Yaw Phillip

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

Your mother tells me you want to know where the family expression "Yaw Phillip" came from originally. She said you asked her again yesterday when you heard Uncle Paul say it to me at the anniversary party. I guess you're grown enough now at the old age of 16 to hear the derivation of that phrase. So sit close by me and I'll tell you. And hand me that glass of ginger ale while you're at it. Thanks.

As you know, we all say "Yaw Phillip" when someone says something we think isn't true but, rather than get into an argument and say "Yeah, right" or "Give me a break" or "Sure, whatever you say" or something like that, we just say "Yaw Phillip." I suppose your mother would be happier if you and your brother said "Yaw Phillip" instead of bull-you-know-what.

Where did that expression come from? My brother and I were born in the town of Lahr, which is in the region of Germany known as the Black Forest. It's not too far from Baden Baden where they have the spas and casinos. Lahr was a small town then of not more than maybe twelve to fifteen thousand people tops and that included people in the neighboring hamlets like Dinglingen and Burgheim.

Lahr is nestled in the countryside near the border with France. Someday you'll go there and on Markstrasse you'll find the "Stork Tower," what in German we called the "Storchenteuer." That tower, which was right across the street from where your grandmother and I eventually had our home and my medical practice, was part of a

medieval fortress that was built in the 1200s or so. It was a beautiful town when we lived there, before Hitler ruined it like the rest of Germany.

My parents lived right across from the central square. I just got a postcard from your mother's former teacher and it showed the large stone fountain that stood in the middle of that square. When I was a boy we used to play around that fountain. I notice now they made it into a planter with red flowers in it. All the streets were made of cobblestones so when you bounced a ball you were never sure it would come straight up again.

On the other side of the square down the narrow street was another Jewish family by the name of Schnuermann who owned a machinery supply business. They sold lathes and metal and whatever machinists use to make what they make. They had two daughters, one of whom was a hunchback by the name of Bertha. She wasn't very attractive but when she was maybe 20 one of the laborers from a nearby village got her pregnant.

At that time it was terrible to have a baby out of wedlock, a shame on the family which nobody was supposed to know about. They sent Bertha away to an aunt in Frieburg to have the baby, which is what families did then. Before too long Bertha returned to her parents' house with a little boy by the name of Phillip.

Soon after, the Schneurmanns found a baker to marry Bertha and they were anxious for her to go with him. So Mrs. Schneurmann, the grandmother, raised Phillip in her household. He was told that his grandparents were his parents, and that Bertha was his sister.

When he was about 8 or 9 years old he came home and said, "Mama, the boys tell me that you are not my mother, you are my grandmother, and that Bertha is not my sister but my mother. That's not true, is it? You are my mother, right?" He would always ask her that question. And she would respond, "Yes, Phillip, you are my son," which in German with the Lahr dialect would be, "Yaw Phillip, du bist mein Kind."

You have to understand that Phillip was a simple little boy. He couldn't figure out on his own why his mother looked so much older than the other mothers and nobody in his family was honest with him so he would constantly ask her, "You are my mother, isn't that so?" and she, with exasperation in her voice, would also say, "Yaw Phillip, du bist mein Kind."

Those of us who lived around the town center could hear Phillip ask her as he left for school, when he followed his "mother" to the market area, when they walked to the synagogue on Friday nights. When we had something at school the parents would attend, you could see Phillip looking hard at the audience and you knew he was confused that his mother looked so much older than the rest. At the end, when we walked the winding street that went from the school up a little hill and through an alley to the square, you could count on hearing Phillip ask, "You are my are mother, aren't you?" and the tired reply would always come, "Yaw Phillip, du bist mein kind."

The first time I remember hearing "Yaw Phillip" from someone other than Mrs. Schneurmann was when I was maybe 9 or 10 and it happened up in my parents' antique store. My grandfather and father owned a big, three-story house with many rooms and an attic. It was filled with antiques in every corner, high quality pieces from all over Europe. If a wealthy baron or prince were traveling in the area, he would stop by our house and buy antiques for their palace. I don't know where my family would find these antiques but I know my father would leave for weeks at a time, I assume to scour the countryside or maybe other parts of Europe looking for things to sell. France was close by to us so he probably went there often.

One afternoon a fellow came into the store with a clock he claimed was a priceless antique. He wanted to sell it for a lot of money, but my father looked at it and knew it was

nothing special. The man argued with him. He said that it was made in the time of Louis the Sixteenth and was inlaid with gold. My father listened and the told the man he would show the clock to his wife, who was an expert in such antiques. And my father went down to the second floor where they had an office area and showed it to my mother. He said, "I have a fellow from Strasbourg here who claims this is an authentic piece of great value," and my mother, who was a quiet person but she had a good sense of humor, told him, "Yaw Phillip."

So from that point on to this day "Yaw Phillip" became part of our family phrase book. If my mother would call down and say perhaps, "I want whosever turn it is to run to the bakery and buy some bread," my brother would say, "Ernest, it's your turn" and I would say, "Yaw Phillip."

