

Kirk LeMoyne Billings Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/25/64
Administrative Information

Creator: Kirk LeMoyne Billings
Interviewer: Dan B. Jacobs
Date of Interview: March 25, 1964
Place of Interview: New York City
Length: 47 pages

Biographical Note

Billings was a Kennedy family friend and associate. In this interview, he discusses John F. Kennedy's time at Choate, his family life, and their first trip to Europe together, among other issues.

Access

Open

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed **April 25, 1967**, copyright of these materials has passed to the United States Government upon the death of the interviewee. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Kirk LeMoyne Billings, recorded interview by Dan B. Jacobs, March 25, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

"GIFT OF PERSONAL STATEMENT"

In accordance with the provisions of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 as amended (63 Stat. 377) and regulations issued thereunder, I, KIRK LEMOYNE BILLINGS, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of personal statements approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

Title to the material transferred hereunder will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

This material shall not until my death or expiration of fifty (50) years from date of delivery of this material (whichever shall last occur) be available for examination by anyone except persons who have received my express written authorization to examine them.

This restriction shall apply to and include employees and officers of the General Services Administration of the National Archives and Records Service and the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

A revision of the above stipulations governing access to the subject material may be entered into by the donor and the Archivist of the United States if it appears desirable to the donor to revise the conditions herein stipulated.

The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

The donor retains to himself during his lifetime all literary property rights in the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument. After the death of the donor, the aforesaid literary property rights shall pass to the United States of America.

Dated:

Kirk LeMoyne Billings
Kirk LeMoyne Billings

Dated:

April 25, 1967

ACCEPTED:

Robert H. Danner
Archivist of the United States

Kirk LeMoyne Billings – JFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	First encounter with John F. Kennedy [JFK] at the Choate School
3	Getting to know JFK's family
4, 19	JFK's time at Choate (personality, religion and politics)
11	The atmosphere of education and success cultivated by JFK's parents and siblings at home
23	Spending time in Europe with JFK before World War II
41	JFK's illnesses
43	Their time at Princeton

Oral History Interview

with

K. LEMOYNE BILLINGS

March 25, 1964
New York City

By Dan B. Jacobs

For the John F. Kennedy Library

JACOBS: Mr. Billings, when did you first meet President John F. Kennedy?

BILLINGS: We first met after we had been at Choate for two years. We both went there in 1941, and our paths really didn't cross until the spring of 1933 when he was healing "The Brief." "Healing" means he was going out for "The Brief" and had to do all the different jobs necessary to be elected. I had been elected about six months earlier.

JACOBS: That was the student newspaper?

BILLINGS: No, the student yearbook. The main job is to assure your election to The Brief Board was your ability to sell advertisements which, of course, paid for the publication. Jack Kennedy was very good at this. He brought in such ads as the Oxford Meat Market in Palm Beach, Florida, where his family purchased their meat, and the Hyannis

[-1-]

Grocery Store in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, where his family purchased their food for the summer. He also received ads from his father's different stockbrokers, etc. As a matter of fact, he

had absolutely no trouble — he came with a great many ads. We became acquainted through this work. In the Fall of 1933 we became very close friends.

JACOBS: Did you get to know his family at that same time or was it after you left Choate?

BILLINGS: His family had a place in Palm Beach where they went every Christmas. I was invited there Christmas 1933. That's the first time I met his family.

JACOBS: Did he have other close friends at Choate — were you one of his closest or were there a number of you who chummed around together?

[-2-]

BILLINGS: He had other close friends. The most important of these were [Charles] Butch Schrieber and Ralph Horton. The latter was a lifelong friend. Although he had many friends, I was his closest friend at Choate. He didn't actually have a roommate in his fifth form year but in his sixth form year we roomed together.

I was talking about the fact that I did get to know his family back in the Christmas of 1933 — and that was a very wonderful and interesting experience, because, for instance, [Edward M.] Ted Kennedy was only two then and [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy was about eight. I did have the pleasure of watching all the Kennedy family grow up.

JACOBS: What was your first Christmas like there? Did you fit right in?

