

6-22-99

DR. I. M. LEVITT -- retired Director of Fels Planetarium,
The Franklin Institute, Phila — (age 90)

(phone interview; taped)

Q--I'm doing research on different kind of biog. of W.v.B & I
know you 2 were very well acquainted.

IML-- I considered him a good friend.

Q--Apparently it was mutual. ~~Am doing an anecdotal biog. on v.B the~~
~~man, th person, looking beyond just "the rocket genius,"~~
~~into his personality, his life's interests outside his work.~~
Ran across a letter you had written him on his 60th b'day,
in '72. I'd like to excerpt from tht letter.

IML--Do you hav th letter w/ you? I'd like you to read it to me.

(I read letter verbatim to him)

Q--I just love th way you have tied together that progression of
advances in the fields of astronomy & space travel, & wd.
like to use that in th book.

IML--(sd. lost many of his files in move from Franklin Inst. To
work for Mayor Frank Rizzo at Phila. City Hall. Doesn't
hav letter; asked me to send him copy, WHICH I WILL DO)

IML--I cant help but relate an anecdote I used that night (of intro
of v.B for award presentation).

Wernher had made a presentation to me. Some group ... said who
wd you like to make th pre. & I sd w.v.B. So they wrote
him a letter, & Bart Slattery, who was his P.R. man, wrote
back & sd, sorry, Wernher v.B is much too busy for that. Actually,
he was in Houston. When he came back to Hvs., saw th letter,
picked up th phone, called th man and sd, I will be there!
So he made the pre. to me at ~~the Franklin Institute~~ Hall of the
Franklin

Franklin Institute. And so when the German Society (of
Penn.) asked me to do it, I sd I'd be ~~glad~~ delighted
to, and of course I did.

But before I made tht formal presentation, if you'll bear w/ me,
I will tell you a little story: I was Dir. of th Planetarium.
There 1 afternoon was a workman behind th perforated dome.
Th workman entered th door tht was due west. And in th
afternoon, tht was th dir'n of th setting sun.

Well, th lecture started promptly at 3 pm, but at qtr.
to 3 a (the?) workman got out, closed door, sat down.
Lecture started at 3, normally ran 40-45 mins. At 45 mins.
later, th workman opened th door. And there, silhouetted in
th bright afternoon, was this man. And a hush fell over th
audience. The lecturer was stunned. And finally, a little
voice piped up from the eastern side and sd, "Mommy, I just
saw God!" ~~When I started this story I had said I'm very,~~

by saying
(introduction)

contd

"Fame & Celebrity"??

2 -- I.M. Levitt interview

(Cont'd.)
"Fame & Celebrity"

very much impress w/ W.v.B -- let me tell you this story. And I told this story, and then I turned to Wernher and said, "Don't get me wrong, Wernher. I'm not that much impressed." He loved it! He loved it. And after th session at my affair -- we ^{had} had a bad meal -- I was hungry & he was hungry & I had my family there, & I sd let's go over to the hotel (Sheraton) & get something to eat. So my wife Alice & my 2 children Peter & Nancy joined us, & we took Wernher over to th Sheraton & we each had eggs & coffee & so on -- and my kids had a chance to meet w/ W.v.B! ~~at~~ And they still boast abt that -- tht they met th great W.v.B.

Also, he ^(V.B.) got a medal at th Franklin Institute, & John Glenn got a medal from the Geographic Society of Phila. I had rec'd a gold medal from them 2 yrs before, & they gave it this time to JG. (3 of them went over to Sheraton) And th next thing I know, we got a pic of W.V.B on 1 side & JG on oth side & me in middle. (Sent pic to both & had ea inscribe it to him)

(I MENTIONED THAT VERY PIC IS IN ERNST'S BOOK!!)

> done (DR. LEVITT SAID PLEASE SEND HIM COPY OF Pg.)

> (HE SAID PLS. GIVE HIS REGARDS TO ERNST & TELL HIM HE'S 90 & DOING WELL !!)

air pollution control

(Sd he still works, since '94, as parttime consultant to City of Phila. Planning Commission. -- unpaid, but gives him an office, all amenities, office equip, sec'y when needs, Had/has been Chairman of Air Pollution Control Bd ~~xxx~~ of City since 1965." So, here I am at 90, & I still go in 3 days a week."

