Oral History Interview

NSA OH-16-84

with

LEO ROSEN

26 August 1984

Rosen Residence, Essex, Connecticut

By R. D. Farley

FARLEY: Today is August 26, 1984. Our interviewee Mr. Leo Rosen. Mr. Leo Rosen is a pioneer member of the Army Signal Intelligence Service, in the 1930s, and served with the U.S. Army Signal Corps until well after World War II. He was involved in the research and development aspects of the SIS efforts at the Munitions Building and later at Arlington Hall and Ft. Meade. Before his retirement he headéd the R&D element within the Agency. This is not a true oral history interview, inasmuch as Mr. Rosen was reluctant to let us tape record his recollections. Instead, a discussion was held with Mr. Rosen for two hours and the recollection of the discussion recorded herewith by the Oral Historian, Bob Farley. Classification on the short piece on Bletchley Park will be classified CONFIDENTIAL. This is NSA Oral History 16-84, a single tape.

FARLEY: _____ number 16-84. Again, this is not the voice of Mr. Rosen since he was reluctant to give us any time at all with the tape recorder.

FARLEY: Today is the 26th of August, 1982(?). This is an oral report of a visit with Mr. Leo Rosen in Essex, Connecticut, on the 26th of August.

Approved for Release by NSA on 04-18-2000, FOIA Case # 16937

The visit was not scheduled, I just made a courtesy call on Mr. Rosen, sort of a spontaneous visit. Located his home, knocked at the door, and he came to the door and kindly invited me in. I noticed he looked pretty much the same as he did years ago. His hair was gray and he had a gray beard. But he staggered pretty much as he walked back to the chair. He invited me to sit down and I brought him best wishes from the people who wanted to be remembered to him and he was surprised that somebody from NSA would take the time to stop by and visit with him. Now Mr. Rosen has Parkinson's disease and accompanying that is the worse case of palsy I've seen in some time. Every part of his body, his hands, his feet, his head, were in constant trembling motion. He just couldn't sit still. He'd slap the side of his head, shake his head, and kick his legs, and it was quite depressing to watch him. Later on he told me that he was in good shape, that the medicine was taking effect, and when I left he said the medicine was wearing off and he began to develop tremors, but when the medicine wore off he walked like an average person, he wasn't shaking, he talked without any trembles in his voice no tremors, and it was surprising. So it sounded to me like the medicine didn't help him very much. Now we socialized for about two hours, talked about the days when he was in R&D and the chief, and the days at SIS, and at the time I said, "Well, gee, as long as you're talking, why don't I go out and get the tape recorder and you can put all this on tape." And he said, "Absolutely not." And I said, "Why not?" He said, "Well, my voice is cracking and I just don't want people to hear my voice." So we continued talking, he said, "Also, my memory is bad. I don't

want to be embarrassed by trying to remember situations, people, places, things, dates, let's just talk." I asked him how he happened to move to Essex, and he said, well, in his early days he was a sailor, he and his wife had a boat and they used to sail in this area, and they found that Essex was a good port. They stopped here frequently and later on he decided it would be a good place to retire. So they found a home, two, three or four miles from the water and moved in. Stayed there until his wife died in 1979, then he moved into a retirement area called Heritage Cove. It's similar to Leisure World on George Avenue, where Solomon Kullback and some of the other ex-NSA people are retired. Heritage Cove is on a much smaller basis, probably three or four main areas, three story building with maybe four apartments on each floor. I asked him if he kept in touch with anyone. He said, "No, I do not keep in contact with anyone with the exception of Cal Callahan." He and Cal are old buddies, way back when Cal was the general's aide and later on when he became a special assistant to Tordella. Leo said that he did write to Tordella occasionally and drop Christmas cards to a few people, but normally he didn't keep in contact with anyone. He wasn't trying to forget the past, but he really didn't have much to talk about. During these discussions, I asked him if he had a good memory about the time he and Colonel Sinkov, I guess it was Major Sinkov at the time, Pres Currier, and a Lieutenant Weeks visited GCHQ or Bletchley Park, visited the British. He said, "Yes, that was about in May of '40 /'41", I've forgotten what he said. He said he remembered something about it, and I said, "Well, how were you treated there?" He said, "Well,