[-3-]

BILLINGS: I don't really remember too much about that first Christmas. I became better acquainted with the Kennedy family when I visited them in Hyannis Port that summer. The first night I was there I was burned in a defective shower and was hospitalized for three weeks. All the kids came over to see me. I really got to know them well. But through the years I think it's another story. I really watched them grow up and I saw their unusual relationship develop — their closeness and their competitive spirit grew. I watched the father and saw how he did it. We'll talk about that later, but now we had better talk more about Choate.

One of the interesting things to learn during the Choate period is that Jack really was a very normal, regular boy. At that time, he didn't show much of his

[-4-]

tremendous intellect. He wasn't too interested in his studies then. He was more interested in athletics, but his health, which was a problem to him all his life, was delicate. I remember one period when he became very sick....

JACOBS: Was that at school?

BILLINGS: At school.... and he was taken to the hospital in New Haven and actually he came very close to dying.

JACOBS: What was that?

BILLINGS: Well, I think it's uncertain as to exactly what he had. It was diagnosed at one time as leukemia. Obviously, it couldn't have been leukemia. It must have been some form of leukemia. It was some very serious blood condition. In fact, we prayed for him in the chapel. However, he came out of it alright. He was one of the best

[-5-]

coordinated boys I've ever known. He was an excellent golfer and tennis player and, with more weight, proved later to be a very good football player.

JACOBS: He wasn't swimming on the team at Choate?

BILLINGS: We didn't have any swimming pool.

JACOBS: He swam all the time at Hyannis Port....

BILLINGS: Of course, he was a very good swimmer and he was an excellent sailor. He was a very good athlete, but his interests were the same as any other boy's. I think one of the things that attracted me to Jack Kennedy was his sense of humor. I've never known anyone in my life with such a wonderful humor and the wonderful ability to make one laugh and to have a good time. He never lost this.

JACOBS: Do you recall any particular instances of this in those days? You probably can recall a great many from recent years, but how about when he was at Choate?

[-6-]

BILLINGS: It's very difficult to remember. I was at Choate two years before I really knew him, but, as I think back it was those last two years with Jack which I really enjoyed. He was largely responsible for the pleasant feeling I have about Choate, because he just made those wonderful years for me. He was always full of life and

eagerness and was inquisitive and interested in everything — nothing bored him. He made life exciting around him.

JACOBS: Were you the same age as he was?

BILLINGS: Yes.

JACOBS: What was the attitude of the other boys to him — was it the same as yours? Did they look to him as a leader?

BILLINGS: No, I don't think they looked to him as a leader. He was always very bright and he had a very sharp tongue when he wanted to use it. I think that people who knew him

[-7-]

well liked him very much. I think others possibly didn't because he had a sharp tongue and could make fun of people very easily if he didn't think they lived up to what he felt they should. I wouldn't say that he was overly popular. I'd say those boys whom he liked, liked him exceedingly, and those he didn't know too well either didn't know him or possibly disliked him. I remember one incident that I thought was funny at the time. His second year we had as a housemaster a young teacher who was very strict. About 8 o'clock one night, Jack was taking his trunk down to the cellar to be stored after a vacation. There was a good deal of noise and the teacher crossly told him, "Don't take that trunk down until morning! That's when trunks should be moved to the cellar — in the morning, not at night." So at 5 o'clock the next morning Jack was back dragging the trunk down the steps. Of course, this

[-8-]

infuriated the teacher much to Jack's enjoyment.

JACOBS: Do you want to get into the fact that he was Catholic and the school was not Catholic, and how he happened to go to a non-Catholic school?

BILLINGS: I think that's very important, but this is something that's pretty well known. Jack came from a highly religious Catholic family. The decision was made in his family from the beginning that the girls would all go to Catholic schools. Mr. Joseph P. Kennedy felt very strongly that the boys should have a wider knowledge of other people aside from Catholics. He felt that the Catholic schools offered too narrowing an education for the boys and that they should go to non-sectarian schools — and I mean strictly non-sectarian schools, such as Episcopalian schools. Choate and all the other schools they attended were non-sectarian — this was

[-9-]

important to Mr. Kennedy.

JACOBS: Did you have discussions about this with him?

BILLINGS: No, we never discussed religion in any way. I was a Protestant and he was a Catholic and it never came up.

JACOBS: You don't recall any conversations that he entered into of a philosophical or religious sort during that period?

BILLINGS: No, I don't think that he did at all — if he did I don't remember them.