> "So if you see Ernst, pls tell him & asked for him & extended to him my very best wishes for cont'd good health & long life."

I had a space travel col. that I began in 1952 & it ran until 1970 or '71 & was translated into 11 languages. I had to give it up when I was made a V.P. of Franklin Inst. & didnt hav time to run around & get mat'l for col.

Q--And there was not much of a space effort in 1952--

IML--No, but there was a lot you could write about -- the human body in space, etc.

When you send (mat'l) to me I will send you ~~me~~ a copy of a brochure they put out. Gen'l Features ~~were~~ the ones that circulated th col., both here & abroad. And then that was taken over by th L.A. Tribune. group. Gave it up. Simply cd not cont. to do it. (was newsp col., in US & abroad)

(IF I'LL SEND HIM MAT'L HE'LL HAV TIME TO THINK OF MORE STORIES ABT V.B. & HIM. WILL TALK W/ WIFE, TOO; SHE & V.B. "WERE KISSING PALS" SINCE TH TIME THEY MET.)

Nazi & Jewish aspects

Q-- Let me ask you abt a sensitive matter, not something I plan to dwell on. In course of my research , seems tht no. of prominent people of Jewish faith were friends of v.B. Apparently they worked thru his connection w/ horrible 3rd Reich & got to the man, and apparently ^{had} seen tht he didnt carry tht prejudicial baggage personally.

IML--I think what you dont know, what is not generally known, he was a major in the SS. ~~Max did not know~~ Or you may know. (Yes.) Inasmuch as there was a tremendous no. of slave labor at Peenemuende, and the SS were th watchdogs. They had to give him a rank so he could order th SS around. So he was made an SS major, or lt. col. But from what I was told, at various meetings abroad, I ~~w~~ understood that ^{was} why th rank was given to him. (sd. ~~fx~~ to some extent "I am putting 2 & 2 together"). But I do know there was slave labor and the slave labor ~~wxx~~ were managed kept ^{by} th SS. And for him (v.B) to hav authority over alive in line th SS, for job assignment or for whatever, he had to hav th rank to enforce what his decisions were. That is why Himmler gave him that rank, so that he could continue his work.

Q--I had never heard that. Very Interesting. Did you & he ever discuss that? Or that period, & how he felt abt Hitler? ~~Indaxhar~~

IML--Yeah.

Q--I do have a no. of his comments abt (Hitler)--

IML--~~Waxxax~~ You may know th oft-repeated story tht he was picked up by th SS & they even sd he was to be executed bec he was not putting all of his effort into th Revenge weapons but he was talking space travel. And for tht he was arrested, & only th intervention of Dornberger, who was th commandant of Peen.-- ~~It was only~~ his intercession w/ Hitler ~~that kept~~ v.B from meeting ^{prevented}

a very nasty fate.

Q--I do hav fair amt of info abt that. But I do think it's interesting tht you were friends & colleagues in th world of science.

IML--Let's go back to 1954. In 1952 I gave a paper to th Signal Corps talking abt an inflatable balloon satellite. I wanted to take a balloon & blow it up & put a carbon dioxide cartridge in it. And when it got into Earth orbit, th carbon dioxide cartridge wd fill th balloon. But th balloon was to be covered w/ aluminum foil. Now, once you've got it in orbit, there are no forces acting on it. So if the baloon was blown up (inflated) & th aluminum was stratched to th configuration of th balloon, it wouldn't shrink, simply bec there are no forces acting on it.

And so I gave a paper in Innsbruck on the geodetic significance of a minimum satellite. I first gav it to th Signal

Corps & suggested then ... and the papers wrote it up, and we had an editorial saying that 'bargain basement balloons (?) (boons?) are not necessary & not wanted'. ~~That was the~~ ~~idea of the balloons~~ So I took a little bit of a ribbing there.

