Interview with Ellen Marchese
July 15, 1995

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is side one of an interview with **Ellen Bonnie Marchese.** This is July 15th, 1995. We're in **West Park, New York** and my name is **Nina Ellis**. Tell me if you would, when and where were you born?

Answer: I was born in **Brooklyn**, 1917, on Thanksgiving day.

Q: Where did you grow up?

A: I grew up partly in **Brooklyn.** No, I guess I didn't grow up in **Brooklyn.** God, you're going back 70 some odd years and -- what else.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your family life.

A: My father and my mother had an arranged marriage. She was years younger than he was. He was -- they came from **Italy** as immigrants. I don't know whether she loved him, but they accommodated to each other. He died when he was fairly young and I was 13. She had six children and she was a lovely, brave woman. She raised us all with a great deal of love.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?

A: 1933.

Q: And did you go --

A: 1934, a-and I went into training in 1935, I was too young to go in when I graduated. And that was three years, King's County, it was very famous in **Brooklyn,**

at the time. It was a very tough training, we had affiliations at **Bellevue** Hospital, at **Willard Parker**. It was tough. I really chose training because it was during the depression. My family wanted to do something so that I'd get some education and they could afford the 300 dollars. And that's why I ch -- I would never have chosen nursing, never.

Q: No?

A: No.

Q: But it was --

A: But it was a profession and it was available to us and that's what I did, went into nursing.

Q: Mm-hm. And when you graduated, what did you do?

A: When I graduated I did psychiatry at **Bellevue**. From **Bellevue** -- at the start of the war I went into -- **USPHS** wanted nurses for their maritime and Coast Guard station down in **Manhattan** Beach in **Brooklyn.**

Q: Public Health Service?

A: Public Health. I worked there for awhile. Then I was a bad girl, I started a petition so that married nurses could get Sundays off. And they didn't like that, they sent me across the street to the dental clinic, where I had a ball, since I was the only woman there. Then, from there I went to 42 Broadway**, Spar** sick bay. I was in charge of the sick bay.

Q: What is **Spar**?

A: **Spar** was the Coast Guard. Oh no, wait a minute, before that I went to the -- oh, the **USPHS**, I told you that, that was **US** Coast Guard and Merchant Mariners. Then the **Spar** sick bay and then I decided to join the army and see the world. Went to basic training in **Atlantic City**, where we went on a 50 mile hike with brand new field bo -- 25 miles -- field boots. Everybody got blisters. They told us to walk in the ocean and that would soften the leather. And they took girls home in ambulances by the droves. But I made it. I made it. From there we went --

Q: They took them home in ambulances from that hike, or --

A: From the hike. It was gruesome. It was really gruesome because we had the new shoes on. Everybody got blisters. So -- but we did everything else, I -- I -- basic training was okay. We were young, we were fit and we got through even climbing up the sides of the ship, where a few of us froze on the ladder.

Q: Oh, those rope ladders? Those big cargo ropes?

A: It was fun. Yeah, I liked that. I was athletic, I liked that. What else? Then I went to -- where the hell did I go then?

Q: When did you go into the service?

A: ‘44

Q: Remember what time of year?

A: I think that it was before Christmas, because we had a miserable Christmas in **England**, miserable.

Q: So --

A: We went to s -- o-on the Queen --

Q: **Elizabeth**.

A: **Elizabeth**. Zigzagged all the way across.

Q: Do you remember very much of the crossing?

A: Yeah, I did. Played a lot of poker, had a wonderful time, lot of men around.

Q: They let you mingle with the men?

A: No, it was the officer's mess, whatever -- the lounge. Not with the enlisted men, just the officers. And there was a lot of poker playing, cause there wasn't much else to do and I'm sure there was drinking, I can't really remember. But the crossing was -- many of the kids in my group got really seasick, because it was rough. So a lot of them spent time in their bunks, feeling green. And we landed in **Scotland** and then they took us to **England** and I remember bunches of prostitutes walking down the streets and yelling at us.

Q: Where was this?

A: And we lan -- in **England**. I can't remember where in **England**.