JACOBS: Have I asked you whether he, at that time, showed any interest in politics, or did he discuss possible future careers at that age?

BILLINGS: I think the only way he could have possibly shown what was in the future, during his period at Choate, was that he was exceedingly interested in history — his marks were always excellent in this subject. He read a great deal of history — as a matter of fact, he read a great deal

[-10-]

generally while he was at school. His choice of reading was mainly historical. He was also very interested in what was then currently happening in the world. I don't remember any other boy subscribing to the *New York Times*, but Jack did and he read it every day. He kept very much up on what was going on. I think this is probably a reflection of what happened to him at home. At the dining room table, at the Kennedy house, all during the years as long back as I can remember — and I can remember from the time Jack was fifteen years old — the father kept the level of conversation on a high level such as current affairs and what was going on in the world. If you weren't able to discuss this, you didn't talk. Of course, nobody really did talk as I can remember except [Joseph P. Jr.] Joe Kennedy, Jack, and Mr. Kennedy. At that time Bobby was eight or nine. It was many years before he grew to the age when

[-11-]

he could join in. But Jack, I can remember, was as fluent as Joe right from the time he was fifteen. The topics were always on a high level during the entire meal. This was a challenge — it was a challenge for me as a visitor. I felt it was much more important for me to read and to know what was going on so that, when I was at the Kennedys, I would be able to at least understand the topics at the table.

JACOBS: This was a conscious policy of Mr. Kennedy, was it, to get his sons thinking of these problems?

BILLINGS: I would think it was conscious. I never discussed it with Mr. Kennedy. I know that this is what happened. He, of course, was in government himself, or, during the early periods, if he wasn't in government he certainly was terribly interested in it and he was very well informed. He knew most of the important people in this country and

[-12-]

many of the top people in the world. He had a wealth of experience and a wealth of information to give us. These were intensely interesting conversations. So it was nothing that was forced on us — they were exciting meals.

JACOBS: Did Mrs. Joseph P. Kennedy and the daughters take part in these discussions or was it primarily the men who participated?

BILLINGS: In the early years, of course, all the daughters were too young. Mrs. Kennedy kept very well informed, but she left it pretty much to Mr. Kennedy to lead the conversations. I must say Mrs. Kennedy has always kept herself well informed and read very widely. I think these meals were some of the most stimulating experiences I've had. The Kennedy boys were lucky to have these challenging discussions at every meal. Mr. Kennedy stimulated the boys into thinking for themselves. He argued with them and he encouraged them to

[-13-]

form their own ideas and opinions. He encouraged them to thoroughly discuss why they felt certain ways, and he encouraged them to disagree with him. This is an example of Mr. Kennedy's careful raising of his children.

Jack Kennedy's father was a very important influence in his life. I have tremendous admiration for Ambassador Kennedy. This is not based on his success in the world of business and in government, but it is based on his great success as a parent. I don't think that those children were born with all the attributes they later possessed — I think a great deal of their qualities were stimulated by Mr. Kennedy. Although I'm not a father, I know how difficult and what a tremendous responsibility it is to raise children properly; this is true particularly if you're as wealthy as Mr. Kennedy. It must be a temptation to spoil your children, to do too much for them. On the other hand,

[-14-]

strict parents who push their children too hard, who expect too much, often end up with antagonistic children who dislike their parents. Mr. Kennedy had as much love for his children as any man could have. They were his real interest in life. This must have made it even more difficult for him to be the kind of parent he was. Mr. Kennedy is not an unemotional man as some people might think — he is an extremely emotional one. I think it must have been difficult

for him to control himself as he did and not just overpower his children with love or push them so hard that they would be spoiled. By careful thought and control, he did not spoil them and did not push them too hard. He encouraged them and gave them the feeling of ambition. I don't exactly know how he did this, but I watched him through the years encouraging and giving them confidence. If they did badly he would let them know that he was disappointed and

[-15-]

that he knew they could do better. He was able to think out how they should best be handled.

JACOBS: He was also a very busy man during this time but he still spent a great deal of time with his family?

BILLINGS: He was an extremely busy man, but aside from his work, his children were his only real interest. His social life was of little importance to him, and although he had many friends, in comparison, he cared little for them.

JACOBS: Did he do all this by example, or were you ever there when he spoke to them or laid down precepts, or the type of performance he sought or what he expected of them?

