next thing there was a bus with no numbers on it or no signs or anything and they took us 60 miles up in the mountains to Los Alamos, New Mexico, which was where the atomic bomb was being developed by Robert Oppenheimer and all of his staff and I was assigned to a particular unit of ten other chemical engineers where we were doing one project that was not directly devoted to the building of the atomic bomb but was kind of a side issue and I stayed and worked in that unit in Los Alamos until I got discharged from there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You got discharged from there when?

Mr. Gerson:

Well, I got discharged in June of 1946 at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. They sent us from Los Alamos to Fort Sam Houston and there we got discharged. Richard, I want to emphasize the secrecy that was present, both in Los Alamos and at Oak Ridge. Top secret stuff. When we left the camp when we had time off or something like that, we all had orders that we were stationed, I remember getting orders that we were stationed, in case we ever got stopped, we were stationed

at Fort Hood very often. We were stationed some place else because every month at Los Alamos we had to leave the post for three days. They gave us money for a three-day pass and the fourth day we spent in the hospital and they would check us for radiation. I was fortunate enough not to be bothered at all but you know in the three days off we would hitchhike down to the Mexican border and I remember going to Juarez and we went up to Taos, New Mexico and we always had in our pockets orders for another base in case we got crazy and had too much to drink and got picked up by the M.P.s or whatever. No one knew that Los Alamos existed so it was very, very tight security, tightest, nobody knew about it, even Harry Truman didn't know about it until President Roosevelt died and then President Truman was told about it and that was the first time he heard about it. Perfect secrecy. That's about it. Well, when I was at Los Alamos they were building the atomic bombs. We did see two of them on the base. I was not part of the test that was done in Alamogordo, New Mexico where a test bomb was fired. I was not part of that unit but we did see the two bombs in the main street, part of the company street. One day we saw them gone and we figured something was going on and a week after that the first bomb was dropped at Hiroshima and the next one was dropped at Nagasaki. When I was ready to get discharged, the Army officer came to me and he said, "We could offer you complete room and board, tuition, expenses if you go to the University of California in Berkley to finish your last three semesters in becoming a chemical engineer. The government, you will be out of the Army, you will be a civilian of course but the Federal Government will pay your room, board, tuition, spending money, the whole bit for the three semesters. However, you have to sign a contract that you will come back to Los Alamos and continue to work for two years at a salary of \$15,000 a year, plus twenty percent hazard pay." Richard, in 1946 that was a hell of a lot of money. However, I turned it down. I wanted to go back to the University of Michigan, finish my

graduation and then go on with my life. So I turned down the offer although a lot of people accepted it, if they had more college coming. I was discharged from Fort Sam Houston and I came home.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Do you ever regret turning that down?

Mr. Gerson:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Let me go back and ask you some questions. What unit were you in?

Mr. Gerson:

It was the 9812 Technical Service Unit. It was the same unit in Los Alamos and Oak Ridge.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Before you first went into that, did they have a complete security check on you?

Mr. Gerson:

Oh, yes. In fact they interviewed, they asked for three people that they wanted to interview here in Cleveland. I gave them three friends of my father's and they all told me the same story. Four people dressed in civilian clothes came in and interviewed them and the three friends of my father thought they didn't know who, they didn't say what they were doing. They were just told they were showing badges and identification and asked a lot of questions about me.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So you had to get the clearance.

Mr. Gerson:

Oh, yes, very much so.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When did you go to Los Alamos, what date?

Mr. Gerson:

I don't have the date that I was at Los Alamos. It had to be, let's see I went to Oak Ridge in April 1945 and got discharged in June 1946, so I spent half the time at Oak Ridge and other half at Los Alamos. So let's see I was there from April to June, ten months, five months, April, I guess probably I would say July or August I got transferred to Los Alamos from Oak ridge.

Mr. Misenhimer:

On July 16, 1945 is when they tested the bomb there at Los Alamos.

