

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

HARRY SNYDER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: December 28, 1988

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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HS - Harry Snyder [interviewee]

PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]

Date: December 28, 1988

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Harry Snyder for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is December 28, 1988. Harry, can you please tell me where in Europe and in what unit you were serving before you arrived at the site of a concentration camp?

HS: It was the 45th Infantry Division, and we had arrived at Dachau. Units of the, of our division actually captured it. It was defended by Storm Troopers. Unfortunately, we took no prisoners. I personally went into Dachau the following day, and did get a chance to see all the ovens by the crematoria, and saw a number of the survivors in their uniforms, the blue and white striped.

PS: Did you know of the existence of this particular camp, in your case Dachau, before you actually arrived at the site?

HS: No, we did not know that there were these types of camps. We were with an infantry division and we were coming into, we were going to capture Munich, and we came across Dachau. We discovered all of this.

PS: Before you arrived at Dachau, had you heard anything at all about the mass murder of Jews and various political prisoners and the existence of gas chambers and crematoriums? Did, had you heard anything at all of...

HS: We knew of slave labor, because I personally was running camps for displaced persons as we came through the Siegfried Line. I had as many as 18,000 slave labor that, in a camp that I had set up at Kaiserslautern, and when we got to Munich, we were, our goal was to capture Munich, but we came across Dachau. So we knew that there were many slave laborers made up of various nationalities.

PS: Yeah, again Harry, before arriving at the site of Dachau, did you see any evidence of German atrocities against civilians, prisoners of war? Any evidence at all of the Nazi brutality?

HS: Well, I did see it, because I worked, as I say, I worked with the, we had to set up displaced persons camps for military reasons. When we had come through the Siegfried Line, all of the slave labor, all of the nationalities--Poles, Russians, Czechoslovakians--had all been sent down to reinforce the Siegfried Line and set up tank traps. And once we captured the Siegfried Line and went through the line, these people were clogging up the roads.

PS: Their nationality were mainly Eastern Europe?

HS: Mostly Eastern Europe, predominantly Russian and Polish.

PS: The camps, displaced persons camp, that you helped to set up in that area, were you there long enough to observe their treatment after the camp was set into operation?

HS: Well, the reason we had to set up these camps, we were worried that our supply lines would be interrupted, because the Germans had threatened us with werewolf tactics and would infiltrate these released mobs of people. So that I was given the job of collecting all these people, and set them up in former German training camps.

PS: How long were you there? From the time you, the, your unit set up the camp and gathered in the people, were you there over any period of time...

HS: Well...

PS: Or did you move on and...

HS: Well, I was in the Kaiserslautern¹ where we had about 18,000 people. I got it set up, organized, as far as setting, giving people places just to live. We separated them by nationality putting the people in various buildings by nationality, and it was necessary for me to supply food for them. The army was unable to supply any food. I was told that I'd have to get all the food and equipment for these people from the Germans. And, of course, I went down into the Siegfried Line and discovered all of the storage spaces for food, clothing, and I took various groups of Russians who also spoke German, and we went as far as ten feet below the, ten stories below the surface to find the storage warehouses, brought the food up and set up a distribution center so that we could feed the people. After we had it organized, I was then sent out to establish another center. This one was in Munich, the *Telefunken Kaserne*. Here I had over 7,000 people. All these were slave, German slave labor.

PS: Among the group, to your knowledge were there any Jewish prisoners? Jewish displaced persons in all of the group?

HS: I really didn't know whether they were Jewish or not, but many of them were wearing the uniform.

PS: Yeah.

HS: With the prisoners...

PS: Can you describe in general the physical condition of most of these people?

HS: Most of them were very malnourished, and they had no place to go. And one of the first things we had to do was to clean them up, delouse them, and try to give them shelter.

PS: But in general you would say that they did show evidence of pretty, of very harsh treatment at the hands of their captors?

HS: They had all, they were actually slaves, and they behaved like slaves.

PS: Were there possibly any prisoners of war among those laborers that...

HS: Yes there were prisoners of war. In fact, one of my methods of setting up government as quickly as possible was to use the highest ranking prisoners of war. I had a

¹Kaiserslautern is a city in southern Germany's Pfalz district.

lieutenant colonel in the Russian Army who I made, put him in charge of all the Russians, and since they were predominantly, were the largest group that I had. Then I would find the highest ranking person of the Polish, let them manage one of the buildings. So that there were army personnel, who were prisoners of war, amongst them.

PS: At the time these people were liberated, these displaced persons, slave laborers, at the time they were liberated by your unit, the 45th Division, were they a part of the, were they from PW camps or were they from, that is, could the...

HS: They came from many places. Many of them had been forced to work in factories. Some of them had been in PW camps. But they were all rushed down to the Siegfried Line to reinforce it. So they came from many places in Germany.

PS: In your advance, the advance of your unit, did you liberate any prisoner of war camps? Did you see any that were in the zone of your advance?