Q: What were the prostitutes --

A: But we landed in the middle of the night and they weren't ready for us. Oh, yelling, "Hi, yank," and all that stuff. The men were with us, too, you know, the enlisted men. We're marching down the street in the middle of the night til they found us billets and that was the coldest I've ever been in my life. Some of the girls got st-straw from the first floor. Me and my two roommates -- my two roommates and I wound up at the attic, with fireplaces that didn't work. And nobody slept, we were so cold. We slept on the floor in our bedrolls. So cold, bitter. Then we walked miles to the mess to eat. I got lost one night in the fog. The fogs were awesome, they were really pea soup. **England** was nice. We also went on **detach** service, which means that they weren't ready for us to -- we were an evacuation unit and they didn't have anything for us to do in **England** til we crossed. And we went to a hospital in the south of **England** and took care of our boys. And that was nice, because that was the first actual nursing that we did. And it was interesting, we been doing what we were there to do and we liked that. We were sent to different hospitals in **England**. And when we came back, we crossed the channel. I remember meeting **Garson Canaan** crossing that channel and going up to him and saying my sister was an actress. Well, his wife was **Ruth Gordon** and he said, "My wife is a famous actress." What else? We landed in **France**. From then on trucks -- hurry and wait, lines -- hurry and wait.

Q: And then you -- they set up the hospital in **France**?

A: In -- in **France,** they set up our tents in **Sudan** I think it was. **Bavaria**, somewhere in **Bavaria**. We lived in tents and that was fun. I lost a very expensive lighter in the grass. We slept on our bedrolls, on army cots and you could feel any -- every lump of the mess kits.

Q: Under the cot? You kept your mess kits under your cots?

A: No, we kept the bedroll on top of the cot so that the cold would not come up under. It was sort of an insulation. And it was kind of, you know, uncomfortable, but at least it was warmer than just sleeping on a cot.

Q: Yeah. And what was your particular job in the hospital?

A: I was the psychiatric nurse.

Q: Oh.

A: I don't remember if I told you that I -- from King's County, where I was a pediatric nurse, my -- my love was psychiatry. So I worked in **Bellevue** for a few years, til somebody hit one of the nurses on the head with a faucet, and scooted. **New York's** bad boys. And the nurse that was on duty that night, happened to be a big, hefty girl and she was working for me and I said, "Enough of this, I quit." I did. But psychiatry, I guess I had m -- that's why the army chose me for that facet, that was my area of expertise.

Q: I've read that for the **GI's** who were at the Battle of the Bulge, that there was a lot of psychiatric trauma there.

A: Yes, yes. I didn't experience that because we were there after the Bulge.

Q: Oh.

A: Yeah. But they were just children -- they were just children. How can you cope with death and dying and your buddy being blown up? You can't. You --

Q: How did you help them?

A: Actually, we didn't -- we didn't get to do that much nursing til we -- we were set up in the tents and mostly the surgical girls did the wounded. There was one tent of the neuro-psychiatric. And I was on night duty, so they were mostly asleep. They had medication. The corpsmen did all of the -- the physical stuff. So there was just tender loving care, that's all you could do.

Q: What -- what was the common symptoms of what they were **[indecipherable]**

A: I guess you'd call it -- let's see, battle shock -- what would you call it?

Q: **PTSD**?

A: Yeah.

Q: Post -- Post Traumatic Stress?

A: Yeah, but that wasn't known then. They didn't call it then. And -- now in World War One it was called shell shock. And people came out of that with tics and tremors and all the rest of it. But these boys were mostly in shock -- in shock. And we didn't get -- since we were an evac -- we were moving all the time, we didn't really get to

follow up anybody that we took care of. The only time we were able to do that was in **England**, because we were there for quite awhile.

Q: But what could you do for them if they were brought there? What -- what was the standard kind of --

A: Well, it wasn't -- they didn't have the sort of tools at hand as you would have in a psychiatric hospital. That's right, I did the basic training. I also worked in a psychiatric hospital where they had German prisoners. But most of the tools in psychiatry then, were either medication -- and it wasn't as kind as tranquilizers or what -- anything they have today. They used -- for violent people they used hot tubs -- this was at **Bellevue** -- where the patient was immersed in a tub of warm water with a canvas sheet covering it. And that was supposed to be soothing. But it wasn't. It wasn't soothing at all. Either that or a cold pack. They would wrap them in cold sheets and do that for hours. But -- it was very interesting. I mean, the things that people say -- I used to keep a journal of everything -- the things said. Now, one young man committed suicide by burning up everything he had ever written. He was a writer and that was his way of committing suicide. So he was in there. The kids I took care of at **Bellevue** were adolescents in trouble who were sent there by the court for 30 days to be evaluated -- to see if they were going to go to a reform school or being sent home or being sent to another mental institution. They were just there temporarily. And --

Q: And what about the ones in the field, though?

