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Martin Rotman Oral History Interview: Polar Bear Oral History Project

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Hope College
Polar Bear Oral History Project

Mr. Martin Rotman

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Hope College Archives Council
Holland, Michigan
September 18, 1979

The Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project was conducted from summer 1977 through fall 1979. Three undergraduate History majors, Ms. Nancy Johnson, Ms. Deborah Lenning, and Mr. Glen Johnson, researched the American Intervention in the Russian civil war, located the survivors, and did the interviews. They also typed the rough drafts and attended to the many administrative details related to getting the manuscripts into final form. The latter task was cheerfully completed by departmental secretaries Myra Jordan and Carole Boeve and their assistants. The students worked under the general supervision of G.L. Penrose of the Department of History. Ultimately, the project depended upon the diligence of the students and upon the willing responses of the veterans.

Department of History

Hope College

Holland, Michigan

1979

JOHNSON: So, you went from Camp Custer to New York and then across the ocean to England; you stayed in England for a while, but how and when did you find out that you were going to Russia?

ROTMAN: We didn't! We didn't know where we were going.

JOHNSON: When did you find out and how?

ROTMAN: When we got on the boat in England and we went from London and got on the train and went way across the country, Liverpool I think it was. And the only thing that we surmised, they drilled us pretty heavy in England, it was about the only drilling we had, and one day we were all issued heavy underwear, so we had a suspicion that we weren't going to go to France. We didn't know where we were going until we were a couple days on the boat, then we found out we was going to Archangel.

JOHNSON: What was the reaction of the men? What did they say when they found out that everybody was going to Russia?

ROTMAN: Why, they never tell you anything on the boat. So, we didn't know that yet. When we landed in Archangel we didn't know what country we were in! But in Russia the women practically do all the work, boatloading and everything. The men don't work over there. And of course we couldn't talk their language. We started talking to them and all they'd say is because that's "what," in Russian you know, and we didn't know at that time at all. We got on the boat in England, and we found that out afterwards that the boad was not supposed to be used for troops, contagious disease on the boat. When we got in Russia we had 350 cases of flu. And some died, some died on the way.

JOHNSON: What was the medical care like? Was there any available?

ROTMAN: No, you see the whole trouble was, we found out all about this afterwards, that we was sold to Russia for a year.

JOHNSON: Sold to Britain you mean.

ROTMAN: And, we wasn't under our own command at all. We found this out later on, that the reason we were in Russia, the Bolsheviks were going to overthrow the government you see and England had a lot of money invested in Russia. The Bolshevik government, well, if they'd overthrow it their money would go down. That's why they hired us for a year. We were about 6,000 over there, no artillery, and no medical care, and no kitchen; we hadn't seen a kitchen since we left Camp Custer. All we got was a pocket full of beans and a pocket full of rice. We had to build our own fires, cook. We gothardtack and we got "corn bully," corn beef. That was what we were issued.

JOHNSON: Did these issues come from American or British supplies or what?

ROTMAN: No, we even used Russian rifles! No American ammunition and these Russian rifles were about a foot longer than ours were!

JOHNSON: Did they still fire well?

ROTMAN: They didn't shoot good. Sometimes when we got on the skirmish line why we'd shoot a dozen shots when we see somebody running, why we'd shoot a dozen shots before they realized that we were shooting at him!

JOHNSON: So, you said you were in "D" company?

ROTMAN: "D" company, yes. So then we unloaded all the sick, and this Slagh, this fella and I, we were about the first cases of the flu on the boat, so

by the time we got there, we were about the best you might say, we took care of the rest of them. So I said to my sergeant, "I want to stay with the boys and I'm not going to the hospital." So they filled up the house for Archangel, and then we sailed down the river a ways. Finally they stopped at an old dock over there and all those that had been sick had to go in an old barracks over there.

JOHNSON: So, you went to these barracks also?

ROTMAN: I went to the barracks, the sergeant wouldn't let me stay with the bunch 'cause if you had the flu you were weak and whatnot. So, we got in the barracks and there was no fire in there, no cook, no doctor, and we each got one blanket and we'd put it half under and half over. John Slagh and me, we carried out, I forget, seven or eight corpses in three days. And the minute they got delirious you could figure they would live about an hour and then they were gone.

