

GENE HERMANSKI

"I was in the Coast Guard in 1943, but wanted to get into Naval aviation. I took several exams, passed them, and was accepted into the program. So the Coast Guard discharged me and I became a civilian pending my induction into the Navy. Processing my papers took several months and I stayed a civilian, which is ridiculous during wartime. I finally went to the Dodger front office and told Branch Rickey, Jr., who was in charge, the whole story. He said, 'Gee, we're glad to see you. We need ballplayers. How about playing for us on one of the minor league clubs?'

"I replied, 'Anywhere is all right with me. Just give me a couple of bucks. I don't care so much about the money. I just want to play.'

"So he sent me down to Durham, N.C., where Bruno Betzel was the manager. Well, lo and behold, I'm down there only ten days and hitting the cover off the ball. Betzel approaches Brooklyn's general manager, and says, 'Hey, give this kid a chance in the big leagues. You can use ballplayers up there. I think he can make it.' The reply is no, not Brooklyn, but perhaps Montreal because they need players up there, too. So they made arrangements for me to go to Montreal.

"I had to report my whereabouts to the Navy in New York, and

when I did, they said I wasn't allowed to leave the country. I couldn't go to Canada to play for Montreal. Well, I was disappointed and explained the whole thing to the Dodger management. Branch Rickey, Sr., was consulted and after being asked if I could be brought up to Brooklyn instead of returning to Durham, he said O.K. I didn't know what was going on for about two days because I was home in Jersey. But one morning I woke up, looked at the sports page of the Newark Morning Star-Ledger, and it said, 'Hermanski Joins Dodgers.' I was shocked. I had to read it three or four times. So I called the office, and they said, 'Yep, bring your togs with you, and join the Dodgers.' This was in the middle of June, 1943.

"I went into Ebbets Field nervously with my satchel full of equipment in hand. When I saw Leo Durocher, I walked up to him and said, Mr. Durocher, I'm Hermanski.'

"'O.K., kid, go over there. Big John'll take care of you and give you a locker.'

"So this was my big chance in the majors.

"They kept me on the bench for a few days to help me get accustomed to the big leagues. I finally got into a game, the first of a doubleheader, and I didn't do too well. I grounded out, struck out twice, and popped up. There's no question I was nervous and a little tight up there. We lost the game and after it was over, I glanced at the lineup card for the second game and there was my name. I broke loose, getting a double and a single, and helped win the game. That broke the ice for me. I played in eighteen games that year and hit an even .300.

"After the season ended, I went to Colgate University for my

basic aviation training, but washed out of the program after four or five weeks. A ninety-day wonder lieutenant asked me if I'd like to be a gunner on a plane, since I already knew something about flying and navigation, but I said, 'No thanks. Do me a favor. Get me back in the Coast Guard.' He said that was a tall order, but he pulled a few strings and sure enough, he had it all arranged in three or four days. I wound up being stationed at Floyd Bennett Field, which is close to home, and got to play semipro ball with the Bushwicks. So I was getting paid as a serviceman and as a ball-player. The Bushwicks played their games at Dexter Park in Brooklyn, and I used the name Gene Walsh instead of Hermanski because I feared my commanding officer might find out about the \$50 a game I was collecting, and either reprimand me or get reprimanded himself. I rode out the war right there in New York, was discharged in February, 1946, and rejoined the Dodgers.

"The only teams the Bushwicks played were from the Negro League. We played doubleheaders on Sundays. I played against Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, and Buck Leonard. The crowds would total as high as 12,000 - 13,000 people, and consist of Brooklyn residents. Surprisingly, the fans would root for the visiting Negro clubs, even though we were the home team. Phil Rizzuto played a little for the Bushwicks while I was there; so did Joe Gordon, Al Cuccinello, Alex Campanis, and Bots Nekola. Many others never played professionally but were still of high minor or even major league caliber. It was one of the best semipro teams in the country. We won about seven out of every ten games we played. It was tough to get a hit off Paige. What fooled me more than anything was his motion. He'd throw his legs

and arms up and whip the ball in like he was falling out of a tree, and use his hesitation pitch, too. He had an assortment of pitches and was still real fast even though he was getting up in years.

"Gil Hodges joined the '43 Dodgers for one game. Howie Schultz, Rex Barney, and Hal Gregg also came up that year. Bobo Newsom was with the club for part of the season. Kirby Higbe was a real happy-go-lucky type of guy. I remember one time he got paid and then said he'd been saving his money, \$2000 worth, and boy, was he going to have a good time with it - the race track, girls, the whole lot. I didn't join him, of course. He had his own little clique - Augie Galan, and Billy Herman. We said hello to each other when we arrived at the park, but after the game everybody went his own way. Whit Wyatt was a very quiet, unassuming person who helped the young guys a lot. He'd tell us that the major leagues weren't as tough as we thought, and not to get nervous. Herman had just the opposite temperament. He had those big, beady eyes, loved to play ball, and enjoyed having his teammates give him the catcher's signs from second base. Whenever he'd get them he'd collect several hits a game. There's a guy who would've hit .600 if he'd known what was coming up. Some of the opposition started calling him Hermanski, which annoyed him a bit. Goody Rosen was our pug-nosed, little centerfielder from Canada. He was a good Jewish boy and a lot of fun to be with. He had a dry sense of humor, and loved to smoke cigars. Paul Waner was also on that club. Yes, he had a stimulant or two. His eyes would be glassy, but he wouldn't waver. I honestly wouldn't have known about it if the others hadn't told me, 'Well, he's had a few snorts. Now watch him hit

that ball.' Tchew! Tchew! Line drives. He was a good hitting instructor, too. Luis Olmo played throughout the war. He was happy-go-lucky. Most of the fellows were. Bobby Bragan was very brainy, outspoken, and an extrovert. He had some good ideas for baseball. I think this designated pinch hitter rule was his years ago.

"I felt like I was on cloud nine while I was up there in '43. Knowing I was headed back to the service helped keep me relaxed. When I came back in '46, things suddenly seemed a lot more serious.