Mr. Gerson:

It was in July?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, sir.

Mr. Gerson:

Then in 1946...

Mr. Misenhimer:

No, it was in 1945.

Mr. Gerson:

1945?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right.

Mr. Gerson:

OK.

Mr. Misenhimer:

August 6, 1945 is when they dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima.

Mr. Gerson:

OK. I was at Los Alamos by then. So it had to be July or August of 1945.

Mr. Misenhimer:

It was July 16, 1945 when they did the test there, the first one they exploded.

Mr. Gerson:

I was in Los Alamos at the time of the test, yes. And both of the bombings. That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So you would not have been at Oak Ridge for seven months then?

Mr. Gerson:

I was. Does that add up?

Mr. Misenhimer:

When did you arrive at Oak Ridge?

Mr. Gerson:

I arrived at Oak Ridge in April of 1945 and I was discharged in June of 1946. So that's ten months and it was about half and half. For some reason or other it does not appear on my discharge as to when I got transferred from Oak Ridge to Los Alamos. That's not on my discharge at all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

If you were there when that test was made, you'd had to be there by July 16, you know the first part.



Mr. Gerson:

That's correct, yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You had that high secret clearance and all of that, right.

Mr. Gerson:

Well, that could have accounted for it. There was a little mixup because when we got to Los Alamos as I recall now, they said why are you here. We showed them our orders and there was some mixup some place but I don't know exactly where or how.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you recall from your time in the service?

Mr. Gerson:

I was thinking back to basic training. No, nothing there other than it was tough physical working, you know. At Oak Ridge and Los Alamos, they were both...there was a lot of construction going on at the same time there were no roads. In Oak Ridge we were in Army barracks but in Los Alamos, we were in barracks, too, but they were a little better. They were a little farther along but it was rough and we didn't get any Army food. We got like \$1.25 a day. The military was kind of off to one side. You know, one area of Oak Ridge and Los Alamos and the rest of the area was where the civilians were. So we were given \$1.25 a day for food. They had cafeterias. We would go down the cafeteria line and we'd order maybe about \$2.50 worth of stuff and the cashier would say, "OK, soldier, give me a dollar and that will be enough." I remember that. I remember the mud roads but mainly the work that was being done and the complete secrecy of what was happening and where we were. In fact we called Los Alamos, we called it Lost Almost, that was its nickname among the guys.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was there any time you ever felt frightened?

Mr. Gerson:

No, not at all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you think of the officers you had over you?

Mr. Gerson:

The officers at Oak Ridge did not have the slightest idea of what we were doing. All they were, were military officers. They had no idea what was happening. They were in charge of 1200 soldiers. They administered our pay and whatever but we had really no contact with them at all. It was the same thing at Los Alamos, they really had no idea of anything about an atomic bomb. They knew the buildings were being built and built and work was going on but they had no idea of what was going on so we had no contact with them really. We never had any parades or inspections of anything like that. In that regard it was not an Army post as such.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now on April 12, 1945 President Roosevelt died. Did you all hear about that?

Mr. Gerson:

Oh, sure, we knew about that. We had plenty of information coming in. There was just no information going out by us.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When Roosevelt died, what was the reaction people had to that?

Mr. Gerson:

Oh, everybody was very sad.

Mr. Misenhimer:

He was the only President most people had known.

Mr. Gerson:

That's right.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then on May 8, 1945 Germany surrendered. Have any kind of celebration then?

Mr. Gerson:

I think, I'm not sure. Yes, there was. I'm not sure if I was at Oak Ridge or Los Alamos. When did they surrender?

Mr. Misenhimer:

May of 1945.

Mr. Gerson:

I think I was still at Oak Ridge.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You would have been.

Mr. Gerson:

There was a big V-E, we had a big blast on the post at Oak Ridge.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then on August 15, Japan surrendered. Did you have a celebration then?

Mr. Gerson:

We did.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where were you then?