But my first meeting w him (v.B) was in '52 but I met him again in '54 in Innsbruck. I presented th paper (again), and I hav a copy of th paper in my files. In 1958 Explorer I went up That was Jan. 31st, something like that? I got a call from v.Braun. He said, "Vell, come down to Hsv. I want to talk to you." And so I came down, and he said, "Ve want to make the last stage visible." This was only a cannister, abt 5 in. in dia maybe & 5 or 6 ft tall, w/ very stringent wt. limits. And so he says, "Will you do it?" And I sd, "Sure!." I sd, "If I can get the Franklin Institute Research Laboratories to help me." So I walked away w/ a \$30,000 contract for th Franklin Inst. to make this satellite visible, bec of the Sputniks, which were visible, as you will recall. We had a very, very good idea. I was going to take a lot of tubular balloons -- the ones that th magicians use to make little animals out offor th kids. I was going to take a batch of those & line them up vertically along th long axis of the satellite, and when it got into orbit they wd open up & be inflated again by a CO₂ cartridge. They wd be aluminum coated, hoping that that wd be a way they cd be seen from th surface of th Earth. Unfortunately, th wt limitations which they imposed made it impossible to add tht kind of wt. to it, and so th project just couldn't be consummated, that was all. So, here was von B, ~~holding~~ my previous papers on an in-building on flatable balloon satellite--which, incidentally, was launched as Project Echo ... and an engineer down at Wallops Is. (Va.) took \$5000 for the idea!

Q-- Oh, is that right?

IML--That's right. He read my paper. But anyway, I thought this was another angle of von B where he figured, fine, he came up w/ this idea of an inflatable balloon satellite which could be seen -- why cant he help my Explorer? And that's why he had me down (to Hsv.) ... And then, oc course, in a couple more mos. we started putting satellites up w/o th necessity of being visible. We were involved in th space game for real.

...

Q--What do you recall as v.Braun's most outstanding personal qualities?

IML--He was a commanding figure. He was th type that, when he walked in th room, the conversation would stop and eyes would turn torward his entrance. He was a commanding figure, at least to me he was, probably bec I was so young, I guess--and ~~when~~

of course I met him when I was quite young. And ~~xxxxxx~~^{to} think that this was th man who put th V-2s up-- I won't say he sits on th right hand side of God, but he's someone big. He had a commanding presence, and also he was very, very bright--so very, very bright.

Q--And, as opposed to Robt Goddard, he was so gregarious.

INL-- Robt Goddard was an introvert.

Q--And thereby hangs part of the tale, doesn't it?

IML--Yep.

Q--Von Braun was so That Goddard was so stung by th criticism he got q early on, that, the doubting thomases he got & th ridicule, that he turned ~~inward~~ more inward.

IML--He turned inward. And that was th opposite of von B, who was very outgoing. He would take information, he would tap knowledge no matter where he found it, & would enter into extensive conversations. He was ... like my wife: She 'visits' people. In th supermkt this morn., she "visited" w/ one woman, ^{then} she "visited" w/ th cashier. I just stand there & stew. I want to get th hell out.

Q--von ~~Braun~~ Braun loved to talk.

IML--Right.

(we closed w/ thanks, discussion of things we will send each other, etc. I promised to send him book copy)

6-22-99

Dr. I.M. Levitt

(phone interview/taped)

• honor - asked who to present

- Levitt sd. V.B

- V.B insisted on doing it
(after Bart Slattery had
turned down the request
in V.B's absence)

Story -

of when he
was der. of Fels Pl.

- workman behind door -

- lecturer started @ 3:00

- 45 mins. later,

- man's image flashed in sil-
houette on screen w/ celestial field.

"Mommy, I just ^{saw} God!"

"Don't get me wrong,
Wernher. I'm not that
much impressed"

dinner w/ V.B - Levitt,
(6' fast) w/ wife &
children

(He's in "Who's Who" if
I need)

- V.B got medal from Franklin
Institute

- then John Glenn got medal

(Dr. Levitt (send
- age 90 now copy pic)

• began space-travel col.
in '52-70 or '71 -

Genl. Features distrib.
col.

newspaper col., in U.S.
& abroad

• Jewish -

• SS officer's rank -
why he became an ^{SS}major -

- so he could order the
SS around slave labor
guards

- '54 - In Innsbruck (?)
in '52, gave paper to _____
re artificial satellite
w/ aluminum foil -

- gave it first to US Signal Corp.

- met V.B in '52, then
again in '54 (@ Innsbruck) -

• Explorer I - after
V.B called him down
to talk abt. making
cannister visible -
from Earth (like Sputnik)
- aluminium coated concept -

• got \$30K from V.B
to work on way to make
it visible - Levitt
had seen paper on
inflatable alum. balloon
→ thru Franklin Institute
Res. Lab's.

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