BILLINGS: Yes, oh yes, he never liked a failure.

JACOBS: Can you recall any of these kinds of conversations that you would want to repeat?

BILLINGS: No, I can't really recall conversations of this sort, but I do know that he never liked a failure, and that came

[-16-]

across very clearly. He felt that his children, at least, should try and do everything they could to succeed. He was very disappointed if they didn't win. He made it very clear that he wanted to see them win at everything they did. If they didn't, they knew he'd be disappointed. He didn't like his children to be second best. Of course, the children were conscious of this constant pressure. They knew that everything he did was because he loved them, and he set the kind of example that they could admire. So they automatically felt that they wanted to win and they wanted to do well for his sake. Of course, this developed into a real desire to win. Mr. Kennedy also built within the family a real loyalty to each other. This must have stemmed from his own great love and his feeling that together they could do better than alone. There's no question about it. It's very unusual the way the members of this family, many of them

[-17-]

in their middle years, still have this very close family feeling.

JACOBS: They have stuck together through critical years and they have helped each other out.

BILLINGS: They have helped each other through everything — it's incredible. It's very unusual.

I don't mean to underestimate and not even mention Mrs. Kennedy. Mrs. Kennedy is a highly religious woman who had a very tough administrative job in running an enormous household and obviously she did an excellent job. She was their security, their base. She had very little social life — she stayed at home with her children, running her house. I think many of us feel that we have mothers who have given us security and give us the love that is needed to make a good family, and I think we all like to feel we have good fathers too. I think that

[-18-]

fathers who are away all day often have a very difficult time developing the children the way they'd really like to. My admiration really goes out to Mr. Kennedy for the job he did, because he thought it through and was able to control his emotions and his love.

JACOBS: Going back to John Kennedy's years at Choate, what kind of scholastic interests did he have? I'm not sure whether you covered that fully before.

BILLINGS: I think, as I said before, that he had a tremendous interest in history, and I think he carried this all the way through his life.

JACOBS: Did he work hard at all his studies?

BILLINGS: He worked at those studies that interested him, of which history was one and English was another — he wrote well and he liked to write, and in these courses he got exceptionally good marks. Of course, you do not get your

[-19-]

choice of subjects. We took physics and all the mathematical and biological courses, and Jack didn't have too much interest in these, certainly in mathematics he had none, and I remember, he particularly disliked physics. He didn't work hard in these courses — he got along and passed, but he didn't get particularly good marks. He didn't feel the need, at that time, to absorb everything he studied. Therefore, his marks at Choate were average except in the courses mentioned above.

JACOBS: What kind of writing did he do at that time? He wrote for "The Brief," as you say, but was there a newspaper....

BILLINGS: He didn't really write for "The Brief," since it was the school yearbook.

JACOBS: That was advertising only — no writing?

[-20-]

BILLINGS: He was in the business not editorial part of “The Brief” — in his senior year he was elected Business Manager.

JACOBS: You said he did like writing....

BILLINGS: Yes, but, as I recall, he didn’t do any extracurriculum writing while at Choate.

JACOBS: Are there any other notable facts about his Choate career that you want to bring out now?

BILLINGS: I might say that when he was at Choate he was not very popular with the faculty. We didn't take too seriously some of the rules which we felt were unimportant. Later, of course, we understood why rules, such as getting to classes and meals on time, and keeping a neat room are necessary in a boys’ school. Now it is understandable how this could irritate teachers probably more than had we broken the serious rules, such as smoking and drinking and

[-21-]

even going out after lights. Jack Kenendy never did any of those things. As a matter of fact, he never smoked in his life until he took up cigars shortly before his death. He did do all these little irritating things that would goad the teachers. I remember once when we were playing golf, a couple of the teachers were waiting at the tee and we heard one of them say, “There’s Kennedy, the teachers’ pet,” of course in a very sarcastic voice. This was one of his charming sides — he was always full of fun, and, I suppose, boys who are as full of fun and joie de vivre, as he was, can’t help but irritate teachers.

JACOBS: What was he doing during the summer at that time — did he spend all of the summers at Hyannis Port?

BILLINGS: Yes, he always spent his summers at his family’s house in Hyannis Port.

JACOBS: He liked sailing....