Mr. Gerson:

I'm trying to remember if I was at Los Alamos or still at Oak Ridge.

Mr. Misenhimer:

This was after the atomic bombs were dropped, so you had to be at Los Alamos.

Mr. Gerson:

OK, I was at Los Alamos. Hard to remember.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you got out, did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life?

Mr. Gerson:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you use your G.I. Bill for anything?

Mr. Gerson:

Yes, absolutely, for my three more semesters of college.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else?

Mr. Gerson:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was the highest rank you got to?

Mr. Gerson:

I was a big Private First Class.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have you had any reunions of your outfit?

Mr. Gerson:

There were some but I never attended.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have you kept up with anybody you were in the service with?

Mr. Gerson:

For a very short period of time one of the guys but he lived in Pennsylvania and it was a little hard to keep in touch. Other than that we didn't, no. You know we really weren't in a unit in other words where we marched together and everybody went off to their jobs in different parts of the plant and it was all secretive. We didn't know what anybody else was doing so it was really hard to get familiar with anybody.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was the morale in your outfit?

Mr. Gerson:

Very high, we were determined to be part of the whole operation, very, very determined.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you get out of the service with any souvenirs?

Mr. Gerson:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever see any U.S.O. shows anywhere?

Mr. Gerson:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have any experience with the Red Cross?

Mr. Gerson:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you recall from your time in the service?

Mr. Gerson:

Well, one little thing. When I was taking infantry basic training, I asked the First Sergeant, was I ever going to get a three-day pass because my parents wanted to come visit me. This was when I was taking basic training in Little Rock, Arkansas. No secretive about that, nothing. Understand? Am I making myself clear? This is during basic infantry training. I asked the First Sergeant was there any weekend when I would get a three-day pass because we all did get three-day passes. I said my mother and father want to come down and see me. So he looks at the schedule and he said, yeah, and he gives me a weekend. So I tell my parents what the weekend was and they made arrangements to come down from Cleveland to Little Rock by train and they were going to come down Friday afternoon and on Thursday, the day before, I asked the Sergeant, his name was Casimir Prevesheky. I'll never forget it. I says, "OK, Sergeant, where's my three-day pass?" He said, "What are you talking about?" I said you told me I would have a three-day pass this weekend because my parents are on their way down here. He says, "Well, I must have read the schedule wrong because you're going to be off next weekend." I said, "My mother and father are on a dirty train coming from Cleveland to Little Rock." He says, "I don't give an f\_\_\_\_\_

about it.” That’s the way it was and when I got transferred out of the unit to go to ASTP, and he came and got me, he said, “OK, Gerson, (and we never got along after that) you’re out of here and I’m glad to get rid of you.” I didn’t say anything, just got my stuff together and left. He was a good Sergeant, he was a good guy. He was tough but he couldn’t read the schedule I guess.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What ribbons and medals did you get?

Mr. Gerson:

I got the American Theater Campaign Ribbon, Good Conduct Medal and our unit received the Meritorious Unit Award and I also got a Victory Ribbon. I got one of those that we called the “Ruptured Duck”, the lapel thing. I got one of those. The Meritorious Unit Award that was to the 9812 Technical Service Unit.

Mr. Misenhimer:

All right. Anything else you’ve thought of?

Mr. Gerson:

No, I don’t think so. It’s brought back a lot of memories.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well, Sheldon, thanks again for your time today and for your service to our country.

Mr. Gerson:

OK and you, too, for your service. I’ll tell you as we get older, Richard, we’re getting more and more of this people opening up doors and thanking us for our service.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well, that’s fine. You’re 90 and I’m 87. We’re both getting up there.

Mr. Gerson:

Well, right, good health to you and it was a pleasure talking to you and I'm going to call my niece and nephew in a little bit and let them know that this interview did take place because they were there when the woman said, "We're going to get someone to interview you." Continue with your volunteer work in good health and thanks again for everything.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Thanks to you. Talk to you later.

*End of Interview*

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