JOHNSON: How about Mr. Volkens? (also another Polar Bear)

ROTMAN: No, he wasn't with us. I didn't see John Volkens in all of Russia, I don't think.

JOHNSON: Because, he said that he was really sick over there at this time.

ROTMAN: Was he sick? Well, probably he went to the hospital then. That might be. Those that were not quite so sick, you might say, they went into this old barracks over there. So John Slagh and me we took care of them all we could, and that's why I always think after the war was over that they sent all the boys back home you might say. I know that they never got these that we buried over there. We layed them over there, three this way and

three this way outside because we were sick ourselves, doing the best we could. And the Russians bury them all in one trench, no coffin or nothing, just roll a blanket over there and let him in. So, I often wonder how they got these, maybe they never did. I know one guy here from Holland, he died. His name was Pry; he is buried in there too. But his folks said--you know they always ask the family if they want the body back here--they said they didn't care if he stayed over there, because you don't know if you get the right one or not. So I never heard if they got him back.

JOHNSON: What was your first impression of Russia?

ROTMAN: Well, there wasn't much. The people, they don't even know how old they are, they just live along the river. We just went along the Dvina and Vologda rivers you know. And we went from village to village, except if we had to fight our way in. Otherwords, not; we had no artillery.

JOHNSON: So, you went down the Dvina River?

ROTMAN: We went down the Vologda River I think. Toulgas is where I had my first battle really. You know, after we was in there we went, we hoped to get all the way down here (looking at map). We didn't have no trucks, transportation whatever. We went from village to village. Then we was in Chamova I think it is. Beresnik. We were around here somewheres and then they had a submachine gunner. So they sent me to machine gun school.

JOHNSON: While you were there?

ROTMAN: Yes. And I think there was about eight of us, and I was in charge of our American bunch; and they had about twelve Englishmen over there too, but they stayed in different barracks than I was sleeping in.

JOHNSON: How did the Americans and British get along? Were the relations good there?

ROTMAN: I'll say not! We got in more fights with the British than we did with the Russians!

JOHNSON: Why was that?

ROTMAN: Well, in the first place, the British never took the front line. We always had to do all the fighting and they stayed in back of us. And what was I going to say? We was to the machine gun school and finished the course and took the exam and we passed; I think only one dropped out. But anyway, I was in charge of our barracks and the English were right across the street somewhere. So we got all through and we had to relieve "B" company. There was our bunch, where the English went we didn't know. But anyway, the English each got a sleigh to go to the front when they got through. And, so I had the drift of that we weren't going to get any, we had to walk. There was 28 miles I think it was. You know our barracks bag and pack, machine gun and ammunition, everything, we had to carry. So the Englishmen, who I watched through the window, got a sleigh apiece. Although a Russian sled is not much bigger than a wheelbarrow you might say. But it anyway carried your load, your barracks bag and blankets and your machine gun, what have you, your ammunition. So, I see the drift of it and I says to the boys, I says, "I'm not walking." I says, "If the English walk, we'll walk too, but not they each get a sleigh for themselves." And we had orders to be ready to move at eight o'clock in the morning. So then they come to my door and they asked who was in charge here, and I says, "I am." And he swore at me; he said "You bloody Yanks, you can't do anything with them!" I heaved off at him, and I hit him in the jaw;

I think I broke his jaw. But anyway he went to his superior officer. Well there come two or three officers, with their drawn revolvers, and they put me under arrest and took my rifle away. But it didn't take me long. I stayed there. Then a guy, he was next to me in command, he says I'll get out there some way or another; we knew that there was one American officer in that town. So I said, "I'll get word to him." And he said, "No you don't, they are watching you too close; they got two guards in our village." And all of the sudden I noticed that one window was broken, and he was gone. So he reports to the American officer what happened. So the American officer he come in there, he had his revolver drawn, and asked me just what happened. Word for word I said just what he did. And I hit a superior officer because I was acting corporal and he was a sergeant and I know there is a punishment. So, after he heard my story, and he asked the other guys if they's swear that it was the truth. He told us not to move unless we got sleighs, same as the English did: if they walk, we'll walk. So, he says to me, "Don't you move, stay right here." He called up the next town, he hired--you know these English they bought up all the sleighs there was in that village--so he called up the next town and he told them how many sleighs they wanted. That was six miles away. So he says to me, "If you are willing to walk down there the sleighs will be ready." I said, "Alright, as long as they cooperate." So we walked to the next town and the sleighs were ready. There is one thing I want you to travel six hours on and six hours off until you get to relieve "B" company. We had to relieve "B" company because they were surrounded. So we did, but then afterwards I heard that English officer that had come in there was dead. So who done it I don't know. I got an idea this American probably had a fight with him or something.

