

# Eric Blaustein Oral History Interview

July 10, 2015

Interviewed by Ed Sanderson

SANDERSON: Today is the 10th of July 2015. We are here with Eric Blaustein from the Israeli Defense Force. Thank you for coming out and speaking with us here at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Thank you for coming out today. We will definitely start in with it. After Germany—after you left Germany in 1945—you went to Israel during that time frame?

BLAUSTEIN: Yes. Let me put it this way: I went to college right after I was liberated—a few months after I was liberated—from the concentration camp. I became a civil engineer and when the State of Israel was declared in May, 1948, I was in my final examinations at the University. I had been active in a Zionist movement with young people who were left in Germany, and I was one of the leaders of the national organization. The fact was that I come from a family that had a long history in the Zionist movement, but in my case in particular...I think what happened to me...as a good German citizen [it] taught me where I belonged and I became...maybe that was my only way to survive, to feel that one of those days we would have a State. So when the State was declared, I insisted to break off my examinations and leave for Israel to train [in] the army. Well...

SANDERSON: Which university did you go to?

BLAUSTEIN: I went to the University of—technically—the University of Hanover.

SANDERSON: Ok.

BLAUSTEIN: So, well, it didn't go too well over with my father, who had also survived and had been an officer in the Austrian army in World War One. He gave me a long lecture that...what it did, you see, is that...I was to be the volunteer...that people get killed in the war so why don't you...just don't have to do that unless they call you. And now I could point out to him that he had volunteered too, in 1915, so... [laughs] and he says...and his answer was "that's why I tell you; it's not fun." Well, he didn't get anywhere with me, so I left in the middle of my examination now. In retrospect, to say my father was right and I was an idiot, but what are you doing with a young guy?

SANDERSON: [laughs] Right.

BLAUSTEIN: So, my father had to pull a few strings, I found out. At first he sealed my examination papers...in the middle he had a long talk with the professor who was my advisor to seal my examination papers. He also called the guy who was in charge in the...then...displaced person camp of Bergen-Belsen of the draft...of the Israeli draft. He was a former military rabbi in the Yugoslav army who ended up as a survivor in Germany after the war, so my father knew him personally. He made a phone call, and when I arrived in Bergen-Belsen to volunteer for the army, first he tried to talk me out of it; very funny thing to do for a guy who runs the drafting office [laughs]. After he saw he didn't get anywhere he said, "ok." So I went through the whole procedure, physical, and all the papers. I ended up in front of this gentleman—his name was Asaria. He set me down and said, "now here are your marching orders, now go back to the university and finish your examinations because we now have enough soldiers, but we always can need a graduate engineer." I was studying civil engineering. He said, "we will need to build a lot of things; we need you. Get your" ...It was only about two weeks I had still to do, and I started to protest. He said "forget it, you're in the army now and I am an officer and I give you an order." So I saw I wouldn't get anywhere with him...involved in transporting me to Israel, so I went back and, to my surprise, I thought first they would tell me "buddy walked out of here, that's it." No, my professor was smiling at me, he said, "we had it sealed," and opened [it] up, "so you can go on starting from here." So I finished my examination. Seven days later, I arrived in Bergen-Belsen, it was a camp, and get in front of the drafting board. I was again told "don't you want to rest up first a few weeks or something?" And I thought I was...

SANDERSON: You're ready to go, eh?

BLAUSTEIN Let's go, ok so I...let's go, ok! You want to go, you want to go? Now, what they had there in Bergen-Belsen at that time...that was a city of about 15,000 people, extra-territorial in the British occupation area of Germany. With the year we are talking about is 1948; there was no German police or British police in there, they had their own police, so that's why there was impunity of running a draft office there. They considered themselves as an arm of the Israeli government the moment the state had been declared, and outright draft of people who lived there. Now, I was a German citizen who lived outside the camp, so I came there as a volunteer. So I came there and they said, "we have a transport going about in two, three weeks, don't know yet exactly, but since you are a college

graduate, we are needing of officer material.” Maybe you can be the transport officer of this rabbi who had been a military man first in the Yugoslav army and then later he had also a year and a half in the British army as of the...clergy core. So he gave me some instructions. Well, it wasn’t much, but I was thinking it would be in about two [or] three weeks when the transport came, my work would start. Now he said “ok, now it’s time for the evening appear. Come with me, [I’ll] introduce you.” And I saw he wanted to get rid of this morning and evening appear. So he introduced me and said, “that’s your new commander.” I had about twenty-something guys, say, and over the next two weeks about fifty, and then we got the orders to leave. Now, leaving Germany at that time...the moment we were outside the Bergen-Belsen, the P camp, we were under the jurisdiction of the German police or German government, which carefully tried not to touch any of us because of what had just...because of the Holocaust.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: They knew they had a bad name, and they didn’t want to get even worse destruction. They knew, apparently, they wouldn’t be able to enforce anything, they would get from us a fight. So they stayed away from us; they didn’t notice us.

SANDERSON: Uh huh.

BLAUSTEIN: The British, though, they were not very friendly. They were still sore that they had been kicked out of Palestine and they tried to prevent us from traveling. But somehow I wasn’t really aware that...I was a little bit ignorant, and maybe the idea was I shouldn’t know, but I was supposed to bring those 50 people into the American occupation zone where there [were] collection camps for the army. It had a little bit to do, I guess, with the individual American commanders in the districts. There were some commanders which, apparently, found most of them were of Irish descent, [who] didn’t like the British.

SANDERSON: [laughs]

BLAUSTEIN: They turned a blind eye...they even turned the old army camps—former German army camps—to the Israeli army, to collect and assemble units there. And, well, I got my people through the British occupation area without any problems. I spoke German like a German, and I spoke passible English at that time, too, so somehow I never found out that actually the German train conductors were in on it, they were paid off, and tried their darndest to keep the British train

controllers out of the wagons—where the people were in—because there was an embargo by the UN on men of military age reaching Palestine at that time.

SANDERSON: Hmm!

BLAUSTEIN: And the Americans didn't enforce it, the British state...so they would've taken guys off the train. They couldn't take me over, I had German papers.

SANDERSON: Papers, right.

BLAUSTEIN: So I was a German and uh...but I could have taken those 50 guys over as DPs and our...Well we got us our bags. The papers I had for that group was a choir going to Munich for a singer festival. Now, I don't know if they even could sing, I can't, and I was a choir director [laughs].

SANDERSON: [laughs]

BLAUSTEIN: So I never used it, but when we got into...I got my first surprise. This military police sergeant, he came on the train, and he looked at my paper and smiled. I heard him call to his partner: "hey get a load of that we have got—another bunch of singers here!"

SANDERSON: [laughs]

BLAUSTEIN: Then he smiled at me as he gave the paper back, "uh, have a good trip" [laughs]. The Americans absolutely were very sympathetic. We got to a camp in southern Bavaria—beautiful vacation place. We got some preliminary military training there.

SANDERSON: Now who did the preliminary training for the military?

BLAUSTEIN: Well marching and being—acting in a unit like a soldier, I mean we had no armaments, but the surprise was, two weeks later, we went on to France and then to Marseille and [not] too long from there we were shipped on a boat to Israel. It's basically a long story. I just want to mention here we went on American military transport, with American military drivers, to France; they brought us to Mulhouse in France. Now I understand that the commander of that transport, some major general, outright said "I'll do that because I think I should do that," but they also knew that the higher up this would not have...It wasn't really above the table but everybody knew about it, say, "get those guys going, ok."

SANDERSON: Yeah.

BLAUSTEIN: So they poured us to Mulhouse in France where we...and then military train of the French army got us to Marseille. In Marseille, we got on a boat which carried the Israeli flag, and we arrived in Haifa early September, 1948. I have once said that actually the trip from Germany to Haifa was more treacherous than anything else, [laughs] and funny but I mean that's not what you want to really talk right now about. Now, in Haifa, because I had acted as a crew of the ship—security crew—my job was to command of the aft deck.

SANDERSON: The aft deck...

BLAUSTEIN: So I mean I was to keep order, see to it that people got water and food and so on. I had about 30 guys working for me. So we got off the boat and we were promptly received by the Israeli army and put into an army camp where we went through one more of a draft procedure, receiving Israeli papers. We spent about 2 and a half days in a camp which there were a few thousand people and from there they moved out in groups of people to real basic training. Well they head to army cantina, you know, I went to shopping fairs and was surprised...one of my girlfriends from Germany...I mean girlfriend...she was there selling...I said, "when did you get here?" and she had come 2-3 months earlier. She wore an Israeli army uniform, I say...I mean she talked to me about the army, and then some guy showed up: a captain in the Israeli army. Come on! It was her boyfriend, so she introduced me, and that guy looked at me and said, "you know, I just had your file!" And I say "so what's in the file?" and, oh, "you will get the core of engineers and officer training." Well, he was only partially right. There was a war going on, and the army does not need that. I was 23 years old...I mean they didn't need me at a desk.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: [laughs] They needed bodies, so before I knew it I was picked for combat training, and camp in [Need spelling of name –ed.] It's now [need spelling of name—ed.]; it's a big hospital now; at the time it was a big army camp. And I say, the first time I saw the difference between the British and American army...this particular army camp was built in 1944 by the American army.

SANDERSON: Hmm.

BLAUSTEIN: All the other army camps in Israel were built by the British army [laughs]. Now we had some Sami tents. The roofs were tents but the walls weren't; it was built for hot climate. Army barracks for 15 people...each barrack...it looked like—for me it looked like luxury, ok?

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: The American army built nicer things for their soldiers. But I spent only about two and a half weeks there for...this was all they could give us in basic training.

SANDERSON: Was there...the people who gave you the training...

BLAUSTEIN: Well, they were Israeli soldiers, most of them were veterans of the British army or the—what do they call it—the Palestine legion...had been in World War Two. They are jokingly always saying the Israeli army was run by the British sergeant. The reason for that was lots of those guys has been sergeants in the British army. They were now officers in the Israeli army because they knew something about military. So the training we got was actually British training. I still fall down with a rifle the British way, not the American way.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: Well that's what they trained us in. So we got, I would say, the most basic training, and right about 3 weeks after the training...after that some officer tried to say we are able combat command us...they came and they said we are the 9<sup>th</sup>...from the 9<sup>th</sup> brigade.

SANDERSON: The 9th brigade?