A: The ones in the field, I don't know what happened to them, because eventually they were either sent home with a section eight. I don't think that too many of them recovered, I really don't.

Q: But you didn't have those hot baths there?

A: No, no, no, no. They had no facilities, no --

Q: Just medication?

A: Just medication. And a psychiatrist I guess would talk to them, **Daniel Freedman.**

Q: That was the name of the psychiatrist?

A: Yeah. But I didn't know him til -- when? It all merges in -- it all flows in together so that there's no sequence to it.

Q: Was it -- were there a lot of these men?

A: A whole tent full.

Q: At any give time?

A: Well, that time in **Germany**, you know, that was the height. It was right after the Bulge, so that was the height of dreadful experiences.

Q: And how many would be a tent full?

A: I'd say 10 on each side. 10 cots on each side. I don't know if all of them were occupied, though, I can't really remember that, I just remember I was on night duty and they were not -- they didn't have demands, as somebody physically wounded would have. They didn't have demands. They were in their own world. It was really

sad, because physical trauma, at least you can mend at times -- not always, but mental trauma is kind of more difficult. Really, your very psyche.

Q: Yeah.

A: And that's about all I can remember of that. Now, when we were at **Gusen**, they didn't have a psychiatric ward, they didn't have that. There were all these little huts, with tiers of cots and all these living skeletons.

Q: Let me ask you, before that, about how did you go -- get to **Gusen** and what were the situa -- what was the situation?

A: Got orders to go and the colonel spoke to us and when we got -- we didn't know where we were going, except we were following our medi -- our medics from **Germany**, we went into **Austria** and when we got there -- beautiful little village, little Alpine village like this. And the hills, the Alps were simply breathtaking. I understand the **danu** is always filled with -- **Danube** was always filled with bodies. And the colonel got us in a group and he told us that none of us were going to be forced to go and work in this camp. That if we wanted to opt out, we could. But of course, nobody did. We all were gung-ho to go and help. So we all went to work and -- horror --

Q: What -- do you remember the first time you went into the camp?

A: Well, you sort of remember, yeah, all those people lying on those bunks. They were like living dead. Nothing but eyes and bones.

Q: And what did you do?

A: I really can't remember it. I -- I -- I do try to block it out. I don't want to remember. Don't want to. Cause somebody did that to them. A human being responsible for that.

Q: Mm-hm. When -- did you -- were you told who those people were? Did you know who they were?

A: They were all -- there were Poles, there were Gypsies, there were political prisoners, all sorts of people there that -- you know, undesirable. Jews, everybody mixed in. I know that **Mauthausen** got -- was much more crowded and was supposed to have been much worse than **Gusen**. But **Gusen** was bad enough. It was -- you know, the same thing on a smaller scale.

Q: **Gusen** was a sub-camp of **Mauthausen --**

A: Right, right.

Q: They were close by each other.

A: Right, right.

Q: Did you go to **Mauthausen** at all?

A: No, I didn't want to go. No, didn't want to go. And then I was traipsing around with my future husband.

Q: Oh.

A: I didn't even go to **Hitler's** bunker, when the whole group went, because I had a date with **Mike.**

Q: You met there?

A: Yup.

Q: At **Gusen**?

A: Yup.

Q: Huh. Was he part of the corps?

A: He was part of the -- the infantry that -- that liberated the camp. 65th infantry. And he was a lieutenant. And he was out on -- doing communications thing. I was at a party with members of his -- his officers -- at night we were invited for drinks and all that stuff. And somebody came in who was dirty and unshaven and all the rest of it and his friend said, "Hey **Mike**, I want you to come meet someone from **Brooklyn.** You might know her." **Brooklyn**. And we met and the angels sang.

Q: At that moment?

A: Well, I wrote home that night to my mother and I said, "I finally met the man I'm going to marry." I just knew. Just knew. We had a lot in common. We both were familiar with **Brooklyn**, we both had Italian parents. We knew the same neighborhoods. Just clicked, just clicked. And that's what I said, I fell in love, so **Gusen** was a little blunted for me.