JOHNSON: Was the fighting in Toulgas pretty heavy?

ROTMAN: Yes, that is where we had our biggest battle. "B" company had blockhouses built, and we relieved "B" company; they had been on three days and three nights holding the front. So I got in the blockhouse with my bunch; I think I had six guys--three of them loading, two of them carrying the ammunition and machine gun, what have you. "B" company was gone and we saw a dead soldier lay there, there were some of the guys dead. So I says, "Bring him in, he is from "B" company I think." Then the artillery started up and I hollered at them because the shells were coming closer and closer; they had an observation post somewhere. And I said, "Drop him and come inside." Then they dropped him and a shell went under his body and all we ever found of that guy is a leg; we had the wrapped leggings, you know, dangling up in a tree, that's all we ever seen of him. So then they went on guard duty and I think there was three of us in the blockhouse, and I set up my machine gun-- I had one of those tripod machine guns. And the artillery kept on throwing at us, and the shells come closer, and pretty soon a shell come right through the porthole. And I was unconscious and the two guys who were in that corner, they were dead. When I come to again--I got a piece of the shell in the basement yet, the nose of that three inch shell you might say.

JOHNSON: Were you wounded at all?

ROTMAN: I didn't get hurt. It just knocked me out. But the tip of the shell, where the timer is on it and so on, layed under my machine gun. But that is as far as, they never attacked at us; if they pulled back or what it was, I don't know. We had guards out all over.

JOHNSON: Do you remember any of your commanding officers at all? American or British?

ROTMAN: The highest we had was lieutenants.

JOHNSON: Do you remember any of them at all? How about a Colonel Stewart?

ROTMAN: There was one Stewart but I never seen him, never met him. We had one lieutenant, I think that was at Toulgas too. We fought there for about a week, I guess. Then I was in shooting my machine gun on the top story--we built up there portholes where we could shoot through -- and he was in the dugout in the basement. And one time he hollered at me and said, "Rotman, hold your post! Hold your post!" because the firing was getting pretty heavy. I said, "You just hold your own post!" That was Lieutenant, not Calhoun-- I don't know what his name was. But he got scared. He thought that we was all going to come down.

JOHNSON: So you went straight down to Toulgas then?

ROTMAN: No, we went from village to village. I don't know where we were at all. I'll know that I see some of these names here, Beresnik, Chamova; we was all along that river (Dvina).

JOHNSON: Were you in Archangel much?

ROTMAN: I wasn't in Archangel at all. I never was there. I met a guy in Florida. He was a polar bear. And I had a Smith in my company, so I asked if he were any relation to him, and he says no, because he got killed on the skirmish line one time and I still got his little Bible yet. He said he was in headquarters in Archangel. He said he never left Archangel. But I was never in downtown.

JOHNSON: What about your clothes? Did you have enough clothes?

ROTMAN: That's one thing we had. You know we never got paid as long as we were in Russia. Never got no rations. And this John Slagh, you said you visited him, he was always volunteering to go get rations. Sometimes you had to walk a mile, sometimes two miles, to get our beans and rice. And he'd always volunteer. I know I shouldn't laugh about that because everytime he came back he'd have a pocketful of beans and rice. That was for himself! (laughs) So finally we found out where the English had their rations house. Our sergeant was a go-getter, and if he was with us--I didn't see him half the time you know, there was 25 in this little village and 25 in that one, we was on our own more or less--but if we was with him he's say, "Who's going to volunteer tonight?" And they'd go down and raid the English! That's where we was fighting all the time. We'd get all the clothes we wanted. Then we didn't get pay, we didn't get no rations, so then we'd sell blankets to the Russian people, get rubles.