[-22-]

BILLINGS: He was a very good sailor — in fact, he was an exceptionally good sailor. There were many competitive races and the Kennedys had three different kinds of sailboats. Jack usually won, as a matter of fact, as did most of the

kids. Joe was exceedingly good, too. The Kennedy kids took most of the awards during those summers.

JACOBS: He had not yet spent any summers in Europe?

BILLINGS: I can't remember when Jack first went to Europe. I know I went to Europe with him in the summer of 1937.

JACOBS: Was that after you both entered college?

BILLINGS: At that time he was at Harvard and I was at Princeton. I can't remember whether he had been to Europe before. I know that he hadn't actually toured Europe — he may have gone over. I think his family used to go to Southern France — the coast of Southern France.

JACOBS: Did the family have a home there at that time?

[-23-]

BILLINGS: They may have rented one. I can't really remember when they started going. I do know that the first time he toured was when I went over with him. We went on a really educational tour of Europe, and I don't think either of us ever again toured museums and castles and chateaux and historical sights so extensively as we did that year.

JACOBS: We're getting a little ahead of ourselves chronologically, but why don't we continue this for a moment and then go back? What did you actually do in Europe on this tour — was it a formal tour with a group?

BILLINGS: No, it was just the two of us. We took a car over and traveled through the cathedral district of France and spent some time in Paris, then through the Chateau area in the Loire Valley....

JACOBS: This was the summer of 1937?

[-24-]

BILLINGS: 1937.... We went down to the border of Spain where at that time, of course, the Revolution was taking place. We couldn't go into Spain, but we did stay for about a week at St. Jean de Luz, where many of the refugees were living.

JACOBS: Did you meet with them?

BILLINGS: Yes, we did and again, Jack was intensely interested in the whole Revolution. This was the reason that we stayed there as long as we did. He was very anxious to get into Spain, but there was absolutely no way we could do this, since our passports were clearly marked “Not Good for Travel Spain.”

JACOBS: What kind of interest did he show?

BILLINGS: He spent a great deal of time talking to the refugees, making notes, and writing a good deal. He kept records of his thinking, and he wrote rather

[-25-]

extensively to his father. I’m sure all of these papers still exist — at least, I hope they do.

JACOBS: What was his attitude toward the war in Spain — did he have a scholarly interest or did he feel involved on one side or the other?

BILLINGS: Frankly, I can’t really remember what his thinking was. I can only think of my own.

JACOBS: You may have been close in your thinking — or were you not —

BILLINGS: Actually, as I remember, those we met at St. John de Luz, were probably upper class refugees of the non-Franco group. So we heard some pretty bloodcurdling tales of what the Francos were doing in Spain. At the time we were very much shocked, but I suppose that’s because they were the only refugees we met. There were no refugees from the other side there at all.

[-26-]

JACOBS: These were fairly well-to-do people of the former republican government who had tales of atrocities or persecutions undertaken by the Franco government?

BILLINGS: That’s right. After St. Jean de Luz we went on to southern France and on into Italy. While we were in France, Jack spent a great deal of time talking to the French as to how they felt about Germany, and whether there was going to be a war; and if so, could Germany invade France again.

JACOBS: Was this with you, or was it with French people you met?

BILLINGS: This was with French people whom we met.

JACOBS: Did he speak French?

BILLINGS: Unfortunately, he spoke very little French. We spoke just the kind of French that we had learned at schools in the United States. Fortunately, many French

[-27-]

people spoke English. He was extremely interested because, of course, the French were very confident in those days that the Germans couldn't do anything to them — they felt that they were very strong and that the Maginot Line was their great protection.

JACOBS: This was presumably before he had actually begun thinking in terms of the thesis he was later to write at Harvard, "Why England Slept."

BILLINGS: Remember this was in 1937 and he wrote that in 1940.

JACOBS: But this may have been some of his interest showing then in the relationship Germany had with France and Britain.

BILLINGS: He was tremendously inquisitive about everything in Europe at the time. We went into Italy and he was inquisitive about Benito Mussolini — what Mussolini was

[-28-]

doing in Italy, and how the people felt about him.

JACOBS: Do you recall any incidents that occurred while you were there observing the Facist regime?