HS: We must have liberated because at that time, I was then put on detached service with military government, and there had to be literally thousands of people who were suddenly free, because the German army had retreated. And they were, as I say, covering the roads, so that our supply lines were endangered. And it was really a military maneuver to get them into displaced persons camps and set up camps, so that they would now be off the roads and that we could now service them.

PS: The time then, there were a number of weeks went by from that date around Kaiserslautern and the slave labor, the DP camps...

HS: Oh, this would be a matter of months.

PS: Yeah, before you arrived at Dachau, which was close to Munich. Do you recall the approximate date of your arrival in the, at Dachau in the Munich area?

HS: It would be difficult for me to actually give you a date at this time.

PS: I believe it was around the third or fourth week of April. I think it was somewhere around April 26th or...

HS: Well...

PS: Or thereabouts.

HS: If we looked at some maps, I think the dates would be on there.

PS: Yes. Now, you started to describe before we moved back to the displaced persons camp. You started to describe what you saw when you arrived at Munich and entered the camp itself. Do you want to continue, Harry, and give us your description of what you saw within the camp?

HS: In Dachau, we were not allowed to go there the first few days because there were so many bodies, and they were worried about the health of the soldiers, because of the horrible sights. We said we did not take any prisoners, because when the soldiers saw what they did see, they were so angry, they actually became wild and refused, any Storm Troopers, even if they wanted to surrender, they were so infuriated that they just killed all of the German troops. Because they couldn't believe what they saw.

PS: Was there any organized resistance on the part of the German soldiers or guards or SS men?

HS: There was some fighting but they were Storm Troopers who I, actually fought very hard, but they were overwhelmed, and the Dachau was captured.

PS: Can you give any estimate of the number of prisoners, survivors, that you saw? The numbers of dead?

HS: The, there must have been many dead because they had to send in special troops to take the bodies and bury them and disinfect them.

PS: Did you see, yourself, the various methods of execution, such as the gas chambers and the ovens?

HS: Well I actually saw the ovens and I saw the room where there was, so-called, a shower.

PS: Can you, there were, when you entered were there still bodies of the dead still exposed within the campgrounds [unclear]?

HS: No, the bodies had been removed, but there were still many of the horribly emaciated people about, until we were able to take them out. Unfortunately, when we offered food to any of them, they were so sick that any food made them so deathly...

PS: Yeah.

HS: ...sick that they couldn't just eat our so-called rich food. They, I mean...

PS: In fact, it's been reported, I believe, that many actually died because the generosity of British or American troops who tried to feed them a little, and that there was, they just had no digestive systems...

HS: They were not--they were unable to eat it. The chocolate that we gave them was actually very, very bad for them.

PS: It would be like poison. Do you know if this particular camp was set up for Jews only or if it was a mixed, a camp of mixed racial groups and mixed nationalities?

HS: At the time I thought it was only for Jews, but I did learn later there were some other people amongst them.

PS: Among the dead or living, do you remember seeing any children? Among survivors or among the dead?

HS: Well, we, I dealt with many of the, they were teenagers, who had been slave labor for many years. But actually very young children, I did not come across any of them.

PS: Can you please describe if any the, any personal responsibility that you were assigned in arranging for the care or transfer of living survivors?

HS: Well, of course, I did have to feed them. I was a quartermaster officer, and that was one of my responsibilities, to supply food. In fact, I was told by the army, that I could not use army supplies. So I would go to surrounding communities and get the mayors of each town and tell them they were to supply so much bread for so many hundreds of people. And even when the mayors said they had no food, I said, "Well, then I guess I'll have to let your Frankenstein come in and get the food." When the mayors heard this, they

said, "No, we'll get the bread for them." And they, each town had to supply so many truck loads of bread. So that was part of the supplying of food. After we had established the camps, we did try to give them necessary identification cards. We also had to delouse them. And we gave them temporary identification cards and made provision to send them back to their own nations, countries of origin.

PS: So there was thought given to arrangement for the transfer of the living prisoners.

HS: Right. It was a, you must remember that identification cards were the most important thing. And that's what we did supply the people with.

PS: Do you feel satisfied, Harry, in your own mind that considering the fact that Dachau was a, as most of the other concentration camps, was not something that had been expected on, especially on such a tremendously large scale, are you satisfied in your own mind that everything was done for the living that could possibly be done? That is in the care, the feeding, the medical attention? Again, considering the fact that this was, you just stumbled, the combat troops just stumbled on these sights with no, completely surprised.

HS: Well, the fact that I as a member of the Division had to perform this duty, I was temporary sent to military government. The army had set up a military government unit, and I had to take charge until they finally caught up to us. So the army did make some provision to take over the operation of camps and captured towns.

PS: Can you describe whatever contact, personal contact you had with living prisoners? Can you describe their reactions? If you had any verbal, did you have verbal communication with prisoners?

