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Irving Heymont interview 2/9/95

SWB: Okay the first thing that I'd like you to tell me

about is the experience in liberating a camp.

IRVING HEYMONT: Actually, I personally had very little to

do with liberating camps. Now first let me say, I don't

know of anybody who liberated a camp. We overran camps. My

regiment overran a sub-camp of Mauthausen called

Gunskierken, in Austria. We overran it because the adjacent

regiment failed to keep abreast, and we were ordered to

extend our area. And it was K company, the fifth infantry

regiment, that overran Gunskierken. I visited Gunskierken

within a few hours after we had overran and got the report.

I spend 15 minutes there at the most, and then had to go on

with the rest of my duties. I recall seeing the emaciated

people, and about, later I learned that we figured it was

about 2000 dead, and above all you can never forget the

odor. I had nothing with me, but I did offer someone some

cigarettes, which was all I had. I was told later, I didn't

see it myself, that some of the people who were given

cigarettes, tended to start to eat them. At that time, I

was a regimental operations officer and had to continue on.

SWB: Did the people react to you at all there?

IRVING HEYMONT: I'm really no judge. I was under so qu- so

short a time, that I'm- anything I say would really be any

witness at all. My reg- my division did put out a pamphlet

describing in greater detail what was found and had

photographs in it.

SWB: You gave someone a pack of cigarettes, do you remember

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anything about his reaction to that.

IRVING HEYMONT: Not really. I remember he was severely

emaciated. He wore what looked like the striped uniform,

and incidentally, may I add a note about that. A few days

earlier, we ran into, about two or three, no it was two men,

in striped uniforms. Dazed, glazed look in their eyes,

wandering down the road. My regimental commander turned to

me and said, Hey Irv, we better round up these prisoners and

slap them back into jail. We had no idea what they

represented at the time. At no time was, were we ever told,

out yonder there's a concentration camp, try to get there.

Prisoner of war camps, yes. Uh, I conducted a very

unscientific, completely statistically poor survey, and I

have yet to find an American soldier, who was at division

level or lower who wo- could claim that, they knew where a

concentration camp was and they were told to get it. We

stumbled on them. I'm sorry to say it, but that's the best

as I recollect, and I haven't forgotten much about that.

SWB: Now can you describe when and how it was you came to

be sent to Landsberg and what Landsberg was.

IRVING HEYMONT: My regimental commander and I were ordered

to Paris to testify at a board proceeding, and then

authorized to take leave. This was early September 1945.

At this time I was, I had been uh, had a new assignment, I

was commanding the second battalion of the fifth infantry

regiment, 71st division. When I arrived back, to make a

long story short, I found that in my absence, my battalion

had been moved to Landsberg, and I arrived there in the

middle of the night, or I should say early hours of the

morning. The next morning, my first attempt was to find out

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where all the elements of the battalion were and what had

happened. When I left, the battalion was in Augsberg, and

now we're in Landsberg. And uh, shortly after breakfast,

uh, General Ralph, Anslau Ralph, the assistant division

commander arrived, and told me about this DP camp. And uh,

he said let's go look. And off we went. And there I first

found out what it was like. What, what it was. And it was a

shock. Shall I continue? The camp was in the German

Kacerne. The kacerne is a German military post, a peacetime

station. It was called the Sauerboer kacerne, last occupied

by some German artillery unit. The camp, I was told, was

about 80 percent, the other 20 percent a mixture of

primarily people from Baltic countries, and a small number

of Poles. The camp, I was told, we took over exactly as it

had been, with a unit of the 80th division that we had

relieved. To my utter consternation, I found there were

American soldiers on guard at the entrance, the purpose to

keep people in the camp from going out. Unless they had a

pass. The camp walls were surrounded, was topped with

barbed wire. People are milling around, seemingly aimless,

the streets were littered with the debris of the German

artillery units, the camp itself was filthy beyond

description. The room, the halls, the buildings, and these

were all pretty modern barrack buildings, reeked of the odor

of urine, you could see where people had defecated behind

stairwells. It was one unholy mess. Shall I continue?