BLAUSTEIN: No, the 10<sup>th</sup> brigade...the 9<sup>th</sup> regiment of the 1<sup>st</sup> brigade. So and they started to form us in a few hours, military units of...companies of us, and then we went...we got put on buses and driven out and realized—from what we heard on the road and the amount of traffic was going—that they had started the new offensive to conquer the native and cut off Gaza. Now we were troops which were supposed to be the second wave in the attack, there was an attack going on, but there was shortage of troops and they needed everybody they could get, and we were as well trained as they had time to train us, and later occasions it happened that people directly off the boat went to the front line and a lot of them got killed. There was an argument 2-3 years later...the Israeli Parliament [was] talking about, who ordered that slaughter? That slaughter saved the State—otherwise the front would have collapsed. I mean it wasn't a nice thing, but we had basically...we knew how to fire rifles, how to move, and how to take cover and so on. That they had managed to give to us, but before we went somebody came around and looked for me, and they say...I say but who officer, come with us. One was a company commander and one a platoon commander, a lieutenant. We didn't even have a common language: my Hebrew was

outrageous, I had a hard time understanding everything; I spoke English and German. Those two guys were two native Israelis, they spoke...one of them was of Middle Eastern descent of the generations who were left in Jerusalem for 20 generations; he was a descendent from that family. He was a captain commander of that company, and he said only English he knew, English and Hebrew. The other one—the lieutenant that was there—well, he spoke Yiddish which was ok because if you speak German, you understand Yiddish. So anyhow somehow we managed...so the offshoot was they didn't have enough officers at the moment. In about 2-3 weeks the lieutenant would be pulled and I would take over the unit, or if something happened to that lieutenant, I would take over right away no matter what. And I know I made that crack...you know when you're 23 what...I made that crack what happens if I get it first .

SANDERSON: Right [laughs].

BLAUSTEIN: I was told not to be a wise guy. So anyhow we arrived at the front line, and...well if you haven't been to the front line, it's not a nice experience. And you suddenly feel especially...I know the one feel...it was the evening, I came in truck. There were people in body bags, their boots were sticking out from side door of the truck...bringing them out of the front line. You see that as our boots...it's a very unnerving situation that I was seeing. Here are green troops who have never been in a fight and I know I had very heavy legs marching into the front line. I moved anyhow, but those legs were heavy, and I remember that last line had to walk. We got into a place called...it's still a kibbutz in western...southwestern Israel. The front line was on the other side of this kibbutz, and I remembered we stopped inside...most of the buildings there had taken artillery, it's in shambles and out of one of those ruins a guy stepped, which was apparently an officer in charge of that area. He gave our lieutenant his marks and so on. So I was [on] a front line which was manned by people who lived in that kibbutz...not permanent but the men who defended that front line there. We were supposed to try to break through to the Negev there—they had units in the Negev—so, well, I guess we did our job. I know it was the first thing...there was some kind of a hill that we could first crouch and then crawl up. You get the order to go over the top, and that would be about fifty feet in front of foxholes of the Israeli defenders, you would have to jump over that, and our task was to take out the Egyptians on the other side. So it was my first experience, and I don't know how I managed to go over the top but the order came, and apparently you are trained in the way you do it just. Your pants are full, your feet are heavy, you let...you jump and go and start to scream in the trance. I remember jumping over the

foxhole and two guys in there are yelling [a] sort of encouragement; it would be like “give it to them” and “good luck.” Well, we did our job; we took the position and that became our first position. Now the next company was running through us and trying to go on, and there was wave after wave after wave of troops. Now that happened, apparently, on a stretch of about a mile. There are several regiments trying to advance and breaking through somewhere. Now the second wave got stopped, it started to get light, and, I mean, we had started out at dawn. It started to get light so the Egyptians outnumbered us, they had more artillery, they had to break off the attack. It’s just...it became...they would have lost a lot of people without achieving what they wanted to achieve. Apparently, the brass figured that was not the spot to break through; it wouldn’t work. So all we had given those guys...we had moved the front line about three quarters of a mile. But ours had succeeded but the attacks after us...

SANDERSON: Did not...

BLAUSTEIN: Before we were pulled out, there was a counter attack from the Egyptians which was the most inept thing I have ever seen because they practically asked to be killed. The counter attack fell apart within a few minutes after it started, but we couldn’t move and they couldn’t move now. We had trenches but we were pulled out, we were too vulnerable to sit there static, guys came down and took over new positions and we were driven every direction. They drove us south, they drove us east, they drove us north, east and south again, and I’d never seen so many troops in one place. I mean, there was a depth of the thing. The place was called Kiryati, it was a village; we could see it but the Egyptians were holding it...we were outside that village. I understand that they had troops in close to the south...had pushed up to the other side of that village. That village was surrounded, that was the thinnest point of the front line. That’s where they had decided, that’s where we go through and attack. I thought I was an officer, giving us a pep talk from a major telling us that we would today...break through the Egyptian line and we would tell it to our children [laughs]. I was wondering “when will I be able to tell it to my children?” Of course because already, in the first attack right before that, I knew people get killed; we had lost three people in our company. So, well we went out, put into position behind the khacknee hatch [sp? Ed.]—it’s better than barbed wire. I mean, nobody can get through there, but you can’t mount an attack through it either so this had to be blown up before we went.

SANDERSON: What were you doing before then, yeah?



BLAUSTEIN: I mean we had room to look through and shoot through but you couldn't run...it, I mean you would have killed yourself getting out there. I don't exactly know anymore what happened but our lieutenant for some reason walked up right, apparently they thought he was coward [...] and a sniper from the other side, boom, I saw him go down, and I didn't even think about it, and somebody kind of pulled him to safety. It wasn't a fatal thing but he was shot in the shoulder and out of action. I hear suddenly my name screamed and it's a guy officer of the sections there saying you have to take over your company. I remember my knees were shaking; I just wasn't really ready for it. And well, the same hole the lieutenant—who just got hit—was sitting down in...was getting him first aid. He was smiling and said...he apparently noticed I was a little bit anxious and he said, "you will do fine, and I am sorry!" He said, "you will do fine, don't worry about it. I know you!" I said, "this guy is looking white from loss of blood and he is giving me a pep talk!" And somehow it helped a little bit to get me back to reality. But then on the phone, the regiment commanders ordered—saying "you are appointed to be lieutenant and take over your command," and they say, "well they just asked do you know what you have to do?" And I said, "I know for the next half an hour. I have orders." That lieutenant always clued me in. He was very...uh...in case I have to take over.

SANDERSON: Right, that was a good thing he did that.

BLAUSTEIN: Well apparently...I don't know if he had premonition something was going to happen to him or so...anyhow I said, "I know, but is there anybody who can give me a little bit more pointers?" He said, "buddy, it's ten minutes before the attack. I can't come over there anymore. You are on your own and you will do." Well we did: we got even in the short fire that fight during the attack, but we poked through and it was quite a thing. What I personally don't understand...I remember I went back to my foxhole and screamed "I am taking over this company." I had one guy who was sort of...he was a little bit older but he had attached himself to me, and he always said "you will run that company in no time." And he was screaming—he was a sergeant—"yes commander we are ready." And somehow his screaming gave me backbone [laughs]. He [says] "hey he's reliable for the IDFs!" So I remember screaming "everybody ready?" I know it only in Hebrew; I can't say it in English [speaks in Hebrew—ed.] and you go. Before that, we had to duck into our foxholes because of blowing up that hedge of wire, and don't ask me when I screamed. I was coughing from the dust. But you couldn't really see, but on the other side...it was a plus because the Egyptians on the other side thought our position had been hit, and so we came

out of that dust and had some twenty feet without being shot at. So we took the whole area too. I was surprised...we came out and the Egyptians were not Egyptians, they were Saudis.

SANDERSON: They were Saudis?

BLAUSTEIN: [Laughs] Under Egyptian command. Which was a surprise because the Egyptians would usually run when they got under...under attack. Saudis didn't; they fought to the last man, practically. But we poked through anyhow and we were excited as we were four weeks ago at war memorial at that spot, that's memorial to my company.

SANDERSON: And that's part of 1st Brigade 9th Regiment?

BLAUSTEIN: The B company of said unit; we were the B company.

SANDERSON: And I know with some of the divisions they are called different names.

BLAUSTEIN: Maybe we didn't have any divisions that time; brigade was the biggest unit in the Israeli army. Now they have divisions, but at that time we were still too small, so the brigades were the biggest unit we had. The generals had maybe 2 or 3 brigades to command and that was it. But I know that whole action to take through the HaNegev was done by two brigades: the right brigade which was the 12th brigade HaNegev, and the other one was the Giviti brigade which...

SANDERSON: Giviti?

BLAUSTEIN: Giviti [spells "Giviti"], Which still exists still today—one of the Israeli elite divisions.

SANDERSON: And what was the name of yours?

BLAUSTEIN: HaNegev [spells "HaNegev"]. It was a Palmach brigade. Now Palmach doesn't exist anymore, but at the time it was like the Marine Corps here. I mean we were supposed to be the cream of the cream.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: But we had only three weeks...uh...

SANDERSON: ...of training.

BLAUSTEIN: ...of training, but at that time...there is a song which is still...it's like the song of the Marine Corps. The song is "we are always there to follow orders and we

never retreat.” So we were expected...it was told to us “you have a reputation here, so go...there is no way backwards, only forwards, in this game.”

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: So that’s why we were put as shock troops to go through, but we were not any more the rich there. When we got there, in my in the platoon there [were] only three guys from the original unit. The rest was either wounded or dead, from earlier battles...a few were replacements, but I mean they filled us in on some of the stuff, your hair was standing up. At that time we didn’t have enough arms...so we had enough arms, we had enough ammunition, so we didn’t have that problem. We poked through the Negev, but by then we were really spent; they had to pull us out. I know we got our orders to go to the outskirts of that town— Kiryati—“but don’t go in, another unit will walk through you, but you will have to wait on the outskirt of town; they will mop up and you will have to bring the prisoners back” [Laughs]. But we know, I mean, you no shape anymore to do some serious fighting.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: Which was right, I mean our tongue was hanging out by then. We had fought the night before, and this was the afternoon we hadn’t slept since that had gone on, since that attack. I tell such story only because it was the spirit of the Israeli army at that time. This unit we trust for leading us was from the other brigade of the Giviti unit, and the officer...Giviti...I heard them when they pushed our defense further, asked to see your officer, because he wanted to know...get the pointers from me what’s going on, and so I came forward and said, “it’s me.” He looked at me and said, “where are your ranks?” I said, “I’m sorry, I haven’t any yet.” And then he said [speaks Yiddish], is like, “it’s alright, it’s alright;” he got the picture that I was new. Then he turned to—he was a captain funny enough—and he turned to one of his lieutenants and said, “hey, you have some double, give that guy your double insignias because he doesn’t have anything.” He talked with me, but I mean it was a stripe of a buddy. We are all together in that, “I realize what your problem is, sorry, here's that.” That was that was the first time I put on ranks in the Israeli army—lieutenant ranks—so that was a big breakthrough. I poke a little bit orders...by...after they were mopping up far enough, and I know they had been through, there was no real fighting going on, I went with my guys through the village, and we saw the fellows who had come up from the south. They were a motorized unit; we shook hands with them. We say, “hey, we poked through here, we at least want to see those guys.” Then they picked us up

with...[sent] some transportation, picked us up, and send us in to rest up. We needed the rest, and we slept and got fed. Now...but that offensive was going on and the sight was that they had cut off the whole Egyptian...two or three Egyptian regiments and what they called the Fallujah pocket with that and the fighting going on there. As a matter of fact, Nasser (second president of Egypt; lead overthrow of monarchy in early 1950s) was second in command at that Fallujah pocket.