JOHNSON: What was the money situation like there?

ROTMAN: Well the Russians seemed to have quite a bit of money. And they was worth only six cents to a dollar. But anyway, one time I bought an egg I remember. I paid a dollar for it in rubles--six hundred rubles or something like that!

JOHNSON: One egg?

ROTMAN: One egg. And that is the way we went from place to place.

JOHNSON: How about the sanitary conditions? Were things very sanitary? You know baths, showers, etc.

ROTMAN: I'll tell you the way the Russians live. The way I found out, we could talk to them because we had some Polish guys with us. They could

understand their language. But when a Russian gets married the government gives them three-quarters of an acre of ground. And on that ground there is enough logs there to build themselves a loghouse, or whatever it is; I saw a lot of loghouses there. Then they'd build, there was a couple windows in it. Then they'd build an oven in there, oh, I'd say about 18 feet long. And they arched that up, put a floor on there and arched that up. Then in the morning they'd fill that full of logs, they'd set it a fire--they had a chimney on there--and that heats all of the masonry work, all of the clay. And then when the fire was out they'd pull all of the ashes out or leave them in. Then the women they baked their bread and they'd shove that in with a great big long ladle. Then at night or whenever or how long it is they kept it, the bread they called it keble, and then they'd pull it out again and that's what they eat. Below that floor, it was about that high from the floor (gestures a few feet), the platform where they built the fire on, there they kept a couple chickens in there. On the back of the house, there they had a lean-to on there, and if they had a horse, they'd keep the horse in there. And the cockroaches were so thick on the ceiling that if you were drinking coffee you had to hold your hand over the top of it. Well, the walls were covered with cockroaches. That was what the chickens feed on!

JOHNSON: Did you stay in any of these houses?

ROTMAN: Well, if we found a place where we didn't have no place to sleep, there wasn't no barracks or nothing, we'd chase the Russains out and we'd sleep in there. We didn't sleep on the top, on their bed; we'd just pull out on the floor, wherever we could find, if we found a decent house.

JOHNSON: What kind of a government do you think those people wanted? The Russian people?

ROTMAN: We traveled up, I think about three hundred miles inland, and I only run across one or two schools and they were closed. They don't know how old they are, they don't know nothing. And the way I understand, that the women do all the work--they chop the wood, haul in the wood--and the men, they go fishing, to bring in the fish and that's all the work they do! Now it's a whole lot different, I realize that. But when we was there they just lived along the country, along the river, I mean. What's between the rivers nobody knows.

JOHNSON: What about the morale of the troops?

ROTMAN: They seemed to be happy.

JOHNSON: From the beginning as opposed to the end?

ROTMAN: Well, they were discontent, you could tell that, but, and their own way of living. They was brought up that way and they didn't know any better.

JOHNSON: How about at Christmastime? What was the morale like then?

ROTMAN: Well, the only thing as far as religion, every home had a little--what do you call them?--an image of Christ, you might say, and they had a candle burning in there all of the time. Then they would salute that and a man had to take off his cap or hat or whatever he wore. That's the only religion they had as far as I'm concerned.

JOHNSON: Was there enough medical on the front? Was it good?

ROTMAN: Didn't have any!

JOHNSON: None at all?

ROTMAN: I was never sick after that.

JOHNSON: What would you do with the wounded?

ROTMAN: They'd take care of themselves. They might have, course we was on the move all of the time. You might say, I don't know, we wanted something to eat, and a bunch of us killed a cow. A Russian cow. And I helped skin it yet. But I never got a taste of it because by the time we got her ready we had to move again to the next town. Oh, there are a lot of stories I could tell if I could remember them. But as far as getting along with these people I know I remember one time, I was corporal of the guard that night, I sent out a guard, there around the blockhouses and so around the buildings, this one guy from Chicago, he bawled like a baby. I says, "What's the matter?" "Well," he says, "you are always picking on me!" I says, "No, I'm not picking on you, it's your turn. But," I says, "if you are sick I'll get somebody else." "No," he says, "I feel alright." So he didn't report all night. And the next morning when I was pulling in the guards to relieve them he was gone. The Bolsheviks had come by there and captured him. He was from Chicago, a real nice fellow. And I never seen him since.