the British gave us anything we wanted. They showed us around, gave us the grand tour." And I said, "Did you take any detailed tours, especially in the engineering element?" He said, "No, what was the use of looking in on a big room with a lot of people slumped over desks writing numbers on paper. I couldn't learn anything from that. But the British didn't hold anything back." I said, "What about the Americans, did they give the British pretty much what they wanted?" and he said, "Yes, that what they had anticipated we brought with us, we gave them." So there was some discussion, but he said it wasn't generally very satisfying." I said, "There's information that you rebuilt the bombe even though the British wouldn't give you circuit diagrams or let you look at in detail. You still came back and built the American bombe from memory." He said, "Not true. Absolutely not true. I don't even remember looking at the British bombe. We recognized the problem, we recognized what had to be done and we thought about it. The Germans were using certain type equipments and we decided that the U.S. machine would be better off using electromagnetic relays. The British were using analogues and we thought that the electronic magnetic relays," and he related them to the phone switches,"would be far superior." So he said with the help of Mr. Tibbetts, and he couldn't remember where he was employed. Tibbets was a mathematician with one of the big outfits, whether it was IBM or RCA or Remington Rand, one of that type organizations, who was either in the military or at Arlington Hall. So with the help of Mr. Tibbets, Mr. Rosen sat down and designed and built the American bombe, and it was far

more efficient than the British bombe, and I think eventually the British wanted the systems or a copy of the bombe built by Mr. Rosen. I said, "Why did you have to build one?" He said, "Well, first of all, the British equipment needed improving, and secondly, we wanted an alternate piece of equiment away from the field in the event that there was a possible invasion of Great Britain. We would be completely out of business if we didn't have a backup system, and there was a need for an alternate site, so we felt compelled to build this system." Again I asked him whether he saw the bombe, he said, "No, I did not tour the analytical area, and I don't remember seeing the British bombe." And again, he said, "We wanted to build one that was an improvement over the British system. It would be speedier and also away from the area in Great Britain, and in an alternate site." I said, "Do you remember anything more about it?" and he said, no, he did remember something about the U.S. Navy trying to fabricate a similar type equipment, but they were not successful, and they were having problems duplicating the bombe or improving the bombe to solve the German Navy problem. And he doesn't remember whether the Navy ever overcame the bugs or worked out a piece of equipment to solve the Navy problem, the German Navy problem. Again, he said that we recognized the problem and proceeded to make an improved version of the British bombe. I asked him how his health was otherwise, and he said, he gets around, he occasionally tries to swim, he goes down to the pool and fortunately he had just returned from the pool, he said, "You really hit it right. I just took my medicine and I'm in good shape

and I had my morning walk. If you had come earlier or later you never would have seen me." So we continued to socialize, talked about people he knew, people he'd worked with, General Blake. He talked about taking a tour on the boat with General Blake, and also went on some sort of a world tour where, he said, Mr. Rosen said, "We visited at least a hundred sites." Now I don't know what he meant, I didn't ask him to expand. But he said it was a fun time. He and Mrs. Blake really enjoyed it and Mr. Rosen had a wonderful time. He talked about some people pleasantly, wonderful memories, and a few derogatory remarks about individuals left unnamed. As I said, I spent about two hours with him and I would have spent longer except he had to go to the kitchen and check on his meal. He had started to prepare the meal before I came in and he was worried about letting it burn. He said that his memory is quite bad and on occasion he had ruined frying pans by letting his dinner burn. So I thought that was about time for me to take my leave. He persuaded me or coaxed me to stay a little longer and I stayed maybe ten minutes and then thanked him very graciously for his time, and he was delighted that I'd stopped by and said that we could talk later on. I said, "Why don't I go out and get my tape recorder and we'll put it on tape." He said, "No way." I said, "How about if I come back maybe Wednesday or Thursday, I have another interview in this area." He said, "Talk all you will, I will not go on tape." But he thanked me for stopping by and I recalled what a great gentleman he was and how I respected him when I first saw him. I called him one of the nice guys and he beamed all over and shook my hand warmly, and I departed, and he said, "Say

hello to anyone who remembers me." And that was the end of the interview with Mr. Rosen.

Again, I'm sorry he wouldn't put his voice on tape, but I'm recording this according to my notes and as best I can recall our discussions. End of oral report.