BILLINGS: Well, I have an impression, and again it's mine and I can't say it was Jack Kennedy's. I had a feeling, when I was in Italy, that Mussolini had done a lot of good for Italy — that there was much less poverty under the Mussolini regime and that the general public were not too unhappy. Of course, later on most Italians say they were unhappy, but at that time we felt he was seemingly doing a good job for the people. At least that's the way I felt.

JACOBS: What kind of people were you meeting and talking with, who gave you this impression? Had you had introductions to people in France and Italy?

BILLINGS: On this whole trip, we made every effort to meet

[-29-]

as many people as we could. They were just people who could speak English. If we found English-speaking people, we talked to them. We also

looked around Italy, and I must say, from what we'd read and thought about Italy before, Italy was cleaner and the people looked more prosperous than we had anticipated.

JACOBS: You yourself had not been there before?

BILLINGS: No, I had never been, and I don't think he had either. We did, through his father, go to the Vatican and we met Count Enrico Pietro Galeazzi, who was the top Catholic layman and we met the Pope.

JACOBS: Was that in an audience with others?

BILLINGS: We had a private audience with Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who, of course, was later Pope Pius XII, and we had a very large audience with Pope Pius XI. It was a very crowded audience with more than 5,000 people.

[-30-]

He was very sick and carried in on a throne. We did, however, talk with Pacelli and he asked Jack about the health of his parents. He had visited the Kennedys at their house in Bronxville when he was in the United States. Then we went on into Germany, and again Jack was absolutely overcome with interest in the Hitler movement. Unlike Mussolini, we got a really bad impression of Hitler.

JACOBS: What cities were you in?

BILLINGS: We spent more time in Munich than anywhere else. We had some bad experiences in Munich and we came out of Germany with a very bad feeling about Adolf Hitler and the entire Nazi movement.

JACOBS: What kind of experiences?

BILLINGS: We got to know a black-shirt trooper in the Munich Hofbrau House. In those days they had floors based on your pocketbook. The cellar was for the poor and so on

[-31-]

all the way to the top, which was for the elite. We went to the top floor and there we met some of these black-shirt troopers. I remember one who spoke Oxford English. He had been educated in England. We drank beer with him and had a very friendly time. I remember, like every tourist, we wanted to take some of the big mugs when we left. Our German friend encouraged us and told us how to do it, which door to go out, and was generally helpful. However, when we went to the door he'd indicated, the waiters, who obviously knew about it, immediately came to us and took the mugs. We looked back. The German was laughing. So this gave us a very bad

impression. And we had many experiences like that in Germany. We didn't have the same impression in Italy. We had a terrible feeling about Germany and all the "Heil Hitler".... stuff.

JACOBS: Did you go beyond Munich that you recall?

[-32-]

BILLINGS: Yes, we went to Nuremberg. We always wished afterwards that we had just stayed three days longer there, because we missed Hitler by that length of time. It would have been a real opportunity to see an enormous Nazi demonstration and to hear Hitler speak.

JACOBS: Do you recall any other conversations or encounters with individuals?

BILLINGS: No, but they were extremely arrogant — the whole race was arrogant — the whole feeling of Germany was one of arrogance.

JACOBS: Was there any special attitude toward you as Americans that was expressed?

BILLINGS: Arrogance — the feeling that they were superior to us and wanting to show it. Perhaps that's the inferiority complex coming out.

JACOBS: Can you recall any particular reaction on the part of

[-33-]

John Kennedy when he encountered this?

BILLINGS: We were very concerned over Germany and we disliked the whole setup. We left there with a very bad taste in our mouths.

JACOBS: You feel he did take notes on all of this?

BILLINGS: I know he took notes. I know he wrote very long letters to his father. A lot of this material should exist because he wrote extensively when he was over there. What I'm trying to say here is that there was a noticeable change in Jack Kennedy. In the summer of 1937, he had just completed his freshman year at Harvard and he was beginning to show more interest and more of a desire to think out the problems of the world and to record his ideas than he did two years before at Choate.

JACOBS: Was he about eighteen?