Last year I went to California and I got a grandson over there, and he was in Vietnam. He was always crazy about war stories. He bought a book, he bought this for me. (shows me pictures in book) That's me.

JOHNSON: Did he know that you were in this picture?

ROTMAN: I knew they took a picture there. In fact what they did--and this is company "C" I think. You see what they did, they didn't know what treatment we was getting here and the folks back home they were writing in to Congress--they didn't know we had any soldiers in Russia--and they talked about the maltreatment that we was getting and so on. So they sent this Ironsides over to inspect our troops and they picked out the heaviest guys

in each company. And I was appointed to be his bodyguard over him. And my grandson, he didn't know I was in it and I spotted myself! When I see this picture I remember then, when they took a picture here.

JOHNSON: What was this Ironsides guy like?

ROTMAN: Well, he wrote back that we were well taken care of and well fed. So like I said, then the guy hollered at me, "Why don't you shoot him!" (laughter) After I got back. They picked one from each company for a bodyguard of him. And they went from company to company--this I think here is "C" company.

JOHNSON: (looking at picture) This is your typical blockhouse right there?

ROTMAN: Yes, well, we didn't build the round ones; ours are all square what we built. Here's what the country looks like, and here is a trench.

JOHNSON: This would be like it was at Toulgas?

ROTMAN: Yes, that's right. Well, the whole of Russia looks all alike, all along the river you might say.

JOHNSON: Do you remember any Bolshevik propaganda? Did you ever come into contact with any?

ROTMAN: No, the only message I saw brought in, and the Polish people would interpret it, that they couldn't understand what the Americans were doing in Russia. They could understand why the English were there, but what the Americans were doing, they wanted to know why we were fighting. So if they had ever gotten after that I don't know. That was the only propaganda we had.

JOHNSON: But was there any propaganda from the Allied side? Like propaganda from the Americans or British; were you using any propaganda?

ROTMAN: Not that I know of. Course probably the officers did--John Volkens could probably tell you more about that. We never was on the move. And my brother-in-law, he was in the same company I was, and I never seen him in Russia until about two months before we left. And we didn't know the Armistice was signed until late in January. We fought till the next July!

JOHNSON: Did you ever do anything with the YMCA or the Red Cross?

ROTMAN: I got to tell you a story about that. We was in a town, I forget now what town it was--Chemavald (?) or something like that. But, anyway, the folks at home must have asked why we wasn't getting any Red Cross benefits, and why we didn't get the cookies, or the stockings, socks, what was sent to us. Nobody ever did. So I tell you what they did: They made us build boxes. I didn't build them, but I helped supervise carrying them out. The boxes were about six feet long, three feet wide and four feet deep, pine boxes. And they painted a great big red cross on there, and they carried them out of a box car. They were all empty.

JOHNSON: Did you ever hear of any dissent among the troops? Any dissention amongst the Americans fighting there? Rumors of mutiny?

ROTMAN: Well, I'll tell you, after there was so much propaganda there between the Americans and the English, we mutinied one time. And we all refused to fight, to go to the front line until the British took their turn. But that cooled over and I don't think the English were ever on the front line. The Canadians had the artillery, there were real nice. We didn't have no artillery. But I know one time we were retreating--that was at Toulgas--and we

run as fast as we could, we could run no more. And the artillery, the other Canadians they helped us hold them back so we got out of there. And we threw everything we had away--gas masks, everything that was heavy. Yes, we lost the battle of Toulgas because their troops were getting too heavy there. We didn't have our own artillery. So we moved back to Chamova I think the town was. I think that was about 15 miles away.

JOHNSON: Did you ever have any Bolshevik prisoners?

ROTMAN: No, I don't think so. I'll tell you what happened to me, I hate to say this. But that was another--I think there was snow then if I'm not mistaken--I put a bunch on guard again. And the next morning when I went down there one guy was all chopped up, in sections. Some Bolshevik got in there.