SANDERSON: Nasser was?

BLAUSTEIN: I shook his hand apparently and didn't know it until years later. They were allowed to leave when armistice came, with their arms, but not...without ammunition. Anyhow we were short and troops and apparently the army unit in one place chose to hold that pocket of...collapsed. They didn't follow order, they did something that no army should do. They pushed the Egyptians back into the village and then started apparently to plunder.

SANDERSON: Hm, oh they plundered the village?

BLAUSTEIN: Instead of forming a defense line, [Egyptians] counter-attacked and let them have it. They were on the run, but the front line collapsed because of that. We were the closest unit by, after [a] day and a half of rest. We suddenly got orders: "you guys, out there, you have to stop it." We stopped it and...but then the...we were about six hours in actions and they put us back in resting.

SANDERSON: Yeah, the resting camp.

BLAUSTEIN: We spent another day there, day or two. And then there was suddenly...get dressed, ammunition was handed out; we didn't even exactly know what was going on, where we were going. We knew, yeah, we were going back into the fight. The troop—Israeli troops—had moved south and had...were now attacking with apparently not much success the city of Be'er Sheba.

SANDERSON: Be'er Sheba?

BLAUSTEIN: Be'er Sheba. Be'er Sheba is mentioned in the Bible; it was the southernmost part of the...

SANDERSON: Israel.

BLAUSTEIN: ...Israeli Kingdom.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: It was, you say—the Bible always says—from then to Be'er Sheba, the southernmost part. Now they had pushed into—partially into—the city, but then the whole thing got stuck. As a matter of fact, there was a big danger they would leave...the Israelis would lose a motorized unit, which they hardly could afford. They scratched all the troops they could together and threw them into the battle at the city again. I think in retrospect I would say that whole war for independence wasn't so much won by the Israelis that it was lost by the Egyptians. They were so bad that, even though they were superior in arms and man power, they made so many mistakes that it got always clobbered; it was because of their stupidities. I mean, you can't blame the soldiers, I would say their officers core was a bunch of novices, and they really made all those mistakes. And the Israeli strategy was based on that, that somehow they would make a real boo boo, when you caught this at the beginning and pushed through there, and for something like that seemed to have happened at Be'er Sheba. We only found out that we [were] going to Be'er Sheba when we were nearly there, only about 12 miles away from where we were in our positions, so we approached the city from the...they had attacked the city coming from the northeast and east, which was a surprise attack. We attacked now from the northwest, the railroad station. We had...we went to the position and saw that another motorized unit had attacked there, ran into mines and a tank trench and got beaten back and pretty badly mauled. I believe it was 185th regiment, I'm not entirely sure what the number was. Something like...is something with 80 [laughs] two hundred and eighty something. Ok. So I know we got in there...the consternation...I know the officers ended up for briefing at main command post, and we were told "if you guys don't take that station there, we have to restore the whole front. You're our last hope, you either break through or that's it." I must say our regiment commander was a smart guy. He said, "how long is that tank trench?" Oh, it was about quarter of a mile. He say[s] "ok, well they don't have any mines at the end of it, and inside that tank trench...why don't we go to the end of it, move in on the tank trench," which was about 20 feet from the Egyptian position. We miss all the mines, just get out in front of the position. We right in with the...but then they get really nervous with that much infantry suddenly appear between them, and we knew how to make a lot of noise, so that's what we did. And I was the lead company, not really, only in the trench I mean; we are the first running after...we had three companies that came over and we just appeared between them, and the Egyptians started to run. I mean it was too much for them that suddenly we were there. They started to run and we [got] after...they left even two artillery pieces behind. So we went after them.

Then after about 100 feet we got orders to come back, don't go after them, we don't want to thin out our lines too much until we know what's going on there. And I came back. Now I talked about that about 4 weeks ago at our retirement home; I talk about my trip and I have a picture, maybe I should have brought it along. It's me, now, after a day walking around all those battle towns. I'm pretty by...by noon, I'm pretty tired; I stand there leaning on that cane. It was pretty hot—it was...it was in the high 80s—I look worn out. And I wrote...the caption underneath was “would you believe that guy commanded the company which stormed that railroad station?” [laughs] I looked very sad, I got a good laugh after out of that because the war...old people there they know what I was talking about. Anyhow we had some pow wow at the railroad station, “what are we doing now?” At that time, I mean, today the city of Be'er Sheva is a big city. At that time it was from some hamlet of 5000 people with three paved roads: one is the middle of the road, and the other is for horse-drawn carriage. Horrible place. There is a British military cemetery there from WWI. Mostly Australians actually, not British, [who] are buried. And I was with my company and the lieutenant of the second company...of the A company had been wounded. That company was given to me too. Now I had two companies. [That] was the biggest number of people I ever commanded.

SANDERSON: So you had both A company and B company?

BLAUSTEIN: B company. It was open air territory up to the citadel which was a British-built fortress of 45cm to 45cm reinforced concrete with shooting slots in there, so all around...I mean it was a real fortress. In between there was that cemetery, but otherwise there was nothing there. Then there was a railroad station, so I was told, “you have to get into that fortress. That was your order.” So we started to advance through the cemetery there, and we got under light fire—I would say infantry fire of rear guard...Egyptian rear guard unit—which tried to slow us down a little bit. That...it's a cemetery the British have--that's WWI—there were about 500 graves there. I took cover behind there...everyone to cover behind the stone, but [it was] not such a good place because those darn bullets ricochet off the stones.

SANDERSON: Stones, ahh.

BLAUSTEIN: So at first it looked like a good place but we couldn't cover ourselves from the ricocheting bullets there. They...I noticed the stone I was hiding behind [was] hit twice. That was already close to the...it was 04 in the cemetery so close to getting out already, the Egyptians were strewn. I mean we...the moment I

realized the fire got lessened, then no fire, went “out, go!” But I still looked up. It really...it hit me and I confirmed it this time. The stone said “Captain Rosenberg, second Australian light cavalry.” He was killed in 1916...1915. What are the chances that you think there are 2 Jewish soldiers in this cemetery? What are the chances that I, as a commanding officer of a Jewish unit, take cover behind the...the stone of Captain Rosenberg. I felt like he was fighting with me. I talk about...that I was down there. We found the grave...I don’t know. There is a Jewish prayer for the dead. I said kaddish there. My son said, “you’re crazy.” I say, “no, I think that guy saved my life.” The two bullet chips...I saw they had been repaired, but I could say the two bullets that hit that stone...I say one would have hit me if the stone wouldn’t have been there.

SANDERSON: Guess there’s some irony on that one.

BLAUSTEIN: This is a little funny things which happened on the sidelines, but I mean we made it up to the furthest wall. Now it’s a six foot high concrete wall, we have been trained to go over that—I mean we know how to do that—and we see that fortress there. And apparently the whole garrison was on the roof firing into the city which had the other Israeli troops which were the troops we were supposed to relieve. We had made it basically up to that wall without being detected. So here we are.

SANDERSON: Were their backs to you?

BLAUSTEIN: Yeah, their backs were...they were not even looking at us. I suppose the railroad station was the defense line there. And they apparently didn’t know we had taken it except for those rear guard guys. And I don’t know where they were running too. It wasn’t really heavy fire, we just ducked down for a few minutes to...I didn’t want to lose to many guys and we didn’t see anybody. I wanted to get my bearings. There all...they’re from there to there, sure, but they disappeared so quickly, I mean they appeared to be bogged down and they said apparently that’s a good time to run for us before they find out where we are. So they disappeared and we made it to that wall. So I had to get...I need two guys to go over, ok. First, the one guy was from my company, a fellow I was still good friends [with] after the wall. He said, “[I’ll] go,” and the one guy from the other company volunteered too. So those two guys went over. Now anything...do you see anything there? They say, “no, there’s nobody in that yard.” They had all these rifles...I mean it was a dangerous situation for those guys. Now that was the rule of the army: I had to go at that point. Oh, I went over, and attack. and in

that unit somebody give you a hand you step on the hand, give you a lift and jump on the other side.

SANDERSON: Yeah they flip ya over.

BLAUSTEIN: I just get over there to get my bearings; you can see the fortress there. There are some stones—cobblestones—pretty high thing. At that moment a machine gun opens up. We take cover behind the stones, but now we are three guys over there under fire from a machine gun with rifles; we don't know exactly where it comes from. I say "look, no reason to panic really, it's only one machine gun." But it meant we had been detected. The fire came out of kind of a basement window, that fire. So I was back there on the other side; I have two other men on the other side. I say "get a machine gun over here." This sergeant who went...he was a veteran of the Polish army, he was good. I mean he was the only guy who really had army training. He had fought in WWII, he had tied together some cleaning rods—not rods, strings—for the rifle. He tied a few of them together, put a light machine gun on there, lift it over and we just untied it and now we have a machine gun too. That one guy from my unit was an expert marksman, so I gave him the machine gun and say "don't shoot until you know where you shoot." And we knew it was that basement window and they were firing...found out they were firing on the wall; they didn't want anyone to come over. Apparently they thought they'd deal with us later. So I have this fellow telling me, "I have them," I say "fire." Boom! And then like boom on the other side. Nothing. I saw only a machine gun sticking up there. We had hit. So within a few minutes we had everybody over the wall. We found later out what had happened. Again it was stupidity first class. We found the door, how to get in there, bang against door. We can't open the door. Must have taken about 5 minutes, [it] was a steel door. And then the one guy says "hey—this is comedy, that's comedy, it's so sick"—when one guy says "hey, it's open!" [laughs] [...] And so we took over two floors of the fortress which were ready to lie down and so on. We caught some officers on the stairways there. We took their arms away and then I...I talked with one; we talked [in] English. I talked with him and told him "tell them go to the roof and tell them to surrender. We are in the fortress and we will get them." I mean they will not survive long.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: I showed him I have the first floor, I have the second floor, the roof is the third floor. Oh, well, he said "you are right." I said we don't want to kill you guys but you have to surrender. And while he goes up I suddenly realize next to me is the



