

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MEYER LEVIN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon

Date: December 9, 1988

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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ML - Meyer Levin [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: December 9, 1988

*Tape one, side one:*

PS: This is Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Meyer Levin for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is December the 9th, 1988. Mr. Levin, can you please tell us where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of a concentration camp?

ML: I was a tank cannoneer on C Company, 25th Tank Battalion, 14th Armored Division, in the European Theater of War. Hostilities ceased on May 2nd. We were deep in Bavaria. We could see the Alps. We ride into Munich. The streets are impassible. No building escaped a bombing. German civilians are clearing the rubble by hand. I'm delighted. I helped bring Germany to her knees.

PS: When you entered Germany, did you know of the existence of this particular concentration camp that you eventually liberated?

ML: No, no, I didn't. I had no idea of what a concentration camp was.

PS: Before you arrived at the camp, in other words, when you entered Germany, had you heard anything at all about the mass murder of Jews in Europe?

ML: No, I did not.

PS: You knew...

ML: I did not.

PS: Nothing of concentration camps and...

ML: No, I knew there was work camps for, people were in work camps. I thought that's what they were. But we had no idea until much later it came out that they were slaughtering Jews in there.

PS: You had no idea whatsoever that there were camps with gas chambers and the...

ML: No.

PS: Ovens, the crematoriums.

ML: No, not at all.

PS: Before arriving at the site of the concentration camp, had you seen any evidence at all of German atrocities against civilians or against PWs or displaced persons?

ML: No, no.

PS: Had you seen any prisoner of war camps that you liberated on the way, or displaced...

ML: No.

PS: Person camps?

ML: No, we did not.

PS: Can you please give the name of the camp that you liberated, and its location?

ML: Now, this is the strange part. I know the war ended and we were near Munich, and we got orders, some of us got orders to proceed to a camp. And I thought this could be that camp...

PS: Dachau?

ML: Dachau.

PS: Yeah.

ML: See? As it turned out, it was nowhere on the scale of Dachau. It was a labor camp and there were prisoners there in their striped pajamas, and they were sore and skeleton like and all the features of concentration camp victims. But I don't know the name of that camp, and I've called around my fellows who I still have contact with, and neither, none of them seem to know. They just know that it was a labor camp.

PS: All right. It was close to Munich?

ML: To Munich, yes.

PS: Probably, I think a lot of the major concentration camps had these satellite camps that...

ML: Yes.

PS: Were...

ML: That might have been a satellite camp as you say.

PS: Yeah, do you recall the date that you were in the area of Munich?

ML: It must have been a week after hostil-, after the war was over, yeah, I believe. That date I don't know.

PS: Did you see Dachau, which was very close to Munich?

ML: No, no I didn't see Dachau.

PS: To the best of your memory, can you describe what you saw at the camp?

ML: Yes. We knew about that there were camps, but I never seen any of them until now, but I was not prepared for what we saw. [ML reads] "The inmates are like walking dead. They're dressed in those striped pajamas. They are no more than mere skeletons. Their skin is a mass of sores. They can hardly speak. They can hardly cry. Their eyes are dry, large and sad. I gave them all the provisions we had in our tank, and they sit on the ground and look at us, and we looked at them in disbelief."

PS: Were there, can you estimate like how many, you saw dead there also?

ML: No.

PS: No bodies?

ML: No. Because...

PS: Oh.

ML: Our tank was on the outside of the gate.

PS: Oh, oh, I see.

ML: We didn't, our tank did not go inside. We were just guarding the outside.

PS: Do you know if this particular camp was set up for Jews only or if it was a mixed camp?

ML: I believe it was a mixed camp, because not all of those inmates looked Jewish. Some looked like Russians or Slavs.

PS: Yeah, you think...

ML: Yeah.

PS: There were like Poles and Russian and...

ML: Yes, yes, definitely.

PS: Did you see any children?

ML: No.

PS: Can you describe any personal responsibilities you had been assigned for arranging for care, which probably, you say you were on the outside and didn't...