BILLINGS: He was twenty. Jack Kenendy grew every single

[-34-]

year of his life and this was part of his growth. If you'd gone to Europe with him in 1937 and then gone again in 1939, you would have seen an entirely different man. He was constantly growing. The 1937 trip, during which he was so inquisitive and so interested in everything, was just an example. He insisted, for instance, that we pick up every German hitchhiker. This worked out very well, because a high percentage of them were students and could speak English. In that way we learned a great deal about Germany. I remember picking up two German soldiers, who were on leave. They were allowed to leave Germany with only \$10.00 each. We got to know them quite well, even though they spoke very little English. They were with us for about a week and we gathered that their general attitude was pro-Hitler. We picked up another German student who was very anti-Hitler. He is probably

[-35-]

dead now.

JACOBS: You went on from Germany to where, after that?

BILLINGS: We went on to London via Amsterdam and Belgium.

JACOBS: Did you stay long in those countries?

BILLINGS: We are in England for about two weeks. This was about a year before Jack's father was Ambassador. We really didn't know anybody in London.

JACOBS: For the most part, you didn't have introductions to people in these countries?

BILLINGS: As I said, in Italy we were very much involved with the Vatican.

JACOBS: If you had the names of any specific individuals you saw it would be possible for a historian to follow up.

BILLINGS: Well, Count Galeazzi in Italy — in France Ambassador William C. Bullitt was there then, and we got involved very much with his assistant whose name was

[-36-]

Carmel Offie. To go back to Germany, we bought a dachshund there, which we planned to take home. Jack discovered, for the first time in his life, that he was allergic to dogs. The dachshund gave him asthma. It was a new malady to add to his already long medical history. From then on, until the day he died, he could never have a dog in the room with him. After he was married they had dogs, as Jacqueline Bouvier Jackie Kennedy loved them, but it was always a big problem. Of

course, we got rid of the poor dachshund. Incidentally, regarding this European trip, it might be interesting to add that since my father was not living and my mother was rather hard up, it was extremely difficult for her to send me on a trip to Europe. It was necessary for me to operate on a very low budget. Actually, I borrowed the money to go — as I remember Mr. Kennedy paid for half

[-37-]

my trip and I borrowed the other half from an inheritance that I was to receive from my grandmother after I graduated from college. I had to live very inexpensively and Jack Kennedy lived as cheaply, I suppose, as he had ever lived in his life. In Paris, we stayed at the Hotel Montana, which was right across from the Gare du Nord. I remember that our room cost eighty cents for both of us. In Monte Carlo our room cost sixty cents, and we ate as inexpensively as possible. In other words, he had to live as I lived.

JACOBS: Did he take to this all right?

BILLINGS: Oh, yes. That is another thing: Mr. Kennedy raised his children never to have any feeling that they had more money than anybody else and to be very careful how they spent it. I'm sure that at that age the great wealth their father had never even crossed their minds.

[-38-]

They always lived well but it was no problem for Jack Kennedy to live as I did. He did it happily. He didn't mind at all.

JACOBS: We've already taken you on the grand tour once and I think I got you in a little more depth on Germany than on some of the other countries. I'd like to go back quickly and see whether there are anymore things to be said about your stay in France, other than St. Jean de Luz, and in Italy, which you can recall, particularly regarding Jack Kennedy's interest in the political activities that were going on. I think you covered the refugees from Spain quite well....

BILLINGS: Incidentally, just to put in this record, I kept a diary during this entire trip.

JACOBS: Is that still available?

BILLINGS: Yes, I know what I'll do with it — I won't turn

[-39-]

it over now but ultimately it will end up in the library.

JACOBS: You will make that available?

BILLINGS: Yes, and it's probably our mutual thoughts, because it's a day-by-day diary of every day in Europe.

JACOBS: Did you encounter anyone else from Choate or college that you knew, or did you have any other encounters with individuals that you could name?

BILLINGS: Well, there was a friend of Jack's from Harvard, named Alec de Portalis, in St. Jean de Luz. As a matter of fact, we stayed with him. His family had a house there. I don't remember anybody else. I remember [Kathleen] Kick Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy were in London when we first arrived there.

JACOBS: Was Kick married?

BILLINGS: No, this was before their father was Ambassador and she didn't know anybody in London at that time, either.