second to...second in command of our...our...the regiment. I said "want to take over command?" He said "NOOO, you're on a roll! I just came along." I know he came along to see if I can handle it, because I hadn't noticed it until then. And then later I realized he had another duty, namely to be on the flag. So we hear them shouting and going there on top, and the officer had enough and comes down again and said "we surrender, what do you want us to do?" I said "let me talk to them, put down your arms, come down with your hands up, single file." Well I never was so surprised in my life. They start to come down and I take ten men to go up. There must have been 150 people up there. I mean I didn't even know. They must have [stood] shoulder to shoulder there and they didn't find...they didn't find us. If they would have seen us, they would have just mowed us down and that would have been it. We got in there by sheer dumb luck. Not that smart. But that's the way I guess wars get decided, somebody does something stupid. So our deputy commander came up with me and suddenly he pulled out an Israeli flag and said "take that flag down." So we lowered the Egyptian flag and raised the Israeli flag and that was it. You could hear in the city suddenly the firing stopped. It's like the Egyptians saw that the citadel fell. You heard some loud cry, and then you saw soldiers running. And I was...came from the other side, and I saw [a] tank going through that main gate of the fortress and breaking in. And we put most of our guys down with prisoner[s]. And there's a famous picture you see of this Egyptian prisoner four wheel bringing them round, and the guys who were inbound take them sitting with their hands up. It was a very emotional moment because we knew basically we had won the war. The Egyptians had to restore their borders, there were still some big battles afterwards, but we had turned the tide on the farther front. It got sort of...the Egyptian army considered us as invincible. But actually...I mean I have talked to other people about other wars and you hear similar stories actually; the big successes always based on stupidity—stupidities—on the other side. They made a mistake, that guy that was handling the machine gun outside. I asked him to go into this basement and look what happened there. He came back with a wounded prisoner and said the other two are dead. I say, "then what happened?" He said "that is a kitchen; they were three cooks which saw us apparently and, instead of giving the information to the commander of the city, they wanted to become hero[es]. They saw three guys sir, but they had a machine gun sir and they started to fire." Well our machine gunner was better and he took them out and that was it.

SANDERSON: So if those guys didn't want to be "heroes," you guys probably could have been wiped out.

BLAUSTEIN: Well if the...sure if those guys had been fifty percent on the other side...and I mean we were their cannon fodder. They would have picked us off like nothing. We had no cover. But all they to do was tell the commander there are guys coming from the other side too! [laughs] I mean we were hardly shot at except for that one occasion. I had the least casualties; I lost one guy I think, wounded in the cemetery. That was all. I mean I started looking at that fortress when I started out and I say "I hope I bring somebody back," and I come back!

SANDERSON: That is special in, something, to go into an odds like that where basically the odds...it sounds like you guys were outnumbered 3-1.

BLAUSTEIN: Well we were always outnumbered, that didn't bother us that much. It bothered us that we were running against concrete walls so and we had no artillery or anything to...if the American army would have done that, they would have called in some artillery and they would have first blasted that whole place to shreds and then the infantry would have gone in.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: But we didn't have that. I know the Israeli army had 6 French WWI artillery pieces [...] in '48...later I mean they got better, but that was the only artillery we had.

SANDERSON: Wow, and those guns were not very accurate to begin with.

BLAUSTEIN: Well, they came ...started to fire a few salvos. If they send...if they think they made those hits they picked up and go to the next place. And you were sent to go there and clean up [laughs].

SANDERSON: What kind of weapons did...did you have during that time frame?

BLAUSTEIN: Well we had basically German weapons

SANDERSON: German?

BLAUSTEIN: From WWII. Now the reason for that is there was an arms embargo by the Jews, but by the UN, our president Truman allowed money to be sent to Israel with that money. They went to Czechoslovakia, which had most of the German light arms manufacturing during WWII, and had just...the Czech army was in the process of changing to Russian arms. They sold us the German stuff. Now the thing is some of our rifles had still the swastika.

SANDERSON: They still had the swastika on the weapon?

BLAUSTEIN: Wait [a] minute, it's hard as steel, you can't get it off! Now some of the guys tried to file it off, you couldn't! And lots of the files we had couldn't...so you couldn't either way so you left it. But most of the rifles had Czech markings on there because they had manufactured them after the war, but then the Russians said you have to go to our type of armament. So the machine guns and rifles were German: model 98, Mauser model 98. And the machine gun was called spandau which was a suburb of Berlin where it was apparently invented.

SANDERSON: Now that is interesting, talking about...

BLAUSTEIN: Famous machine gun, it was the first machine gun to fire 2000 bullets within a minute. It was invented at the end of the war and apparently...lying there in Czechoslovakia and ended up in Israel, an air-cooled machine gun which was a higher...shot more bullets per minutes than any other machine gun on the market at the time.

SANDERSON: Wow that's definitely a major irony. Yeah, basically, German weapons used to liberate a Jewish state.

BLAUSTEIN: It was all Truman's fault, if they had fed them arms not money [laughs]. I mean the Americans didn't interfere but Truman wanted to be...it looked apparently at least that he obeyed the UN, which was new, because...I mean he looked already the other way with putting man power over there.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: And this ship, for example, I went to Israel with was piloted by an American captain and half of the crew--the real crew--which were about 7 to 8 people, they were Americans, American sailors, volunteers. A lot of Irishman I always said, I do say, the British army. It's just out of spite. I mean I shouldn't say this, a different story, that captain did something: he fired on a British cruiser with a machine gun. I just think all the Irishmen want to do that [laughs] but I mean they were very nice and helpful, and I guess most Americans sort of—with me—were very sympathetic. Because I remember sitting next to the truck driver from Germany, a fellow from in the south, I mean very simple guy. I had a conversation with him and he was telling me "well I'm proud doing that because God wants the Jews to return there." And he felt proud being part of it. So I assumed that they generally made public that the soldiers didn't mind to do that.

SANDERSON: Yep, that's...uh...yeah, that's definitely one of those ironies.

BLAUSTEIN: Now this was the battle of Be'er Sheba, and then we set for...nothing big went on, however my unit was involved in some small skirmish which is...today [the] place is called Yeruham(?) very small town, but there used to be a big town called Mamshit in antiquity. It was built as a...the caravans which came from Arabia to Gaza and HaSharon we were one day away from there for it was a caravan stop in Byzantine time, and of course called Mamshit.

SANDERSON: Mamshit.

BLAUSTEIN: It's completely excavated, it's the national park. I was just there a few weeks ago. Now the city...now I...my company stormed that city. That...there [were] Turkish homes of stones of...that city was destroyed by the Arabs in 600, 650, something like that, when they conquered that area. Then the Turks built from the stones of the ruins on the top of that mound. Today everything is excavated; you can walk around and go from house to house. I was... it was quite interesting. It's a national park, we were sent...it was called operation Lot [spells Lot]. Lot is the head son of Abraham.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: And they lived in this area as herders so it was a very small operation. I don't think there [were] more than 500 soldiers involved on both sides. And we stormed that under nuisance fire, I would call it. I didn't lose a single person in my company.

SANDERSON: Oh nice!

BLAUSTEIN: And we jumped just in there and they surrendered. And I remember that officer, the Egyptian officer telling me "ok now you can see, you can sit in a gutter in place," and he was sort of happy we relieved him [laughs]. So anyhow we'd took that part, but I had to personal loss there. I was running and I had a Swiss watch, which was my only possession and pride as a soldier, with a bend there which apparently stretched through and I got stuck on the bush. But, right, I was running—remember we were under the light infantry fire—it ripped [off] and fell down. I started to look, I mean I couldn't stop right then. I mean I was under fire; I was leading a unit in an attack so I maybe after it was over...but an hour later I was looking around and never found it. Now I still haven't read that excavation report of Mamshit, it might be that they say that the people of Mamshit had in 600 BCE Swiss watches [laughs]. That's why I looked again, knowing it wasn't there, somebody must have found it. It's just that in the desert it's impossible to find anything. But, I was a young engineer at that time, now this is in the middle

of the desert. And on [the] second day I am sitting there on the wall—it was overlooking [a] valley between two hill[s]—and I realized about half of the retaining wall was holding back water. The place was...the wall must have been originally about 60 feet long and 50 feet high, a retaining wall built from stone and dirt. They caught the water in that valley and the city lived off that water. At that time I was just out of college here, it was formal I was still up here, I couldn't do it today I start, this wall followed exactly the hydraulic pressure curve horizontally and vertically. Now you need advanced mathematics to do that and I don't know how those guys did that, they had no Roman numeral, they had no...only Roman numerals, they didn't have the numerals we have.

SANDERSON: Yeah, right, with the decimals and everything.

BLAUSTEIN: How do you make intervals and how they figured that out is indescribable to me, but they knew it, and that was 2000 years ago.

SANDERSON: Wow.

BLAUSTEIN: I was sitting there with an open mouth and I thought to myself, "you think you are smart? 2000 years ago some guys did that." So anyhow...and the only other thing I did from there was I got orders to take 10 men and walk through the desert to find a way if you could go by land to Jordon which is...it's on the Dead Sea, as the crow flies about fifteen miles but you have to overcome different...in elevation of about 1000 feet. It's through the desert. I mean it's very cracked to walk, it took us, they figured it would take us 4 days to make it. I made it in 2 and a half days. And I...again when you are out in the desert alone and you are the king, I was the guy who was alone in the desert, and my commander was in Kunup so I couldn't talk to him. Our field telephones at that time had a range of about a mile and a half. So I was out of range. I had one guy who was with a big wireless there. Our orders were to not be seen by any Bedouins. Basically what they told us [is] if the Bedouins would have seen us first, they know the desert better than some Israel soldiers coming that are three months out of Europe. What I learned about them later was they knew exactly where we were.

SANDERSON: The Bedouins did?

BLAUSTEIN: We didn't see them but they saw us. But anyhow we run some and come around the hillside and there's a Bedouin with about six donkeys. Now I mean I hadn't been told that--there wasn't implied to me--we could have had to killed them, I wasn't about to do that. That's...I mean I just said that none of my soldiers were willing to do that. Now we have the desert guide there, and he was sort of semi-

civilian and he looked at me like, you're not going to do that. So we decided the next best thing...we had everything on our back, we had six donkeys, put all the stuff on the donkeys—

SANDERSON: Donkeys?