ML: Our tank was on the outside.

PS: Yeah.

ML: Well, here's where I was mixed up in it, I got out of the tank and followed a group that is moving towards a warehouse close by. These people could still walk. They smashed the doors and windows and poured in, and I along with them. There was food and clothing there. They begin to shed their dirty prison garb and changing into clothes, civilian clothes. They are loading up and looting cans of Hershey cocoa, eggs, butter, sardines, and so on. And then an American officer barges in and he's very upset. He wants them out of there. He orders me, being the only GI amidst, amongst them, to drive them out. He's furious. I'm not. He's shouting, "*Raus! Raus!*" And I'm also calling, "*Raus! Raus!*" But I'm adding, "*Langzam, langzam* [Take your time, take your time]," in a lower voice. They seem to understand and keep right on plundering and it did my heart good to watch them.

PS: When you arrived within site of this installation or camp, were there any German military still there? Any German soldiers? Guards?

ML: No, no, no. It was at least two weeks after the war was over.

PS: Oh. Oh.

ML: They were gone. They were gone.

PS: Well where, during this period of two weeks, had other units of the American Army entered and taken care of these people?

ML: I don't think so.

PS: Survivors?

ML: I think we were the first.

PS: But actually it hadn't been discovered?

ML: Well I...

PS: You say...

ML: I don't know what happened previous to our visit there, but it didn't look like they were being taken care of by anybody, that they were on their own. They were in

such bad shape that I'm sure there was, there wasn't any kind of a coordinated effort to feed them and help them.

PS: Can you describe the reaction of the prisoners when they saw your unit approaching and realized that their day had arrived that they were liberated and free?

ML: Well, they were anxious to show us how terrible they suffered. They picked up their pants legs to show us the terrible sores on their knees. They were skeletons. They were thin. They were emaciated. Their eyes were big and sad and you could tell that they were, some of them probably did not live through the next week. They were in that bad shape. But they were anxious to show us how they suffered.

PS: Did, was there, you did have personal contact with some of them. Was there a communication, verbal communication? In other words what I'm saying is was, was there a language barrier?

ML: Oh...

PS: There was...

ML: There definitely was a language barrier.

PS: You yourself...

ML: I tried to say something in Yiddish to them, but they didn't understand me, and they weren't talking. They just sat there. Wanting, looked like they would rather die than go on another step. They were so emaciated, so tired, so sick looking.

PS: And you believed that it was a camp that was mixed nationalities? Some Jews, some probably Poles and Russians?

ML: Yeah I, you couldn't tell whether any of them were Jews or not. I couldn't tell. They did look like Slavs. A lot of them looked like Slavic people.

PS: Were you prepared at all to give them any kind of care and feeding or medical supplies?

ML: Well, we were five men in a tank and we had our officers there, and I suppose they made arrangements to care for these people, which they did. Because eventually they took them out of that camp, and they put them where they could delouse them, feed them, and see which ones could go home, which ones can go home and which ones were afraid to go home. Some of them were afraid to go home. They...

PS: That, oh, pardon me.

ML: That's, no, that's all right.

PS: Well, at that spot, was, did you have anything really to give them as far as food?

ML: Oh, yes as I mentioned, whatever provisions we had in our tank I distributed them. On a small scale. This is our tank and other tanks--there was five tanks with us--they did the same thing. We gave them everything. We gave them our cigarettes, we gave them our chocolates, we gave them our rations.

PS: And you people, feeling that you had discovered this installation no doubt radioed the information immediately and you feel pretty sure that within a short time...

ML: Immediate, almost immediately.

PS: Medics and others were out there to...

ML: They were there to take charge.

PS: Did the experience of seeing these prisoners have any effect on your feeling about being a part of the war and fighting Germany?

ML: Absolutely. Absolutely. I was glad I was part of it. I was glad that I was instrumental in seeing the Germans lose. I took delight in their loss. And I felt it was all worthwhile as far as I'm concerned. I'm glad I didn't stay home.