People were living in what in the American army terminology,

would be squadrons, designed for 20, 30 men. Uh, they had

started, obvious to me, tried to make inhabitable family

quarters. They did that my hanging blankets, using

cardboards from large packing cases, some wooden closets to

wall off little cubicles. And also it was quite obvious

that they were all trying to cook, have meals there, they

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all had little electric warmers. As I soon found out, the

uh, everything compounded problems. The uh, cooking over

the, in the rooms, and then having to wash dishes in the

sinks, clogged up the toilet, the plumbing system, and a

lack of toilet paper, the use of newspaper clogged that up

and it was not designed to hold the number of people who

were there. Uh, initially we estimated there were about

4000 people in the camp. At no time did we ever really know

the population. Except it was always overcrowded. And

there was always a struggle to get the numbers down so we

would not have to, as we later on, to force people to move

to other camps. Uh forcing people to move, a transport, had

terrific connotations. Yet at the same time, they didn't

want to lower it because that determined how many rations

they had. At the end I came to the conclusion that during

the period I was there, till the end of 1945, the population

varied from four to seven thousand. Uh, I was shocked at

the first sight. It was incredible. Should I continue or

am I boring you.

SWB:

IRVING HEYMONT: What was even more incredible were the

orders I got from General Rolf. Uh, he took me to his side

and said, look. You will not take orders from your

regimental commander about the camp. You will take orders

direct from division through me, which is a rather untenable

position. And he said don't worry about your battalion, let

them take care of themselves. You worry about this camp.

Your job is to get this camp cleaned up, without incurring

any adverse publicity. If you get any adverse pub-publicity

for the U.S. Army career goodbye. I was a regular army

officer. Uh, needless to say, I was not particularly

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pleased to have those orders. I recognized a number of

things right off. First, of all the problems of the camp,

one of the things would, would be simplified if we only had

one kind of person in the camp. So I requested that all

non-Jews be moved elsewhere, and make the camp an all-Jewish

DP camp. To my great surprise, that was very quickly done.

It wasn't until months later that I learned that General

Eisenhower had issued orders that all the Jews should be in

all-Jewish DP camps. I was rather surprised when I heard

that, I, my ego was shattered, I thought I'd had a lot of

influence. The uh, but I was also surprised that no one had

ever told me that. Another thing I did, uh, after I,

forgive me if I ramble...

SWB: Let's just go back to one thing. Why was it a problem

to have Jews and non-Jews together, explain this to me, I

don't understand.

IRVING HEYMONT: The, for one thing there was a matter of

Kosher food for some of the Jews. Secondly, there was

enmity within the group, within the population. The Jews

considered the Baltics, peo- uh the, not really victims of

the Holocaust, that many of them had come to Germany volun

tarily to work. And uh, that they had not suffered the way

the Jews had. The Poles were very few. Also, the

motivation of the two groups were totally different. And

uh, I- particularly if the orders were, my orders were not

to get any adverse, incur any adverse publicity. I felt it

would be simpler if I dealt with only one kind of people.

The uh, I soon realized that the camp, the Jews had an

internal camp organization. Despite their despair, I-I-I'm

rambling now, I find it hard to put it all cohesively. They

had done some remarkable things which didn't appear on the

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surface. They had organized a camp committee. A self

designated camp committee, but fairly popularly accepted by

the others. And these were a remarkable group of men. They

had organized a sort of a camp structure. They had set up a

camp hospital.

SWB: Let's stop, we have to reload...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

IRVING HEYMONT: It's interesting, for a moment, to tell you

the origin of the camp. It was started as an emergency

means to care, to house and care for the survivors of the

eleven little sub-camps of Dachau that were centered around

Landsberg Khelfring. These camps had a total population of

about 30,000, 99 percent Jews, most of them from Hungary,

some brought in from Auschwitz. It was a crash project to

build two underground factories, to assemble the German jets

that had been bombed out of the original plan Augsborg. On

that note, it was a work to death camp. Not an

extermination camp, but a work to death camp. About half of

the thirty thousand died, and are buried in a number of

cemeteries around there. So they used this Kacerne, this

German army post in town, to house them. And they,

population was increased by survivors who drifted in from

all over the countryside and other camps. The Jews who

formed about 80 percent of the camp when I arrived, had

organized themselves into a city within a city. There was a

self-designated camp committee consisting of some of the

most brilliant men I've ever met. Most of them were Jews

from Baltic countries, from Latvia-Lithuania. And they had

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organized a structure, they had a police department of their