BLAUSTEIN: He comes with us. So we...since he knew the way better than he did, it took us only two and a half days. But we got...we got close to our lines in the storm, they had a garrison there, they wanted to see if we could start to supply them from there because they were supplied through the air only. So that guide I had [said] "I saw you about a mile and a half away from camp, you better get rid of that guy," and now we can let him go. So I let him go, and we had food and stuff like that, I mean for four days and it was two and a half day. I didn't want to carry that stuff anymore. I mean I could see already the positions there and I say "give it to that guy." We...we created a lot of trouble for him. So only [...inaudible name] could talk to him; he spoke Arabic. So he talked to him and his eyes lit up. Then he fell down in front of my knee and wanted to kiss my shoe. That was a little bit too much for me, I mean it's only sugar. I found...that desert guide told me "you know this guy just told me that with sugar he can buy a wife!" [laughs] [It] was about a pound and a half or something like that; he [said] he never saw that much sugar in his life. So that's one of things I have to buy, I mean they live off the land and he used that sugar, [he did] not have to buy. He thought I had given him the world. I don't think it's today any more like that, but he offered to wait if we want to walk back he would help us to go back. He said for that he was willing to do that. He thought we were...He thanked us and he said it was alright; it was worthwhile for him to come with us. If I thought about the alternative, I said "you don't even know what orders I had." So he...he was happy we got there, and we got flown out by airplane and got three weeks; three weeks [of] vacation. In Tel Aviv, they flew us close to Hotel Tel Aviv, so it was pretty good. I remember we came out and we were dirty. Uniforms worn for two and a half days in the desert torn all to shreds.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: And we came to a place called Gedera. It's close to the...it was a settled area of Israel at that time more or less there. There was an army camp with an officer from our unit. He had the leave...the passes for leave. We said "you don't want us to go like that into Tel Aviv." He said "OH!" So we got all new [passes]. First we were allowed to shower there at that camp, then we got all new outfits! Then we could go and join society again. I mean we were...appeared cold and

dirty as can be. Then we go back then, back to Be'er Sheba and join our unit, which had been—by that time—reestablished there. And the last offensive of...for the War For Independence started a few days later. It is it was called [speaks Yiddish] Offensive so in the translation, which lasted about two weeks.

SANDERSON: Two weeks.

BLAUSTEIN: We got the Israeli forces across the Egyptian border, deep into the Sinai; then the British started to intervene. We certainly had British airplanes over us. And the ultimatum was they would restore in 48 hours the past border or the Suez Canal guys would intervene. We were in no condition to take on the Suez Canal garrison and I don't know if we would've, but I guess our government was smarter than that. We...I think we could have taken them on too, but our government said it was not a smart idea to start a war with the Great Britain in 1948.

SANDERSON: Yeah, right.

BLAUSTEIN: So we were told to restore but I...this was basically a war of surprise. Israeli forces actually marched through the desert and rolled up the Egyptian defenses from behind. Now again it is...war is a funny business; I came to that conclusion. The second in command of the Israeli army was a fellow with the name of Yigael Yaden. Yigael Yadin...what is the name...professor...I can't think of his original name. He was the son of a history...a chronological professor of the Hebrew university. He knew all the boats built by the British in Palestine by going, you know, south. Well this archeologist, was Zuchenik, professor Zuchenik. As a matter of fact we have a far relative of him, a lady living in our retirement home. In...uh...western suburb, Dortmund. Or not! Did I say Dortmund again?!

SANDERSON: Yeah.

BLAUSTEIN: That's in Pittsburgh!

SANDERSON: Yeah [laughs].

BLAUSTEIN: [mumbles] well, he told his son—who by the way became a world famous archeologist later—but at that time he was second in command of the Israeli army. Why? He had been a lieutenant colonel in the British army. So he was by now a general in the Israeli army. He was the second in command and finally, after the war, he became the commander of the Israeli army but then he got tired and became a professor of archeology again and as such he is actually now

world renowned. He got from his father information...there are two more new roads from the coast to the British road which goes north south—that's where all the Egyptian positions were. They are very well built but they are out about 2 feet of sand. So if you clear them you could use them. Now the Israeli corps of engineers get one night, must have been the 22nd or 23rd of December 1948. They cleaned the sand away and then the armored forces of the Israelis went on those Roman roads and suddenly appeared on the back of the Egyptian lines. Well that was where the Egyptian lines collapsed and within two days we were on the border.

SANDERSON: Wow.

BLAUSTEIN: And there were no real defenses yet. They were in the process quick to put some defensive line up at Sinai, but they never got built up enough that they really were any resistance.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: We just rolled through and that's why the British--when we were half way down in the Sinai already--they were about to take El Arish, which is a big coastal city [halfway] down the coast. The British got nervous, got too close to the Suez Canal so that's why they made that ultimatum. But it wasn't very good, that ultimatum: the Egyptians knew they were beaten and sued for armistice. Then in 1956 another got into it there was no war. But I had my last hooray there by mistake. I ended up to fight one of the worst battle[s], and I was one of the highest officers there because the Egyptians had put their defensive line half ready about 15 miles into Egypt. Israelies were, my unit was first unit, the spearhead unit going in. I wasn't the spearhead, there were some others, but I was pretty much.

SANDERSON: You were close to it

BLAUSTEIN: Yeah, I was part of that spearhead, I was in it.

SANDERSON: And this is still with the A and B company?

BLAUSTEIN: C company and some other, some tanks, and I mean it was a sizeable thing. Our airplanes had spied out that...they told us it isn't much, but they pulled that famous 6 battery 6 gun Israeli battery interaction. And I was told my company and the other company--B company--we were about two hundred people, get off the trucks here, the trucks said "stay here, wait for the artillery. When they



come they will set up shop here right here, because it's about 15 miles they can reach from here." Very well we will wait for some softening up and then we will storm the position. So, well, I didn't like that assignment at all because they all went on and I was stuck here in the middle of the desert with 200 men and 4 trucks and waiting for somebody to come. And I had to tell those guys get off the road at least. I mean, airplanes can see you, go off to the side of the road. Lucky enough, about two hours later, the artillery showed up and that artillery officer--he was a major--put up my batteries here. [He] knew exactly and he had the coordinates where he was to fire to and we were supposed to [be] their protection. So I was still talking with that guy asking what he needed from me, and Chief Rabbi of the Israeli forces of the south shows up with his crew out of the blue. We needed him like a hole in our head. He was really interesting character. I found out Rabbi Goin...I mean he was a colonel by ranking; he just wanted to...he wanted the frontline. He was a guy who was jumping out, wanting to parachute out of airplanes. So anyhow he shows up and I had sent half of my guys up to a hill which overlooked the southern side. So a soldier comes running down and says "lieutenant, come up, you have to see "that." I say "what's the matter?" "There are Egyptians on the other side!" I say "you must be kidding. There aren't supposed to be any." Now those are all Egyptian troops who would be retreating through the desert...and I mean, they must have been missed, but they were there. And after I got up there I knew they knew we were there and they knew they were more than we were. They had seen us apparently before we had seen them, and they were getting ready to attack. And I was there with the only artillery of the Israeli army, and they were about to lose it! They were a full regiment. I first got all...whatever I had, everybody up here! And then I sent out, we got the first attack and we were...they were warded off, but they were not fazed by that. [I] reorganized and got ready. I sent out the artillery officer, "send anybody you have with a rifle up here, I need fire power."

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: Because I don't have enough people to stop that!

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: Well it was...that major came up, I said "you want to take over?" He said "I am not infantry, you know better than me what to do." Then I look and see that Rabbi Goin with a machine gun not very far from me. He must have...he said "what do mean? You said you want men, you want manpower...you want firepower and you want men...I'm a man with firepower!" [laughs] So I had

everybody up there. I mean, let's say we beat it off and intimidate the Egyptian faction...after the third attack...the officers jumped into their jeeps and drove off and left the rest.

SANDERSON: Ahh [they] left the men there.

BLAUSTEIN: They were horrible. If I would had been an Egyptian soldier, I would have run away too, with officers like that.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: So we spent the whole night there. I remember it was drizzling in the desert; it happens once every four years. We were soaked all the way through. We had those pop [up] tents we put up. So half the roof is dry and each time they sent a salvo the tent was...and after a while the tents started to collapse. But they took that position. I mean they had made it. I saw it the next morning when we were told to rejoin our group. But above that they had one...the barbed wire was one line on top of...they hadn't even gotten around to put the barbed wire up.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: We took their headquarter[s] in the Sinai. They didn't even know we were there. I mean we just showed up there. It [was] a few hours later that one of you showed up there. They are eating--they are handing out lunch--the guys were standing with mess kits in line. A whole hour troops were rolling in and jumping out of jeeps and, you know, that was enough to set basically...I mean there was still some minor fighting and mobile operations going on, but then we got that British ultimatum and pulled out, and the armistice was signed and basically the fighting on our front was over and I was reassigned to the core of engineers. Which let me spend some...the rest of my army service, another year in relative comfort of running a drafting office, in the staff...

SANDERSON: You were running a drafting office?

BLAUSTEIN: Yeah, in the staff unit, but I still have...it's basically one of those funny military stories. I got...I was...they still had units in arms on front lines, and this was in winter now. Sometime in March--the rainy season--you couldn't be very clean if you were in the front line. I was assigned as the commander of one of the hills, [there were] about 50 soldiers and every few...about every half a mile they had a hill with about 50 soldiers and [groans].

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: It was very primitive there you could...you had 4 week stints there. I remember I got...the mail came...there was a jeep driving up and the mail tells me that I have been transferred to staff engineering, core of engineers staff, which is about 20 miles behind the armistice line in a camp, in a camp with all the nice stuff you have there in the army. Well they did...I made...it had my stuff packed and jumped in that mail--the jeep who carries the mail--before he could leave. I knew he was going back to that, got the record in packing up and leaving. So I arrived there and started to do engineering work. And I met my wife there so that's [laughs].

SANDERSON: Oh! Outstanding!

BLAUSTEIN: She was the second aide of the colonel. But I came there so dirty; I arrived so dirty. I mean I was sweaty enough to be about two weeks in that armistice line without a shower. I was wearing...I had a steel helmet; I had a rifle and a duffel bag with my stuff--which was dirty too. I had my orders; I come into that camp and everybody's clean and I look like a real outcast [laughs]. Well I said "I come from the front lines, I'm a tough guy." I march into that headquarter[s] building; there is a secretary sitting. I say "I want to talk to colonel so and so." She looked...had one look at me and started to give me a hard time. She said I looked so dirty, and the colonel wouldn't want to see me like that. I got--tough guy--I got mad at her. Apparently I raised my voice and the colonel came out [and yelled], "what is going on here!?" Well he knew who I was, but he sized up the situation. He didn't want me either there really; I had lice, all god knows what. I remember he say "that's ok, welcome here, now I want you to go." He called another guy or another officer, "show that guy where his quarters are, show him where he can clean up." And as we were walking out, I hear him quickly say--shouting out at him--"for heaven's sake, give him a new uniform." So I married that girl [who] gave me a hard time, she has given me a hard time later too! [Laughs]

SANDERSON: Yeah.