PS: Up until this day, when you just accidentally, I suppose, came across this unit, this installation, up until that time, did you have any idea at all of what was happening in Germany?

ML: No, see...

PS: As far as the Jews were concerned and other, the mass murders?

ML: About a week or a month before the war ceased, there was a notice out that the Germans were killing Jews. And my good buddies in the tank said, "Hey, Levin, you gonna have to fight harder now, cause they're killing your people." I didn't appreciate that humor at all, but that's what I heard at that time. I heard that they were killing Jews. Up until that time, I thought the Jews were in some kind of labor camps, working for them.

PS: Yeah. You realized of course that Jews had been rounded up and shipped off in boxcars, but you felt as did most others, that is servicemen, that they were being shipped as displaced persons...

ML: Displaced persons...

PS: To labor camps.

ML: To lab-, to work for Germany.

PS: Well now when you saw this, did you realize that this was just one of thousands, that this was just not an isolated camp for labor and displaced persons? Did you realize then that this possibly was just one of thousands and on the scale that you later saw and heard about?

ML: Yes. I had no idea as to how broad this concentration camp thing was, and how mass murder was. But I knew this was not the only place. Because, I remember in March, when the fighting was on, that we would be chasing the enemy at great speed. We would pass these enclosed places, and people who looked like they were prisoners would wave to us. But we kept right on going because we were in a battle. We couldn't stop. Maybe a rear, the people in the rear stopped and liberated these camps, but we kept right on going. So I saw. I saw labor camps like that.

PS: Do you recall the reactions of other men in your unit? Did you have a opportunity to talk with them after about what you were experiencing?

ML: I did. And certainly the tanks that were there, we all knew, we all saw what we saw. But when we came back, we just told the rest of the men what we saw. And I

didn't see too much reaction. No, not, nobody got too excited about it. Because they were ignorant of the real, what was really going on.

PS: Yeah.

ML: They didn't know.

PS: Can you please tell us how long you remained in the camp and whether your experience lingered after you left?

ML: The experience lingers to this day. But we weren't there long. We were there just one day. From morning until late in the afternoon. Others, other Army units took over.

PS: Yeah. Has it had any influence on your thinking as you look back? That is, that one experience?

ML: That one experience I've later learned was just the tip of the iceberg for what really went on. Now that I've read a lot and took a great interest what happened, the whole enormity of the thing is beyond my ability to realize, to know that things like that happened, that they wanted to wipe us out, off the face of the earth. I've been active since then.

PS: In your own mind, Meyer, can you possibly explain to yourself or others the German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps?

ML: I can't. I can't understand that people like the Germans, enlightened, cultured people, to go down to that level where they all wanted the Jews dead. I cannot understand it. I could understand it of savages. But not the intelligent German people. That is a mystery that will remain forever.

PS: And actually this was one of the highest cultured societies...

ML: It was.

PS: In the world at that time.

ML: It was. Yeah.

PS: Education, science, every field.

ML: And they, to, I stayed in Germany until I went home, and spoke to the Germans about it. And they said, "Ah! *Is kanid zein! Muz anin haben fiel kultur!*" In other words, "It can't be possible! We're cultured people!" That's what they said.

PS: Did any of the, while you were there, were any German civilians brought in to look at...

ML: Yes.

PS: At the site?

ML: Yes. The German civilians from the villages, and the *Burgermeister*, which is the mayor of every village, they, we marched them all through there to see *wus*, what happened. They--we had signs up. "*Wes Dynn Schuld!*" "Know Your Guilt." We had signs up, cause they had to go...

PS: When they were brought in and looked, did they, did any of them admit that they knew this was there? Or did they all plead innocent that...

ML: They...

PS: They never knew such a thing?

ML: Pledged innocent. Pledged innocent. Now I know they couldn't have been innocent, not the ones that lived where they burned bodies. Because there were villages that were burnt out, and when we would approach them, our artillery probably set them on fire, we smelled a sweet sickening smell and we knew there were bodies burning in the rubble. So you know it smells like burned hair. And they smelled it for years. And they said they didn't know? They're liars.