What happened to Phillip? I don't know if we have enough time now. We do? OK, I will tell you that story because you probably should know anyhow.

I never was a close friend to Phillip even though we lived near each other. Oh, we would see each other at the synagogue or maybe play soccer together occasionally, but we were not close. One reason is that he wasn't a very good student, so he went to the Realschule, the public school. My parents enabled me to go to a private school and then, because I did very well, I was sent to the advanced high school, which was called Gymnasium.

At some point Phillip came to understand why his mother looked much older than the other mothers and stopped asking the famous question. But he was always an insecure person who needed reassurance. He used to drive his friends crazy because he would always ask them, "Are you my friend?" and they would respond, "Yaw Phillip, du bist mein Freund" which as you can figure meant, "Yes, Phillip, you are my friend."

I did get to know Phillip better during the last years of high school because we were both in what was called “Jugendwehr.” That means “youth defense” and we were trained in how to march and take orders so that we would be better prepared to enter the army and become soldiers. Later Hitler turned the Jugendwehr into the Hitler Youth and you know what happened then.

During my day, this was 1914 or 1915, joining the organization was supposed to be voluntary but nobody could afford to refuse. It didn’t bother me too much though and it helped me along when I got into the infantry.

I never was ready to volunteer for the army because I was not a diehard German patriot like so many others. But at age 19 I finally got a letter and was drafted into the Army. Since I hadn’t started medical school, I had no chance to go into the Medical Corp even as an orderly. So I had to go into the Army and became a plain, what we now call a buck private. I was drafted on July 25, 1916. Yes, I do remember the exact date.

Phillip Schnuermann was drafted around that time and we ended up together in the same unit. It was not unusual for boys from the same town to be assigned together. I should say really that it was common. Companies and battalions were often formed from local militias, which is why one bloody battle at the front could leave a whole town in mourning for lost sons. Millions and millions of Germans died in that war every year, including many from our region.

We were told at that time we would get training for three or four months. But after maybe four weeks one my superiors told us, “Now we go behind the front to France, but you don’t have to fight.” So we loaded into many train cars and left for France.

After about 24 hours we arrived in France and went to our quarters. They said that we would get more training but all we got was orders to dig trenches. You know that Word

War I was fought out of trenches. The Germans had long lines of them all along the country side. Most of them were very deep, maybe 15 feet or more, and some even had bomb shelters and other rooms dug into the side of the wall.

During the day it was too dangerous to dig, so we had to do it during the night. Everybody got a spade and a pick ax and we had to go to bed after supper. We were in a destroyed village called something like "Passue" or maybe it was "Pozieres." I don't remember now. But by 10 o'clock at night they woke us up so that everybody could dig trenches. We were youngsters, 19 years old, and we were so tired that we almost couldn't do it after the first few days. But we dragged ourselves out with spades and pick axes on our shoulders.

Once we finished digging trenches well behind the lines that I guess they wanted in case of a retreat, they made us march every night about 45 minutes toward the front to dig new trenches. The sergeant stopped by and measured out a length of ground. Kaufman, you dig from here to here. You, that's your area from where he stops to that bush. Come on boys, hurry up. Hurry because in the next few hours the British airplanes will come with machine guns, so you better dig yourself in and work a little faster."

And that's what we had to do every night, night after night. The farmers and peasants did it with much more ease than I did it. It was torture for someone like me who knew more about Latin and Greek than picks and axes.

Anyhow, we dug trenches for about 2 or 3 weeks and then they put us in the front trenches. It was November by that time. Our enemy was the British at the River Somme. Have you learned about that battle yet in school? Fortunately for me I missed the beginning in July when the British suffered almost 60 thousand British casualties in one day, really in just a few hours. The arrogant British generals thought that they had destroyed the

German defenses with a massive artillery barrage and enormous explosions from dynamite placed under the German positions. But it didn't cause as much damage as they thought so when they sent waves of soldiers to storm the enemy trenches, they were mowed down by our machine guns. I learned this all later because at the time I was a new recruit, and we didn't hear much about the actual war.

The battle dragged on for months because no one could gain an advantage. The machine guns and artillery were murderous. Every time one side or the other tried an assault to gain a few yards, the machine gunners would just wipe them out. During the day it was hard for the enemy to wound or kill anyone because none of us came out of the trenches. It was a stalemate like in chess. We just squatted low in the trench because, if you put your head up too high, a sniper from the other side would shoot you right then and there. They really weren't that far away at all. You could usually hear them talk and sing songs in their trenches. I'm sure they heard us as well.

The only time during the day when one side could try to kill soldiers from the other was when soldiers went to the back lines to get food. We had to catch the food in the morning and then again in the evening around 6:00 for dinner. Two soldiers would always be sent.

The morning meal was just coffee which had no coffee in it, just water and sugar. We might also get a slice of dark bread. In the evening you had soup. They called it "potato soup" but it was made with what we called "horse potatoes." They were like turnips. The only meat they ever had in the soup was bacon, small pieces, and I wouldn't touch it. I fished it out and gave it to other soldiers. So I had practically nothing to eat. We all lost weight.