own, internally. And above all, they organized a school

system. They set up a hospital where they were training

nurses. The school system was really, the driving force was

a fantastic individual, Dr. Jake Wallaisky, a trained

agronomist who had worked for ORT, the Jewish Organization

for Rehabilitation and for Training, in Europe. And he had

practically set up a people's university. His driving thing

was you had to learn how to work to survive when freedom

came. The leadership strongly resented being wards of the

U.S. Army. And uh, they kept after me, wanting to have what

they called, uh, responsibility for the camp. And I kept

telling them, when they showed me that they couldn't[?] have

the camp cleaned up, take care of it, they can have their

authority. I wonder what they often thought, here are these

men, after what they had been through, many of them had

responsible jobs, listening to a 27-year old army officer

telling them they can't have responsibility for themselves

until they maintained certain degrees of sanitation. And

uh, every problem that we had in regard to sanitation, they

always came back with a stock answer. If it's that

important to you, move us out of Germany, and that will

solve your sanitation problem. Of course, nothing I could

do. But, in dealing with them, with the camp committee, I

was also under a different pressure. General Rolf told me

that at the first possible opportunity, I should hold a

democratic election for a new camp committee. The reason

for it became obvious to me. The army did not want to be

accused of setting up people to run the camp and not giving

the people of the camp their own choice. Compounded with

that, I-I might say r- at this point, I was not the only one

there. There was an UNRHA team, and an American joint

distribution committee, American joint Jewish distribution

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committee team, that had arrived about a month before I did.

And they were very helpful. They really did the pick and

shovel work. And uh, I asked General Rolf, and he send my

request, they rounded up all the Jewish soldiers in the

division who could speak Yiddish or German, to report to be

attached to my battalion to work in the camp to assist the

uh, UNRHA and the AJDC team. The head of the UNRHA team was

a very nice chap, but unfortunately he spoke, did not sp-,

was not Jewish, did not speak German, and couldn't

communicate with the people of the camp. I asked that he be

replaced by somebody who could speak German or Yiddish and

preferably who can commune with the people. They sent a Dr.

Abraham Glassgold, who was Jewish and had experience, and

who was an incredibly wonderful man. He was the right man

for the right job. Well anyway, the uh, I figured that I

had to get some way to get to the camp people other than

through the camp committee, because I didn't know what they

were saying. So I thought, one way to do it, I had to

establish myself. So I asked them to assemble a meeting of

everyone in the camp, at which I spoke. And uh, I remember

the AJDC team, Rabbi Rosenberg translated for me. And my

pitch was very simple. That you were, who suffered all

this, were liberated. You can't die of disease now, a real

stirring speech. And I ended up by saying, I'm going to

abolish the American army guards at the gate, they will be

there, but not to keep you in, but to keep unauthorized

Germans out. You're free to go out anytime you want. The

pass system is abolished, and I want you, yourselves, to

take down the barbed wire around the camp, hurrah, hurrah,

hurrah, great joy. What I did not know, until many months

later, that General Eisenhower had issued orders that the

pass system, the restriction on Jews, DP's, leaving the camp

would cease immediately. No one had ever told me of that.

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Anyway...

SWB: Why hadn't it been done?

IRVING HEYMONT: You ask why hadn't that been done. I

cannot answer that question definitively. I can only guess,

and I can only repeat things that were told to me, and I

don't think it's germane right now. The uh, I felt one way

to reach the camp population was for the camp to have a

newspaper. But at that time, all newspapers were illegal.

And I knew, I was smart enough not to ask whether I can have

the people publish a camp newspaper. If I did that, they

might say no. So I spoke to Dr. Glassgold, and I said, why

don't you sponsor the newspaper, allegedly. It will be

under your auspices. And I told the camp committee they can

start a newspaper, I would not censor it, Mr. Craddock would

not censor it, but I'm sure they would not give us any

grounds to regret that. And they didn't. And they started

the Landsberg Zeitung. And immediately they requested of

me, could I find some Hebrew print for them. Well my

battalion supply officer was a very wonderful young man.