PS: Yeah.

ML: They knew.

PS: Well there, at that site, you saw no evidence right there of gas chambers or any...

ML: No.

PS: Methods of...

ML: I don't think that place had gas chambers. It was just where they worked them to death.

PS: And you saw no bodies.

ML: No, I wasn't inside.

PS: Yeah, oh, right.

ML: I was outside the gate.

PS: After you left the site, was there any official or unofficial meeting of your unit to discuss what you had experienced?

ML: Nope. Nope.

PS: Is it contained in any regimental history of your division and...

ML: Oh I'm sure it is in the 14th Armored Division history, it's probably there. Yes, it's must be.

PS: Later on did you hear of any other servicemen who were involved in the liberation of camps?

ML: Nope. No, I didn't. For a long time I thought it was because we liberated this camp and other units of the 14th Armored probably liberated other camps. And our 14th Armored was known as "The Liberators" and I thought that would be, that, perhaps that's the reason that the 14th Armored was called "The Liberators" because we liberated that part of the country and the camps. I just wish to think that, that that's why we're called "The Liberators".

PS: Yeah. How long, Meyer, did you remain in Europe after the war?

ML: After the war--it was over in May--I remained in Europe until April of the next year. It was a point system by which you got home. I had 47 points, and that wasn't enough to be on the first batch that went home, because they had 90 points some of them. So I had to wait until the 47 pointers were ready to go. So, in between the time I was in Bavaria and the end of the war was this rescuing the labor camp. I was shipped to Berlin to stand guard in Berlin, until April. We were the ones, they wanted combat men to stand guard. There were new young troops coming in from the States, but they were silly and

they were worthless and they didn't know what it was about. They wanted tough men, combat men, to stand guard and we stood guard in the, in Berlin. And of course Berlin was all destroyed. There was nothing but rubble everywhere. So that's what they needed us for, and by April I went home.

PS: During that period...

ML: Yeah.

PS: From the end of the war...

ML: Yeah.

PS: While you were a member of the army of occupation, did you have much contact with German civilians?

ML: Oh yes.

PS: Did you have enough contact to get an impression of whether there was a very deep guilt feeling or the feeling of, "Well, they weren't responsible?" Do you have any comment?

ML: I had a lot of contact with civilians. I had, in Berlin I finally became manager of a recreation center that we had in our camp and I was the, showed the movies. I was the projectionist, and I had Germans working for me, see. I had a lot of civilians working for me. And they, it's like Churchill said, "The German is either at your throat, or he's at your feet." They were kowtowing to us. They were bowing. If I asked them to kiss my shoes, they would kiss my shoes. They were such nice people, and they didn't know and they didn't know and they didn't know. But they knew very well. They all knew, because some of them, those who cringed the most, we found out were in the Nazi Party. Heh, we had to fire them. They knew. They knew very well.

PS: Meyer we've covered a lot of ground, and you certainly have given some very meaningful testimony.

ML: I hope so.

PS: Is there anything, actually we've reached the end of the formal questions, and I just wanted to ask you before ending, is there anything else you would like to add that we didn't, any thoughts that you have, or any experience that you have that you would like to relate?

ML: Well, you certainly don't want to hear about my war experiences. You want to hear experiences in conjunction...

PS: Related.

ML: ...with the...

PS: Yeah.

ML: I saw these people, we got them together, we put them in camps, refugee camps. I saw them in different places, under our control, American control. And we fed them, and we tried to send them to their homes, whether they were from the Ukraine or Poland or wherever they were from. And I found out, and I was amazed, how many were afraid to go home. I don't know why they were afraid to go home, unless they were guilty,