Q: Yeah, cause you were in a state.

A: Yup.

Q: But, can you remember what -- what you did every day? The -- were you in a ward, were you --

A: Yes, we were assigned a ward and we went and gave medications and did dressings. We never actually bathed anyone I don't think. I don't remember bathing anyone. The usual things that nurses do, comfort, backrubs, that sort of thing. And we went every day, we walked down when we didn't take the bus. There was a little village that you walk through the streets where they kept the animals and the **[indecipherable]** and you had to hold your nose going through those villages, they smelled so. We also had an **Austrian** maid and we kept deviling her. "But didn't you know that anything was going on down there? How could you not know?" No, they didn't know anything. They couldn't smell it, they couldn't -- unaware -- they never knew anything that was going on.

Q: Do you believe that?

A: No. I don't. I think they were probably -- if they didn't like it, what can you do? Can you fight the whole army? You can't. They -- afraid for themselves, for their lives.

Q: Did you --

A: But still -- what?

Q: Did you feel anger toward the local people in general, or --

A: Contempt. Contempt. No, not anger. They were very ingratiating. Eager to please. Plus there was a language difficulty. No, but I -- I didn't like Germans for a long, long time, it was a -- it was a bias that you -- you know, you identify the whole race with a

few crazy people, which is wrong. You know, you know that in retrospect. But for a moment I hated all Germans, all. That's about it.

Q: When you were going every day to the camp, did you also see former inmates there who were not sick? Who were able to walk about?

A: Yes, yes, there were some. Now, they probably curried favor and got more food than the rest of them. Now, **Albert** was one of them, he was a Pole.

Q: Who was **Albert**?

A: Little fellow, I took a picture with him in front of the **Listerbag**. He wanted -- he was the one that wanted to come home in my foot locker. He was well nourished, so I imagine he was a trustee of some sort, since we didn't -- I -- I didn't have that conversation with him -- I didn't ask him. But he was just somebody around that --

Q: He wanted you to take him back to the States?

A: Oh, everybody wanted to go to **America.** Promised Land.

Q: You mentioned somebody else before, an artist that you met some --

A: One of the patients held court in one of the back bunks. He just worked with crayons and people learned that he drew likenesses, portraits and he would charge them five dollars. They would come and sit for him for a half an hour, he'd do a portrait and they'd pay him and take it because he was fairly good. He got -- he got the likeness, but not the soul, you know, he -- how c-can you if you don't know someone? He also -- I also bought from him a little crayon sketch of a landscape, trees. It was

very lovely, but I lost in the moving -- also my portrait. And he was -- he was confined to bed, I can't remember what -- what was wrong with him, he was confined to bed. But he had a tidy little business going. And there's not really much more I can remember specifically. We were working, we walked, we went to work. We took care of them. And don't forget, this was after the war was over. I remember when the war was over, we celebrated by having onion sandwiches. We were in the field and we had -- there was nothing to eat.

Q: **VE** day, you had onion sandwiches?

A: Yeah. Delicious. Cause the food we ate was none the greatest. We had **T**-rations and **C**-rations.

Q: What about -- what -- what did you and **Mike** do when you had time off? He had a -- he had a vehicle?

A: He took me up -- yes, he had a vehicle, because he was an officer. I would bring over **Lipton's** chicken soup to the house where he lives. Since he was an officer, he lived with two other officers in a nice little house. He had a barber that cut his hair that one day cut my hair. I would make the **Lipton's** chicken noodle soup for him. We went mostly for rides. But then I had to go home. He stayed, he was sent to other -- I think he went to **Dachau** from there. I went to 20 grand in **France**, where I got scabies from the rotten blankets.

Q: Oh, what's scabies?

A: Scabies is a little itch mite that digs into your skin and lays a nest under your skin. It is excruciatingly itchy. And it comes from dirty blankets. And at 20 grand, which was a -- the place where everybody went out -- what's the name? Disembarking. Disembarkation point. We slept on cots with dirty blankets. And when I got home, I had scabies. Terrible.