And you could never take your boots off because mud was everywhere, and you never

knew when they would send you over the top of the trench to try another assault or to retrieve the wounded. That's what I remember most was all the mud. It would get into your boots and harden like plaster of paris and the friction would lead to ulcers all over your ankles and feet. When I was sent to the rear finally, I was in the hospital for almost six weeks so my feet could heal.

One morning Phillip and I were assigned as runners to get the so-called coffee at a field kitchen stationed back far enough to be safe from artillery. It was a half hour both ways in the dark with no moon shining. The only way to kill soldiers on one or the other side was to use a cannon shell loaded with shrapnel. When the artillery shell exploded, it would spray out these pieces of metal and increase the chances of hitting someone nearby. They would try out the shelling during the day to practice at hitting one of the paths they knew we had to take to get to the kitchen. They knew exactly from the footsteps where the soldiers would go to the field kitchen. I guess an observer in an airplane would report back if they hit the right area. So they had us in their sights.

We knew how the shrapnel shells would explode. When we heard a "wooooo" sound we didn't have to duck because as long as you heard that sound you knew the bomb would be a certain distance away and wouldn't hurt you. If you didn't hear the sound first before the explosion, you knew they were close by.

So Phillip and I were running and all of a sudden I see pieces of shrapnel exploding maybe 30 or 40 feet into the air. Dirt and the metal pieces were flying around my ears and my face. But none of them hit me. And the two of us jumped into a grenade hole and I said, "Come on, Phillip, let's run to the rear." But he didn't run. I saw blood coming out from his neck. Then I knew right away I couldn't run either. First of all, I didn't want to leave him, and secondly, the first bomb was always followed by a second one.

And that one came and again all the pieces flew around my ears. Phillip, who had been bleeding and only wounded by the first shell, was killed by the second bomb even though I was laying on top of him to cover him. I was spared. It was a miracle.

When I was sure no more bombs were coming, I sat up and saw that Phillip was dead. One of the metal pieces had cut his carotid artery and he must have died instantly. I know in the movies dying soldiers always have a few minutes to utter some last words but not with Phillip or others who died around me. And I didn't have time to stay with him because at any second another bomb would come and I would be dead, too. So I picked up the empty tins that we had both brought along for the water and ran as fast as I could to the rear lines. But I do remember turning around to look at him and all I saw was him sprawled in that ditch and I just yelled out, "Yaw Phillip, du bist mein Freund." He couldn't hear me, of course.

Was I upset you ask? You know, I was so scared and things around me were so chaotic and we were all so focused on just surviving the carnage that I'm not sure I really felt anything but terror, terror, and more terror. It's been fifty years now and I can still feel how frightened I was. After all, here I was this short, Jewish teenager who had never gotten into a fist fight let alone mortal combat. I was just looking to survive. I really don't remember being upset by the death of any one of my comrades in particular. The whole experience was a nightmare.

Fortunately, not long after Phillip was killed, I was recruited into one of the FLAK companies. They were looking for soldiers who had some training in mathematics and physics. FLAK stood for "Flug Abfer Kanonen" which translates to "Airplane Defense Cannon." They trained me for another 3-4 months on the machines they used to determine the location of airplanes that came at night. This was before radar naturally and was based

on judging the sound of the engines. We wore something like a stethoscope in our ears and when I got the loudest signal, I would say, “That’s 75 horizontal and now let’s go vertical. That’s 32 plus.” I gave the coordinates to the FLAK gunners, and they would aim and quickly fire at that angle. That’s how we fought the enemy airplanes. And that’s how I didn’t end up like Phillip Schnuermann.

I’m still thinking about your question to me. Was I especially upset about what happened to Phillip? You know, for years afterwards none of us said “Yaw Phillip” because it didn’t seem right to make fun of somebody who died in the war. His cemetery plot was maybe ten feet from where my grandparents were buried in Lahr so I would see it when we went every year to pay our respects. In fact, it was one of the many stones that was toppled when the Nazis desecrated Jewish cemeteries both before and after the second world war.

Maybe ten years later when your grandmother and I married and your mother was already born I was joking with Uncle Paul. You know how we can get each other laughing. He said to me, “Ernest, you are such a fine brother, next year for your birthday I will buy you a new Cadillac because I will have made so much money.” And without thinking I replied, “Yaw, Phillip.” As soon as those words came out of my mouth I felt a twinge of remorse but then I realized that saying “Yaw, Phillip” was a way of remembering Schnuermann. Really, every time someone in the family utters the phrase, we remember poor Phillip. Given all the people we’ve forgotten through the years, maybe it’s not so bad that we remember Phillip in this way. At least that’s how I have thought about it.

So that’s the story. I bet you didn’t think you’d get that long of an answer. And, by the way, with your bushy eyebrows and the long ears that look just like mine, I can tell you without a doubt, “Yes, Michael, you are my kin.”