HS: Oh yes I worked very closely with them. In fact, being the camp commander, I had to make myself known to all the leaders and to actually house them. And I would have the, all of the selected leaders of each group meet with me so that we had counsel. And one of the tricks that I had to use when I was at Munich, in the *Telefunken Kaserne*, so I would drive around on a motorcycle so I could be visibly seen, and to know that they were now under the control of the American Army.

PS: Considering the language barrier, there was still, you personally did have some verbal communication with the people and...

HS: Yes. The common language, my Yiddish, proved to be a very good Bavarian German. So that I was able to converse with the people, no matter what their country of origin, they still understood German, so that I was able to communicate with them.

PS: Stumbling on this horrible sight without really any knowledge that such a thing existed, did the experience of seeing this, seeing the prisoners, seeing the dead, have any effect on your feeling about being part of the war and fighting Germany?

HS: Well I guess World War II is known as The Good War, because we actually saw the atrocities, and knowing that I participated in freeing these people and overcoming Germany's cruel treatment of all these people made it a very satisfying experience.

PS: Do you recall the reactions of other men in your unit? In other words, did you talk with many of them afterwards and find out what their feelings were about this experience?

HS: Every American soldier who had any contact had a hate for the Germans that I never thought they would finally change their opinion of them. And I left Germany when we were still occupying, and the American soldiers' contact with the Germans, everyone claimed they were "nix Nazi", and very few people believed them.

PS: Yeah. How long did you remain in Dachau after the initial liberation and did your experience linger long after you left?

HS: We must have remained in the area of Munich, and Fürstenfeldbrück [a small town just northeast of Munich] for at least a few months. So that I was then relieved of my duty of displaced person camps and I came back to my own division. So that we were stationed in the area until the war in Europe was over.

PS: During that period, Harry, did you have much contact with the local German civilian population?

HS: I was quartered in the home of the brewmaster, so that I did live in a German house. And they all claimed they knew nothing of what was going on in Dachau, which was hard to believe. But, I must give them this much, that they were not permitted to even approach the fence, which was off limits to them.

PS: The one, I think a lot of people are curious, even though most of them were not permitted to approach the fence, there were so many workers necessary for the operation of the camp that, weren't many of the local people employed within the camp?

HS: Not that I know of. Of course, I was in a small village and they said the soldiers would never permit them to get near the camp.

PS: At the time of the liberation of Dachau, were you aware that this was only one of many, many concentration camps that were on the same scale? Dachau was one of the major death camps. Were you, did you in your wildest imagination dream that there were many, many death camps such as this?

HS: No, we were unaware of camps of this type. We had been in combat almost three years, and this was the first time we had ever come across civilians being treated in this horrible manner. There were many stories about how horrible the camp commander had been. When we were in the camp itself, we were told the stories that the commander's wife used to make lampshades out of the skins of babies.

PS: Yeah. In your own mind, can you explain German decisions that led to the setting up of the concentration camps?

HS: We were unaware that the concentration camps of this type had ever been set up.

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

HS: Yes, many meetings. In fact, the Amer-, our officers in charge at all levels, from corps or so down to our division, were unaware that this atrocity had been, had gone on. And we had to control our soldiers because they were so angry.

PS: Do you know if your regimental or division history includes this experience of the liberation of Dachau?

HS: Yes. It's listed in a part of our records of the 45th Infantry.

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

HS: No, because it was soon after that I was, I had achieved enough points to be able to get shipped back home.

PS: When did you first hear of the gassing of Jews? You have already stated that you didn't know anything of it until you saw Dachau. Do you have anything to discuss in that regard? Was there any...

HS: Well, of course, as they discovered more of these camps, then the names of Auschwitz and all the other camps came to mind, and I knew from my own personal experience if they were anything like Dachau, how horrible they could have been.

PS: Did any of the prisoners you liberated ever contact you or anyone within your unit, do you know?

HS: Not that I know of.

PS: How long did you remain in Europe after the end of the war, after the Germans surrendered?

HS: Well, I left Europe in September of '45, so that I had been in Europe and in Africa since May of '43.

PS: Harry, you've covered the subject certainly very, very well, and we've reached the end of my list of questions for you. At this point is there anything that you would like to add to your testimony, or is there anything that we haven't covered in my questions that you would like to add to this?

HS: Well, whenever I see a person with numbers tattooed on his arm, I know full well the kind of life they must have led. The Germans were cruel slave masters, and it will take many years for Germans to overcome the shame that they have brought to their whole nation.

PS: And...

HS: When people say that this is a myth or a hoax, they have to talk to me, because I have actually seen it.

PS: Harry, this tape of your testimony will become a permanent part of the records, the Archive here at Gratz College, the Holocaust History and on behalf of Gratz College and the Holocaust Center here, I want to thank you very, very much for your very valuable and your very important testimony. Thank you very much.