Q: Did it -- was it common for nurses to -- in your unit to pick up pr -- health problems of -- when you were exposed to a lot of things --

A: Well they -- they dusted us with **DDT** a lot. I don't think too many of us had health problems. No, I really don't -- I really don't think -- I can't remember anybody that was really sick. And -- plus we were younger and many medics in our outfit, dentists in our outfit. That was another thing that disturbed me. The married doctors, who found they were unable to live without a sexual life, would go around and proposition all the nurses to be their girl for the duration -- have you heard this from anyone?

Q: Hints.

A: Cause a few of them were one of them. And that disturbed me a lot, because whether both pair were married or not, I just, you know -- today nobody would think anything of it at all, but I just didn't think it was kosher. The dentist approached me, I, "What are you, crazy?" I was a --

Q: He was married?

A: Yeah. He finally found a nice little blonde and she -- they -- this is all, oh, I shouldn't be saying these things. Okay.

Q: It's life.

A: Mums the word, yeah. They did what was convenient and I suppose it was healthier than being deprived, but I was very moral then. And not so any more, it's 1995. What the hell.

Q: Where were you on **VJ** Day, do you remember? Or let's say, even the -- the dropping of the bomb, do you remember where you were? You weren't in **Europe** any more.

A: No, I was home. Let's see **[indecipherable]** and I were -- God, I can't remember.

Q: But you were on leave, like everybody else?

A: I guess so, yeah. I must have been home.

Q: Yeah, and had you been told that you were going to **China [indecipherable]**

A: Wh-When we were in **Europe** we were supposed to go to **China**, but -- that's right. That's why they changed our orders, they must have dropped the bomb then. See, the time frame is very fuzzy to me, because there were so many different changes in our lives. We were always on a truck, going somewhere. I can't really remember. Sorry.

Q: Well, when did you get out of the service, do you know?

A: 1945 -- the end of 1945? '46. '46. **Mike** came home a year later and we got married. That's it.

Q: Did you continue nursing after that?

A: Yes, I did industrial nursing, which I liked -- down in **Bush** terminal in **Brooklyn**. You remember **Bush** terminal?

Q: Mm-mm.

A: No? You were in **Brooklyn**?

Q: Mm-mm. No, I'm from **Chicago.**

A: Yes, but you told me you knew somebody.

Q: Yeah, visiting, visiting.

A: Oh, just visiting.

Q: Just visiting.

A: Okay, okay. That was the waterfront, lot of longshoremen. And I worked there for awhile. Then after my daughter was ber-born, I worked -- did some industrial nursing for the guy that made the first hydraulic bed, **Greer** Hydraulics. I got pretty good pay then, cause I was part time. And then she got sick going to nursery school, so I quit, took care of her and that's it.

Q: Is that period -- I'm specifically interested in -- in what you saw at **Gusen**. Is that something that you think about very often or -- over the 50 years since you've been seeing your other -- your friends who were nurses with you, certainly it was --

A: Whenever I hear of any war -- **Bosnia** reminds me of the horror of it. Even **Rwanda** with all those starving children. **Haiti** reminds me of it. Anything where man

cannot get along with man, reminds me of that and that nobody's learned anything. The world is still biased, it still hates Negroes and Jews and ethnic minorities and everybody else. Ma-Man hasn't learned a thing, not a thing.

Q: 50 years ago, did you think maybe people had learned?

A: We thought we were fighting a very good war. It wasn't a war that there was any doubt about that we were in it rightfully.

Q: And when it was over, did you think -- were you optimistic?

A: God, sure, I thought, you know, we saved the world for democracy. But we didn't -- didn't. Man does not change his nature. Greed, power, corrupts. And it'll be so ad infinitum, unfortunately.

Q: Do you talk with people about your experience, what you witnessed?

A: No. No. Nobody's interested. Young people aren't interested. They're not even interested in saving the planet for God sakes. That's my passion, ecology. I think that I'd rather talk to you without this thing.

Q: Okay.

A: All right?

Q: You think we're finished? Anything else you want to say about the war?

A: No. No, except stop it, stop it everyone. Stop hating each other.

Q: Yeah. Okay, let me --

A: We should celebrate our differences, not hate them.

Q: This is the end of the interview with **Ellen Bonnie Marchese -- Marchesa?**

A: **Marchese** --

Q: **Marchese.**

A: -- is the way he says it.

Q: This is July 15th, 1995, **Nina Ellis.**

A: Very cathartic, **Nina.**

End of Tape One, Side A

Conclusion of Interview