BLAUSTEIN: So anyhow that is basically, in a nutshell...now eventually...I can make it very gruesome but...uh...I guess that many years after, only the good memories survive.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: If there are any questions you guys have...do you want to hear still something you could later put that in front when you edit it?

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: About my trip to Israel?

SANDERSON: Yeah, how was that? Because you left Israel in 52 or 53?

BLAUSTEIN: I left in '53.

SANDERSON: In '53.

BLAUSTEIN: No, I wanted to talk about my going to Israel from Germany. But I left in '53. I arrived here in 1954 on Thanksgiving I think. I didn't know what Thanksgiving [was]...uh... 11/11/54 I arrived here. Well I have to say in spite of the accent I am so Americanized if you ask me what I was, I am an American. I came now back from Israel. I have a friend that--retirement home, Lumbart--and she asked me, "tell me what's your loyalty?" At first I was a little bit...[why] would you ask me something like that even? I know she is very liberal and personally interested in life stories. I say "I[ll] tell you something: if I go to Israel, I know my way around. But that's not the Israel I lived in. It was a very poor, primitive country, which started to pull itself on its shoe strings." I go out there [and] it's like America, only everything's a little bit smaller because they don't have that much room.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: But I mean what you wear, what you eat, the way you live is like people, typical middle class country. You have reliable transportation, you can drink the water out of the faucet, it's...yes I speak the language, I can get around there, and I really don't feel like a stranger there. But when I came back, I came home. There is a difference. They view me [as] an American over there and that's my behavior, and here--unless I talk--I don't stick out [laughs]. So that's the difference. I come across like an American. I realized that the first time I was in a carpool. Well, it was the late '60s early '70s--in the carpool--and we took some other guys along with us; the car was full. One of those guys was Italian...was an Italian immigrant about a year in the country and he was sitting next to the driver. They got off...at least the driver started to grow plain. Like these foreigners and all these other guys smelled, don't they ever shower. And finally I had enough and I say "hey buddy, I am a foreigner too," even though I was already an American citizen. What are you talking about? You can't generalize. He turned around and he said "you're not a foreigner, you're an American." And he said "I even mean it. You behave like us, you do things like that. We don't look at

you...we worked in the same place, we don't look at you as a foreigner. You're one of us." And apparently it has to do with behavior. And for other people to say "I perceive you this way" ...and yes I have a very heavy accent--I know that--so did Kissinger [laughs].

SANDERSON: [Laughs] right.

BLAUSTEIN: So it...it's different. I have been so Americanized; I am an American. The same thing happened to me when I got [out] of Frankfurt...of the airport. I traveled a lot professionally...out of the airport, and I tell the driver where to go. He looks at me and says "you speak German?!" I said "why not? What's the problem?" He said "you're an American, aren't you?" I said "how did you know that?" [He responded,] "the way you hail a taxi, your shoes..." He had sized me up as an American. And suddenly I spoke German.

SANDERSON: Yeah, really threw him off. So where did you come in...to the United States from Israel?

BLAUSTEIN: Well I actually...I got...I left Israel in 1953 in April. I went through Germany. I had gotten married in '51; I went through Germany to introduce my wife to my parents. My father was a dyed-in-the-wool German; after the war he resumed his "German-ness again." I mean you couldn't get him out of there. I think when you grow up somewhere...he called the Holocaust a bad dream. Now he never forgave it the same, I realized. But I had an occasion to see him in action in the 90s, but anyhow it became clear at that time that my wife didn't feel good, and we went to the doctor. She's pregnant, and there's something wrong with the pregnancy, and we were told if you want to have that baby she should not travel. At that time we went by boat mostly. So I had to stay in Germany until the baby was born. [I] took on a job; I left Germany shortly thereafter. I cannot live in Germany, in contrast to my father, it bothers me in Germany. Not the individual German, but the whole thing as a whole. It brings up too many bad memories. So I mean, I have German friends, I visited my father as long as he lived there, but I've been only back once to Germany since my father passed, but that was a paid trip: the city I was born in invited me.

SANDERSON: Oh nice.

BLAUSTEIN: And even then some of my problems came through. Somebody [who] I didn't know knew English overheard me say something which they didn't like.

SANDERSON: And you were born in Chemnitz correct?

BLAUSTEIN: Pardon? In Chemnitz?

SANDERSON: In Chemnitz?

BLAUSTEIN: [Correcting pronunciation] Chemnitz.

SANDERSON: Chemnitz, I'm sorry.

BLAUSTEIN: It's in eastern Germany, but Chemnitz was they called the Manchester of Germany. [The] German textile industry was there, and a big part of the car industry was in Chemnitz. So one dollar--the auto union--so you have DKW, that factory was there. There was another one: Wonder and Porsche and Audi. If you lived there, you either mixed in the textile industry or the car industry. So it was a very prissy town but nothing exceptionally beautiful or intriguing. I know I took once--it must have been in 2000--I took an automobile club book for Europe out, and they had all the German cities and Chemnitz. There's not much to see in the city. I mean it's a big city but it's not...there's nothing big [that] happens there. There's a history there, but it's so benign. I mean it's...there's not much. There's...it's an industrial town, which lost all of its industry, which was run into the ground by the Russians or East Germans. It just now...they start slowly to--

SANDERSON: [To] kind of build itself back up.

BLAUSTEIN: It is famous for being called Marxstadt during the East German period and the city has one interesting thing. There is 8 foot big granite head of Karl Marx standing in the square in front of a building. After the liberation of Eastern Germany, they changed the name back to Chemnitz and there was a vote [about] what are we doing with that monument. Most people thought they would vote to take it away, but they voted by 80 percent...no we want it to stand here to remind us how bad it was. It's really...it fits. You read the story on the monument that the citizens insisted it should stay here to remind them of the bad times.

SANDERSON: Where in most cities, it's the exact opposite.

BLAUSTEIN: It's amazing you still see that. And you hardly see any sculptures there, and it was left there to have a memory of that time. It's a very interesting concept actually.

SANDERSON: In some ways it's good that they're keeping that, so people can remember. 'Cause a lot of times that sometimes doesn't happen.

BLAUSTEIN: Well that's true, because there comes a time when people just don't remember. Now I mean I have...[the] best example is the Holocaust. Now I have lived through it, and I am a docent Holocaust in the history. I am dealing now with young people who have learned that history is cool and that means as much to them as the British War of the Roses. It has happened. I mean, on one hand it's good: you don't want to have a generation burdened with that horror. On the other hand it's bad in terms of preventing future excesses like that. I don't know, maybe they have some psychiatrist who can figure out something in the middle. And I'm pretty sure if you go another 10-15 years from now, in to eastern Germany in those cities, the new generation has not the slightest ideas. I know I talked with...in the 90s--in '97 I think--that I was in Germany. I talked with some younger people there about Hitler time. "I learned that in school," that was the answer I got. And I...somehow it doesn't mean much to me. I know it lies heavy on the soul of our politicians and so on, because they have to go outside. But they said to me...in a way you have to think this is right. I mean what is it to a guy whose grandfather maybe wasn't even born, or was a kid at the time? So I mean he's a third generation after that horror, you can't blame him anymore for it. I mean I have talked to young Germans who somehow found out that something like that happened, that somebody in their family--some great grandfather or so--was a real bastard. And they talked about that, and I remember one case that guy said, "can you imagine he did that?" and I don't even want to hear about this man. And in one case I caught myself defending him in saying "you know you should not judge him this way. He didn't know anything about democracy. You are living in a country--the kind of country which your father built--so you don't know anything about dictatorship. You don't know how you would have behaved under that dictatorship. So hold it. It was a horrible thing which your grandfather did, a horrible thing. But you can't judge him with today's...today's feelings." You hear that again and again from the Germans, I mean...oh those bastards! "I had an uncle, I had a great uncle," it's always the great uncle or uncle. But I mean it's a bad condition.

SANDERSON: Now is any of your family still in, still there or have they all left?

BLAUSTEIN: No. I have, there's one guy there who was my best friend in school; he survived 3 years of Auschwitz. He married after the war--a German woman--and I know he...the time they were friends. His family was an orthodox family, and we were very assimilated. They would look a little bit down on me because I was not...[I did not] come from a good enough Jewish family. No I mean, I look a little bit down on. Funny enough it doesn't bother me with him. Somehow I'm a little bit

bothered by those kids of his. I mean they are people in their 50s and 60s now; those kids...they want to act a little bit like Jewish but they are not. I mean don't even try. I mean why? You're Germans, forget it. We changed, but there's war reversal. Because I got more Jewish because of my stay in Israel, and now I'm liberal too. Most of my friends now are not Jewish. I live in a retirement home, Chicago's a new city for me. I lived in Cleveland and later in Pittsburg, so my friends were there. On the other hand, I have my opinion about it. I am what I am and what I have to be. I brought my kids up in a certain way and my grandkids are the way I approve of. I can't control them either, I don't even try, but each generation has to live his own life.

SANDERSON: And you said you lived in Cleveland and Pittsburg the majority of the time?

BLAUSTEIN: Yeah, I lived 18 years in Cleveland and 33 years in Pittsburg.

SANDERSON: When did you move to Chicago?

BLAUSTEIN: My wife had Alzheimer's, and detected it very early, and my daughter was in Glen Ellyn for nearly since she's married and she basically [said] "this is what you are going to do. I mean, you need help, you need to take care of mom, I can't do that if you live in Pittsburg."

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: We were retired at that time already, so I say "it's very simple to move us; we will go to [a] retirement home in Chicago." Now Lombard was the closest we liked as retirement home. We looked at a lot of homes, so we ended up in Lombard. My wife passed away in the meantime, it was one year yesterday yeah.

SANDERSON: Oh well I'm sorry to hear that.

BLAUSTEIN: Oh well I got...my wife died away 3-4 years ago. Her body was still there for 3 years...it comes to the point that it's not anymore the person and the moment it doesn't know who you are anymore then you really know that's it.

SANDERSON: How long were you married to your wife...well how long were y'all married?

BLAUSTEIN: 63 years.

SANDERSON: 63 years, wow outstanding.