[-40-]

But she did know of a boarding house where we could stay very inexpensively. I remember she sent us there and then she went home. And this is when Jack got so terribly sick. It was very worrying because we didn't know anybody, and we didn't even have a clue what kind of doctor to get. Somebody at the boarding house recommended a doctor, who wasn't very good. We had a lot of trouble. I bring up sickness because — (as Bobby said in his Foreword for the new memorial edition of *Profiles in Courage*) Jack Kennedy all during his life had few days when he wasn't in pain or sick in some way. Jack never wanted us to talk about this, but now that Bobby has and Jack is gone, I think it really should be told. I seldom ever heard him complain. I knew his different maladies, and they were many. We used to joke about the fact that if I ever wrote his biography, I would call it "John F.

[-41-]

Kennedy: A Medical History." At one time or another, he really did have almost every medical problem — take any illness, Jack Kenendy had it. Many of them were very, very painful. He had a nervous stomach. I really don't know what was wrong with his stomach; I'm sure medical records show. But his stomach trouble was something he had all his life. It felt like a hard knot and it gave him constant pain. Of course, his back was also a terrible problem for him most of his life.

JACOBS: That was a war injury?

BILLINGS: It was basically a weak back right from the beginning — he just hurt it playing football at Harvard, but it was ruined in the navy when his [Patrol Torpedo] PT boat was hit by that Japanese destroyer. From the war, he also had reoccurring malaria. When he was at Princeton he had hepatitis.... jaundice.

[-42-]

JACOBS: This is a good transition time for us. We did jump ahead, so now let's go back.... He left Choate and he goes to Princeton, and you were there at Princeton....

BILLINGS: We graduated from Choate. Joe, his older brother, had gone to the London School of Economics, and he studied under Harold Laski, who was, as I understand it, a very liberal individual.

JACOBS: A socialist?

BILLINGS: Yes. He was encouraged to go there by his father because Mr. Kennedy felt his boys should have completely rounded point of view.

JACOBS: Mr. Kennedy encouraged Joseph to study under Laski?

BILLINGS: That's my understanding.

JACOBS: You understood that he regarded this as an experience that would challenge him in some way and make him think?

BILLINGS: That's my understanding.

[-43-]

JACOBS: When did Jack go over there?

BILLINGS: He went over there in the fall of 1935, when I entered Princeton. As I remember, he was going to study in the London School of Economics for a year.

JACOBS: That was right after Choate.

BILLINGS: That's right.

JACOBS: He was eighteen?

BILLINGS: Yes, he was eighteen. He was there for about a month and he got sick again. They didn't seem to know what it was. If he were going to be sick, he might as well be sick over here, so he left London and came home.

Actually, before he decided to go to the London School of Economics, he had applied for admission to Princeton and had been accepted. Therefore, when he came back he entered Princeton about a month after college started. He roomed with Ralph Horton and myself. He stayed at

[-44-]

Princeton about two months but he was sick the entire time he was there. It had the appearance of jaundice. Actually it was probably hepatitis. He went out to Arizona and spent the rest of the year recuperating there.

JACOBS: So he didn't really enter into the life at Princeton.

BILLINGS: No, he was only there two months.

JACOBS: And he didn't really pursue studies at Princeton....

BILLINGS: I was working my way through Princeton, and we lived in the cheapest room on the campus. It was on top of a very old building. There were seventy-two steps up to our room, with the bathroom in the basement.

JACOBS: What building was that?

BILLINGS: It was called "South Reunion Hall." I understand it is about to be torn down, but it's still there now. I went up to see our room recently and it's now a janitor's

[-45-]

broom room. Jack Kenedy didn't mind living there. He could acclimate himself to any situation. This was one of his many refreshing sides. Similarly, when we went to New York, we'd take our dates to the places I could afford — like the automat.

JACOBS: Was he in the infirmary while he was at Princeton?

BILLINGS: No, he just wasn't well.

JACOBS: He just wasn't able to follow his studies well?

BILLINGS: He wasn't well, and didn't get terribly good marks.

JACOBS: He did go to class occasionally?

BILLINGS: Yes, he went to all of his classes, but just wasn't terribly well and ultimately left. Of course, after that year in Arizona, he was a year behind Ralph Horton and me. He decided then to go to Harvard; which I'm sure his father had wanted him to do from the beginning.

JACOBS: This brings us to the summer of 1936, approximately,

[-46-]

right?

BILLINGS: Yes.

This is the end of the first tape of an interview with K. LeMoyne Billings, done by Dan B. Jacobs, at Mr. Billings home, 17 E. 89th Street, New York City, on March 25, 1964.