because they certainly were afraid to go back to Russia. The Russians dreaded to go to Russia. I can only assume that at first they collaborated with the Germans, and later on their turn came to die at the hands of Germans too, but if they went home, the Russians were waiting for them for collaborating. That was what I assumed, that they were collaborators. Now I didn't run into any Jewish people, oh, I did run into Jewish people! In Austria, in Salzburg, Austria. I went there for the holi-, for *Rosh Hashanah* services, *Yom Kippur* services. And there was a lot of Jewish refugees there. And I brought as many goodies as I could, chocolate bars from home and everything, to give it to them, because I knew I was gonna meet the Jews. And it was Friday night. And I talked to them and I started to distribute the candy to them, and they wouldn't take it. And I was amazed. And, and, "What do you mean you can't?" These were people who were starving. They said, "*M'turnit troggen uff Shabbas*." "You're not allowed to carry anything on Saturday." I could have belted them one. I was so angry with them. I met some Jews in Metz who told me their experiences, and they said the Poles, the Polaks were worse than the *Jawohl*. *Jawohl* is the Germans. Because they always said, "*Jawohl*." The Polaks, they said, were worse to the Jews than the Germans. Of course I read later that they had, the Germans had the Poles do the dirty work for them. That's why the Poles had no love for Jews [unclear]...

PS: While the Germans were also killing the Poles.

ML: And they were killing the Poles. And I know that the Poles were antisemites for hundreds of years. The Jews lived there a thousand years. For the last four hundred years the Poles hated Jews. So I could see where these people could really be mean and willing to kill Jews. Poles, Ukrainians, they did it. We know now they did it. They were the guards in Auschwitz, and they were the ones who did the killing. But the Germans used them. They were willing partners to kill Jews.

PS: These German Jews that you saw in Austria after the war, they were all, had returned from...

ML: From concentration camps, yeah.

PS: Yeah, they were survivors of concentration camps.

ML: Right, yes.

PS: They were still, I guess some of them even in their striped uniforms?

ML: No.

PS: They were...

ML: No.

PS: Oh...

ML: The one I saw was in the streets and in the synagogues and they were they had clothing.

PS: Do you have any idea Meyer how the Ger-, the Austrian civilian population reacted to them? Did they help them? Did they ostracize them? Or do you have any idea what the relationships...

ML: No. In the first place, I was stationed in Bavaria. And I only would go to...

PS: Oh.

ML: To Salzburg for the holidays, see. That's the contact I had with them there. But I didn't stay in Austria long enough. But, I don't think that either the Germans or the Austrians felt that they could befriend the Jews. They lied a lot, because we were in a, in this town, I forget which town it was. Are you, still have enough tape there?

PS: Yes.

ML: And the woman, she had a little Volkswagen in the yard. And some of us fellows wanted to drive it. And she said it belonged to her neighbors, the Jews, and she was keepin' in for them. And she had their furniture too, see? And this is, "*Unsere freunder de Juden*." [Our friends the Jews.] She's waitin' for them to come back so she could give it to them, which was a lie, because, heh, they robbed the Jewish homes as soon as the Jews...

PS: Yeah.

ML: ...were taken out. But this was the excuse they used, that their friends the Jews, they're keeping it for them. I didn't trust them. I didn't believe any of them one word. Not one word. If there were any that were really genuinely friends to the Jews and helped the Jews, I didn't meet them, and you wouldn't know it. You wouldn't know it. I mistrusted them.

PS: Okay. We have reached the conclusion of the interview between Phil Solomon, the interviewer, and Meyer Levin, who is a U.S. Army Veteran of the 14th Armored Division...

ML: Division, yes.

PS: And Meyer, on behalf of Gratz College and the Oral History Archives of the Holocaust, I want to thank you very, very much for your real, meaningful testimony. Thank you.

ML: And I want to thank you for finding me, because I had these things with me for forty years, and I was wondering, "How am I ever gonna get to tell the story?"

PS: Yeah, well, I'm glad that we...

ML: That we did.

PS: We found each other.

ML: We certainly, I'm glad that I met you too, Phil.

PS: And your testimony will become a part of the Oral History Archive...

ML: Wonderful.

PS: ...of the Holocaust...

ML: Wonderful. I'm glad that I could, I'm glad I was there, and I'm glad that I could help.

PS: Oh, that's good. Thank you very much.

ML: Phil, thank you.