BLAUSTEIN Well we married in 1951. Now it is...it's a very tough thing to live through because...especially when it wasn't a marriage of convenience. It was a big love



affair, and you marry that woman and you have children and you raise--her and you--those children. I mean then you feel--[we had] our kids were in our late 40s--the kids were starting to go to college, we sort of still could continue in a way our love affair because we are still young enough. We traveled a lot, had a lot of fun together, and suddenly that hits and I mean it's devastating. The first 2-3 years you still can overlook it but there comes a point where you realize you can't take care of her, and you have to let other people do that. Then [you] walk in and one day she doesn't know who you are, it's a very tough thing. And I watched that for about 4 years and the last 18 months were sheer hell to watch.

SANDERSON: I'm very sorry to hear.

BLAUSTEIN: But I mean, I remember I friended here at the home a lady, strictly intellectual affair. I lecture in biblical history--I have degree in that--I worked for 10 years after I retired at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburg as an archeologist even though I am an engineer. So it's a hobby--a hobby which I made into a little bit more than a hobby. Now I have...every month I give two lectures on biblical history over at the home, and sometimes at other places, and I have even lectured at Wheaton College.

SANDERSON: Wheaton college, ah.

BLAUSTEIN: So it's a hobby. So this lady, she was a professor for biblical history at the Catholic seminary here, and I don't even know which one. Well we were eating dinner we met and decided we have the same interest so we have a lot to talk [about]. But she was...in a retirement home you talk mostly over dinner; you have dinner together and then sit there for an hour to talk. She knew my situation, about two years ago. She was a bit uncomfortable with my wife, [she asked] "why don't you bring your wife here? I don't mind." [I said] "You don't understand; it's just not possible. She doesn't know how to eat, you have to hand her the fork."

SANDERSON: You have to um...

BLAUSTEIN: It's just she's not anymore capable of...it's not anymore a person, it's just a shell. I mean she didn't know; the funny thing is she knew it was the end. That I was somebody she should like, and I walked in and there was a big smile, it was like "that's the guy who means well for me, and does things for me," but I knew she didn't know I was her husband. She didn't know that, the concept of husband she didn't know.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: And my son visited her--he was her boy--and she saw him last time a year before that and yet he was shocked. She never caught on who he is. She was very suspicious of...he lives overseas, and he comes only twice a year to the states.

SANDERSON: And that's the one...and your son lives in...still lives in Israel?

BLAUSTEIN: He lives in Jerusalem. He's an American, but he was the only one born here. My daughter was 6 months when she came here.

SANDERSON: Oh okay. But um, when you retired, when did you start getting involved in to you know the Jewish Veterans Association and getting involved in doing lectures, and doing lecture circuits and stuff like that?

BLAUSTEIN: Well I really didn't care too much to talk about anything about the Holocaust and I think I wasn't really...yes I wasn't really retired. And I was at some kind of federation, some kind of a dinner--Jewish Federation of Pittsburg--and by some coincidence I got to sit next to the lady who was running the Holocaust center in Pittsburg and it was told of a Holocaust survivor herself. We start to talk and "oh you have to come, I need you I need somebody who," well you know most of the Holocaust survivors end up crying when they give a lecture, mostly older women, men, very few men which survive. Today even there are very few who can still walk up the stairway to leave that thing at home. My daughter is now in a walker. You have to be able to relate, usually to high school kids and so on. An old man crying is not a nice sight. I'm teaching them history, a horrible history, but it's a history. And I made it clear I lived through that, so don't argue with me about it; I know it was this way ok? But I ended those very far over, especially with teenage[rs]. I remember I was invited once to Chamber of Commerce to talk about it. I didn't know why...afterwards a gentleman comes up and shakes my hand says "that was great. I didn't know about the details of it, and they let me know." Then he tells me "you know why you were invited here? My son heard you in high school. And he came to me and said 'dad you have to listen what that man has to say.'" He said "you impressed my son very much." That was a good compliment to me but...so I didn't want to talk about it, let's forget ok. I lived now [in the] United States, I have been in Israel, I was a soldier. I have shown I'm not a stray, I'm not a stray I [speaks in German], I am not a stray. I am a guy who knows how to command a group of people, and how to fight, and how to protect himself. So I mean it's made me; it has changed my whole attitude towards myself. I have been...I advanced very well in engineering here. I have

been a chief engineer and I was the vice president of engineering when I retired. So I know how to be successful. I hate people telling me what to do. So I am pushing that I can tell what to do. Maybe it's true maybe not. So but anyhow this lady sitting next to me...I was thinking about it but I was going to Germany to visit my father who was then quite old. We were talking about something he had told me before--years before--something about his childhood, I think about his army time. And I had forgotten entirely how it was, and I asked him. And I suddenly saw that strange look on his face filled with [pain]. He says, "you know, I forgot. I don't know anymore." Now he was then about 93 or 94, I just can't remember. The flight home it sort of flashed up in my mind, he forgot, and he told me so vividly, and he had told my son when he was a teenager about that, some experience he had during WWI in Russia. I think you went through one of those things and you remember well and then you will have forgotten to...when you get this age. So I told him, I said "you will talk with me, we will talk about it and you will write it down." As a matter of fact that was the start of it. I started...after I came home I started to write down my memories. It is typed up it has been edited and I have also a tape from--but this is only about the Holocaust--Spielberg took a tape of my Holocaust experience. It's just...now it's an 8 track tape.

SANDERSON: [Laughs] 8 track.

BLAUSTEIN: I mean I guess you can convert it but I gave each one...I told my children "it's yours now." They all have the memories and I know my grandchildren...my granddaughter got some prize here--last year in high school--you get for composition, she took my memoirs and wrote that composition. She got an Illinois state prize for [it].

SANDERSON: Nice.

BLAUSTEIN: She's 33 years old now. So...but she used it, so I was sort of flattered that she did. And I talked to her about 3 years ago. Shortly after I came to Chicago, I was invited by that young adult group of the federation to talk about the Holocaust. Downtown somewhere they have a building here, I don't know exactly where it is. I'm giving you the...how long can you talk? I can talk for about 30-35 minutes and then question and answers and you can fool people into tell such stories like that. There's a guy getting up in the background and he says "you didn't say anything about such and such a story." Well I look and say "how do you know that? I didn't talk about it so how do you know that, I don't know you." "Oh!" he says, "I am a classmate of your grandson."

SANDERSON: [Laughs].

BLAUSTEIN: “We were a group of 6 friends who used your memories as a class project in high school, I am quite well aware of all of your memories.” So my grandson never told me anything. He was there I mean he had been...it was his girlfriend that was the Bochum chairman. I say “yeah, why did you never talk to me?” “There was everything written out so well that I didn’t need your help.” So we were just reading it and then discussing it and this guy...he had told this guy, he had worked apparently downtown so he came to listen to me. That I like but I don’t think it should be a lifestyle. I mean I usually don’t talk about it unless I am invited, but I don’t have a problem anymore to talk about it.

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: And from that time I went into speak--at that time it was after I retired--I worked for the museum. But there I could take off whenever I wanted. And I would say I had at least 10 to 15 lectures every year in high school. Between larger groups, I even talked once to retire...a group of retired army officers, professional officers. General [...] was in that group listening to me and they wanted to know about the Israel war of independence. I had to talk to them...the strategy I had to talk with some general, my horizon was about 1000 feet long, I know what was going on there.

SANDERSON: Yeah anywhere else [laughs].

BLAUSTEIN: They told me “you have to do that, you have to do that.” But they were all colonels and generals they had their luncheon table and you came together and they listened to war stories, but I was flattered when I found out who those guys were.

SANDERSON: Now did your...’cause your wife had been in the Israeli military as well?

BLAUSTEIN: Yes.

SANDERSON: Did you guys ever do talk...did you do talks together?

BLAUSTEIN: Well we talked about...that year I was in the core of engineers, that’s where she was. She spent two years there during the war for independence. To her she said she was frightened of me when she saw me like I was a dirty guy with a steel helmet over him and a duffle bag and a rifle. You didn’t see that stuff, that was the first thing: I had to turn my rifle in, didn’t want me to run around with a rifle.

SANDERSON: How often do you talk about your experience in the war, for the war of independence?

BLAUSTEIN: Not anymore too much. I talked lately because I made that trip to Israel. That was mostly about...more about my...I mean it used a little bit of the war but it was mostly about my trip and the experience as a veteran walking into those things you know except for my trip to Be'er Sheba. I think exactly the walk by from the railroad station through the cemetery to that fortress.

SANDERSON: To the citadel.

BLAUSTEIN: Now the railroad station is a museum; all around there are high rent, high rise apartments and I mean beautiful! Then there is the cemetery; they can't move that. That is the property of the British commonwealth and you can't, they maintain that like we maintain our [...] the concrete wall I know was gone. There [are] houses now; they had to wipe away those streets. When I was there, lived 5000 people there; it was the periphery of the city. Now there are 200,000 and it has a world class university. I mean it is really...it is one of the top universities in the world. The university...it's called the University of HaNegev, in Be'er Sheba, especially cancer research. So it is really a different...the totally different animal. So we get there and the top of the fence was wire mesh fence with barb wire on top there, which struck me already funny. Why did they take the concrete wall and put a fence there? When we finally got around to the other street, it's the inner city! It used to be the periphery of the city. Well we come around and all the houses built nearly up so you can see only a quarter of that building, and I wanted to see the roof where they surrendered. So we discover...at first I see the...that's the police there then they cover the prisoner, the city prison. Well you can't go sight-seeing in a prison, I thought. I had an escort: my son and two of my nephews were with me and opened doors for me and so I don't fall. They are guys in their early 60s--all of them--but still I was...one of my nephews disappeared, and he comes out with a police officer and the police officers tells me, "Lieutenant Blaustein"--nobody called me that for 67 years--"welcome to Be'er Sheba. I understand you want to see the roof of the citadel. Well I can show you that." He walked with me through the prison. I mean there are guys behind bars.

SANDERSON: They're like, "who's this guy?!"

BLAUSTEIN: We are walking with the officer through there, he gets me to the roof, and shows me everything. The flagpole is still there and the flag on there, he said "you

raised the flag here?" And I said "no I didn't, but I had to hold the flag in my hands before it was raised." He [said] "oh want to raise the flag?" And I must have looked at him with a funny look. He said "I can do that, I was the officer of the shift" [laughs]. So he lowered the flag, he didn't take it off he just lowered it and said "now pull it up." I hoisted it, so now I can say I lifted...I put...I hoisted the Israeli flag on the citadel of Be'er Sheba, only 67 years later, nobody fired on me.

SANDERSON: There you go.

BLAUSTEIN: But I mean he knew it well, I used [it] for a joke. But entirely different feeling...I walked in there like I'm somebody. For a day I was somebody. I went everywhere. I was eating at that station at a restaurant it was noon. I was tired, I needed some rest anyhow, so my son said "let's have lunch here." I didn't even finish lunch and a reporter from the city says "I understand there is a veteran and officer who stormed the railroad station."