JOHNSON: So, you don't know anything about prisoners at all?

ROTMAN: We never captured any.

JOHNSON: Where did your orders come from?

ROTMAN: From the English. I never seen a sergeant or a lieutenant except in that blockhouse we was in, like I said, he said, "Hold your fire!" Our captain got court-martialed over there, going out with women and so on. I forget the name of the captain now. He got sent back to the United States. Then we got another captain, but he was never with our bunch. No, our bunch never captured any. Skirmish line--the first skirmish line I was in there was a guy from east of Zeeland--what's that little town there? He was about ten feet away and he got a bullet right through the head. (gesture)

(Mr. Rotman then tells the story of how he "played dead" under the fallen tree where he had his machine gun emplacement, fighting the Bolsheviks.)

JOHNSON: What is your impression of the Bolsheviks? What kind of people are they?

ROTMAN: Bolsheviks? Well, I'd say they are more like these racketeers~~are~~ in this country.

JOHNSON: What do you mean by racketeers?

ROTMAN: They are above rule and order. How are you going to describe them? They don't believe in nothing--how do you describe them--

JOHNSON: Do you mean like the mob? Organized crime?

ROTMAN: Yes, just like a mob. If they have a leader, why they'll feed him a lot of stuff you know and that's what they believe.

JOHNSON: What about the Russian people?

ROTMAN: Most of them, what they call the "Whites," they sided there with us.

JOHNSON: What kind of a government do you think they wanted?

ROTMAN: We never talked about that. I don't know what they wanted. They were satisfied, they were born and bred up that way. And all the people we met, well you couldn't find any fault with them, they were ordinary people. They never knew any different. I know I had a postcard with me from New York, a picture of that all building, and he couldn't believe that there was such a thing in this world.

JOHNSON: Looking back on this whole Russian campaign, what do you think was the purpose of it all? Why did the Americans go over there?

ROTMAN: Like I said, we was sold to England for a year. And the way I understand it the members of Congress didn't even know we had American soldiers in Russia! That was, we was sold, just a few guys in the Senate they OKed that order, I guess, the way I understand it. We should have never gone there. I tell you we was so glad that the Englishmen, when we got through. We was supposed to go to England again, but they didn't dare! So they sent us to France. We got in one harbor there where we had to change boats--I forget what we had to do--and down the ways an English boat sat next to us. And all we did was heave coal and whatever we could find at it! You know the friction was so bad that they didn't dare to send us back to England again, so they sent us back to France.

JOHNSON: Do you think that your spending that time in Russia has changed your life at all? A definite impression on your life?

ROTMAN: I do, I think so. The only thing what I always say, that we are so thankful that we have a country like this. I still, it's the best country in the world. We got religious freedom and everything; there is no country that's come close. Now I've been to France, and France can't compare. England can't compare with the United States, not even London. It is a different life, different country; I never have any desire to go there again. I was awful disappointed with London, I know that. The wealthiest people live in the oldest houses.

JOHNSON: What about when you came back home, what kind of a reception did you get?

ROTMAN: Well, we was at Camp Brest, in Boston I guess, we were there a week I guess. We had an awful heavy bunch from Detroit in our company. So Detroit

was wonderful, they had a big parade. But one thing I'll never get over, was a corporal--I forget his name--he came from Detroit, and we got in Detroit and they had all special booths. "R's" in one place and "A's" and "C's" in another so the people could meet their children, their relatives. So, this guy--his name started with "C," but when we was in France, he got drunk in France--he missed the boat! And this lady started to cry and she hung on to her husband and said that so-and-so was dead. So I told this lady I was one of the bunch. She asked me if I knew anything about him, and I said that he had a little too much to drink the night before. And they were the happiest people I ever met! Well, what they give us in Detroit, they give us a dinner and they had cars lined up there, and we could go anywhere we wanted to in Detroit. Of course, I don't know Detroit so I didn't go nowheres.

JOHNSON: Then you just came back home from there?

ROTMAN: Yes, so from there we went to Battle Creek, back to Camp Custer, and a special urban run to Kalamazoo.