SANDERSON: "That's me!" [Laughs]

BLAUSTEIN: I started to enjoy it. I mean you know here I am, just an old guy. So that evening I was in the news. It is quite a city even so, over there 200,000 people is a big city contrary what I...as a matter of fact a lot of Jewish-Russian immigrants settled there. And some of them apparently were chess masters. Spaski, where he was full master, he was a Jewish fellow from Russia and they have to...most of the European chess masters live in Be'er Sheba. They are citizens of Be'er Sheba; they were immigrants, professors at the university, decided to play chess. They call it the chess capital of the Middle East.

SANDERSON: Outstanding, yeah.

BLAUSTEIN: I mean if you had asked me before I had seen it this way, this is the most rotten and dirty city. A little Hamlet, ok? There were two north-south city streets paved and one east-west and it's not really paved...paved by the borders with dirt on the side because at that time camels didn't need pavement and the camels and donkeys walked on the side, and here and there was a car going through. It was very dirty, and I know one of the army jokes was there was a tremendous amount of lice there after we took the city. And they were continuously. So I remember one soldier telling [me] "you can't send out on leave anymore." I said "why not?" He said "can you imagine walking around in Tel Aviv?" He was making a joke about that, if you didn't do that the flies were sitting on you. And today I didn't even get into that city and half of the old city is there. Now the old

city is a city that built between 1948 and 1958; that's what they call the old city. That means the streets which were there when...after the conquest. But I mean there is no building...very few, here and there is a building which is a little bit better built but nothing.

SANDERSON: Very little that exists from when you were there?

BLAUSTEIN: Nothing, absolutely, only the police fortresses only building. Now, there are wells there. Be'er Sheba means, somebody will tell you, mostly it means seven wells. It doesn't mean seven wells; it means...in Hebrew, the word for oath and for seven is nearly the same: one is "sheba" and oath is "shuva." If you read the Bible, they talk about this earlier. Abraham lifts the Book of Genesis. In there you have...Abraham gets into a fight...he's a Bedouin chief. He digs a well to have water with his sheep and right then some tribal chief—Melchizedek they call him--the king of righteousness in English. He was another Bedouin chief who lived there before apparently. So his guys steal water from the well, so Abraham doesn't have enough so they get into a fisted argument and then they sign a treaty, [the] first peace treaty we have written up in the world, in the Bible. Between Abraham and that Melchizedek they made a treaty of who uses that water, so when you get into Be'er Sheba now. Not a disappointment, but I think it's a joke. They have a museum--it's called the Abraham Museum--and they show you the well, supposedly that's the well that Abraham dug. Now I had...somehow something didn't look right to me there. It just had opened by the way. When we came into Be'er Sheba on the southern end, we came in there and I decided it's the first thing I wanted to show. So they had a movie about the story of Abraham, and then they have that well there, and I said "I've been around here before," when I stepped out and I come to realize there's that old Turkish viaducts there and the old railroad used to go there. I said "no, after we conquered Be'er Sheba, my unit was for two weeks in that position; it was the most southern position of the Israeli army after the conquest. Well right next to that bridge...and the first night I remember that's the viaduct like that took those we thought we are under attack they counter and we start to open fire. And sure enough I see that bridge about 100 feet away and I go over there, I look and [it's] peppered with bullet holes. I say "gee we did that." They left it there and today it's one sort of the things you can see. I said "son I know I spent time there I told you, there was an old Turkish building over it, and there was an old gasoline pump, and we used that for showers." And now they did it entirely different. It looks like ancient; you go in there and this is the well Abraham dug...ah my foot!

SANDERSON: [Laughs]

BLAUSTEIN: The ancient city of Be'er Sheba is about a mile and a quarter from the present city of Be'er Sheba. This old city of Be'er Sheba was destroyed in about 630 by the Arabs when they conquered it. It was foul land; nobody lived there. In around [the] 1820s, 1830s the Turks decided that the settlement started build houses so the Turks decided to build their administrative center, but lucky enough they didn't put it on the old place; they put it right in the dirt over there and that is the city we conquered. The British used it later; in Turkish times the population was about 3,500, British time about 5,000. Now it started to be the core of [a] modern Israeli city. I laugh, they said "the old city." I said "old city? You built it in between 1950-1960."

SANDERSON: What did the people...the museum say when you...?

BLAUSTEIN: I didn't. I'm very...almost to somebody happy ok? Why...why destroy it?

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: That happened to me, what, 30 years ago. I was in Jerusalem and my wife's uncle was--at that time--he was running one of those tourist companies which run those buses. I know I had nothing to do and I looked down there. I walked down there and at that time he put me just on the (????2:36:02-06) he told the guide, relative of mine--

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: --"just take care of him he needs something." So we got to Jerusalem, and I know we might have seen fortress of Scion, it's a famous landmark in Jerusalem with a round tower and--

SANDERSON: Right.

BLAUSTEIN: --had nothing to do with Scion but it was built by the Turks in 1600. Anyhow when you get there, there are 2 things they show you: the place, the tomb of David. MY FOOT! It's a ceneta, grave of a crusader, died in about...the crusader run this place from 1000 to 1100. In that time they don't even know who it is. It must have been one of their top officers. And the other thing they show is the place of the Last Supper. Now my son deflated...that when he was about 7 years. He went with my wife and his sister to--for the summer--to visit my wife's parents and talk. I was here in the states, he went to that uncle too and he went on this bus every day. I'd say he was about 11-12 years old; he had nothing



better to do [than] sitting at home, I mean, with his grandparents. So he went over to uncle Oscar and uncle Oscar put him on a bus. So he wrote me his visits there...and he wrote me his visits there and he said to me he went to that room and "they told us the Last Supper happened there, but I don't believe it. There wasn't even a table in there." I remember I wrote him back, "well that was the Last Supper and they took the table out after that." I mean it's right in the tomb of David, it's in the lower level and they say this is the Last Supper. Those buildings weren't there; they are from Turkish times only 1500-1600. But at the tomb of David there is a little table on the side and there is an orthodox Jewish fellow sitting behind there who sells you certificate for a pilgrimage to the tomb of David and it costs five dollars. I remember at that visit when I went there I saw that guy and I told the guide, "what is going on here? This is the tomb of David?" He said this is a good business for him and people were lining up to get that certificate. So what, the guy told me shut up, I mean don't spoil his business; he makes a living that way.

SANDERSON: That is hilarious.

BLAUSTEIN: Ok anything else, specifically?

SANDERSON: Actually I pretty much ran out of questions on the Israeli war. Well a lot of it...I mean you answered a lot of it on there. And the fact that--

BLAUSTEIN: I mean that's my experience.

SANDERSON: Well and that is--

BLAUSTEIN: Somebody who was at another front and fought with the Syrians may have a different story.

SANDERSON: Right, well and that, though it sounded like you were involved in a lot of the major stuff on the southern front, pretty much. I mean--

BLAUSTEIN: Well I came there at a time when...at the time when I was a leader. I don't think they checked me out very well, "this guy looks like an officer ok make him one." I remember one of the things the regiment commander told me when I asked him, "I am not," he said "well I don't have anybody better, so you'd be it!" He did tell me "you are a great guy and so we don't have anybody better, so you better do it." And maybe that's how he felt, because I know after the attack--after we were finally finished--he came...an hour later he came over with a, actually with a brigade commander he came over and he sort of, I guess he...sitting over there

was a company commander talking to them and debriefing them and he came over and he said “they argued you did an outstanding job, and considering that it was the first time and you run into trouble with things we couldn’t foresee, it was fantastic. I mean we were very happy with you.” And I thought he hardly knew me before when he was telling me “I have nobody better.” Lucky guess, I guess.

SANDERSON: Yeah.

BLAUSTEIN: But then he put a foot in his mouth, he was telling me, “you did it like a German.” Jews had--in Israel--the reputation of being like bureaucrats: everything had to go by the book, and something happened during that fight that didn’t go by the book. I didn’t mention it here because it’s a little bit [of a] mistake ok, and not everybody goes for that. I’m the last guy who goes for it, and it happened to me. Anyway he said “you handled that situation like a sabra.” Now sabra is a nickname for native-born Israelis and this guy was a sabra. A sabra is a fruit of a cactus, same cactus I say blew up. You can buy them here sometimes at the supermarket too, the cactus fruit. It has prickly outside very sweet inside and that’s why they call it the natives at that time. They are very sweet people but very prickly outside. So anyhow he says that to me, “you didn’t act at all like a German, but you acted like one of us, a sabra.” And the commanding officer, the brigade commander is a German Jew, and he said “what?! I am born in Germany too, what are you talking about?” He was a...it was a colonel, like he was all mad at him. I had nothing to...he said that not me!

SANDERSON: Yeah don’t get mad at me on that one.

BLAUSTEIN: By the way this captain I have now with my visit, I read about him. He is...I didn’t even know that he is sort of a national hero. During the war, before, he did a few heroic things and I did not know that. I was told he was still alive. He lives in the south, a man in his nineties. I was also told he doesn’t take visitors anymore. I guess we all get to a point where...I don’t even know if he would remember me; I’m pretty sure he would. ‘Cause I was in Israel--I think it was ‘97 or ‘98--they had [an] Independence Day parade in Jerusalem, which basically they don’t make any more...much fuss about the military as such. It was the veterans [who] watch and they had 2 or 3 elite regiments which lead and passed the commander of the army who stands on a dais and salutes. Maybe it was 2 or 3 elite regiments who came walking through--really I mean soldiers--and after that people came scurrying, such and such a unit such and such a unit. And they are all middle aged and old people are trying to watch, so I saw my unit. First I didn’t even see

them, my daughter in law noticed them and said “hey, want to join them?” And I did! I went out and first some policeman tried to stop me because he thought maybe I wanted to...I wanted to throw a bomb. And while I was arguing with him someone in that group said “let him in, that’s our lieutenant, Lieutenant Blaustein!” Somebody recognized me, so apparently I look still good enough to say. I didn’t recognize anybody either, but somebody in that crowd recognized me. So I walked along, and this time my son introduced me to the father of a client of his. He was in C- company; he knew me but I didn’t know him. I was a lieutenant, he was a soldier, and there [were] soldiers there in another unit. He knew me...knew who I was. I guess he saw me running around, screaming around something like that. So...but it’s amazing how you...I’ll tell you, I can call my daughter actually because I’m surprised he hasn’t called, because I told her two hours and we are now two hours come.

SANDERSON: Actually we are pushing 3 almost; we’ve been talking for 2 hours 45 minutes.