Very full of initiative, meaning he could steal anything in

sight that he thought we would use. Well he scoured the

countryside and found only one set of Hebrew print in

Munich, and that had been pre-empted by an organization of

the uh, organization of the Jewish liberated political

prisoners. So they published their newspaper in Yiddish,

but using Roman characters. So Zeitung came out

C-A-J-T-U-N-G. How they got it printed, I don't know, I

didn't ask, there are a thousand and one things that went on

in the camp I had no knowledge and didn't have the time to

look into. But it turned out to be a very interesting

paper. A really, an outstanding paper, with a lot of good

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news, literary things, and was avidly read, and as I was

told later, set an example for other Jewish DP camps and

became the um leading Jewish DP camp in Germany. They did

an outstanding job. The uh, they were always after me to

find things to help them. And uh, I was very much

intrigued, very much desirous, of helping them in the

schools. And I, one of them, several of them, took me out

to the site of one of the underground factories that they

built. And it was a fantastic thing. We went in

underground and you could look up and see the undercarriage

of railroad cars. Tremendous presses and power equipment,

and there we were scrounging for screwdrivers, files,

hammers, little vices. I don't know, it just struck me as

weird. I visited that site again, in 1991. It had been

completed by the German army, and had been used for

munitions storage, the Americans, we used to use it to store

nuclear warheads, for the German Pershing missile unit, that

had been in the, what was then the site of the DP camp.

Incidentally, when I visited that camp in 1989 at the

kacerne, the kacerne commander complained to me how crowded

he was. He had 700 men there. And when I told him we had

four to seven thousand, he was incredulous. But anyway, uh,

I'm rambling.

SWB: Let's do something short because we only have a minute

left. Why don't you just tell me the physical condition of

the people in the camp when you got there.

IRVING HEYMONT: Surprisingly, in good shape. And I found

out why. There was a DP hospital not too far away, at St.

Tatillion, and the more serious cases were brought there.

In my stirring speech, I pointed out, you who survived, now

gonna succumb to disease because of your own filth. And the

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camp doctor told me, says that was a very pretty speech, but

you don't know. Those who were already going to succumb to

disease have long since been dead. What you see here are

the survivors. And they're not going to die that quickly.

So be it.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: Before you start, tell me a little about your

philosophy of running the camp. What was the first thing

you wanted to do.

IRVING HEYMONT: Keep out of trouble.

SWB: How did you run the camp, and what were your major

goals?

IRVING HEYMONT: I've often been asked, what was my major

goal in running the camp. The answer is very simple. Keep

out of trouble, not incur any adverse publicity, do as I was

told, and not imperil my career. At the same time, do as

much as I can to help these people. I realized later on,

that if my father had not found ah, service in the Czarist

army distasteful, made his way to the United States about

1900, I might, if I had been lucky, have been a survivor in

that camp. The other thing that soon became apparent to me,

is what the motivation of the people in the camp were. And

I realized that, with the increased attention being paid to

the uh, plight of Jewish DP's, and the treatment by the army

as as result of an investigation ordered by President

Truman, the Harrison report, the high-level attention we

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got, got to be very very close. We had generals in and out,

about every other day. But looking back now, I can see

where there are two different perceptions. Two different

views were clashing. What the DP's wanted, and what the

army wanted. Ah, simply, the army wanted, would be very

happy, if the Jewish DP's were content to live in camps,

like soldiers in garrison at peacetime, and would be clean,

neat, and orderly, and not cause any difficulties. The DP's

had tremendous differences among themselves. Uh, there even

were some Jewish DP's who couldn't talk to the others.

These were the Greeks and Greek Jews, who didn't even speak

Yiddish. But they had a different set of motivations. The

first and primary motivation was to find survivors, members

of the family. And the ends they went to were incredible.

They traveled all over the face of Europe, looking for

survivors. I was told that the post office was a cemetery

in their home town, that people would leave notes on

tombstones. The other great motivation was to try to

restore, wherever possible, some semblance of family life.

That's why they cooked together. That's why they try to

break these barracks, rooms, into somewhat private rooms.

And above all, despite their internal differences, they were

all united on one thing, to get out of Germany, at the first

and quickest possible time. The army saw these, I'm

speaking in broad general terms. Uh, here were people who

were not neat, clean, orderly, and docile. And above all,

were suspected of being prime movers in a black market.

That was a terrible bugaboo, the black market. The black

market was any transaction that wasn't according to the

unreasonable regulations. The standing joke was, among the

Americans, if everybody in Germany, at least in the American

zone, who was black marketing was put into jail, there'd be

nobody left to guard them. There was no question that the

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DP's, just like the native, the local Germans, were also

black-marketing. Swapping to get cigarettes, in turn,

swapped for something else. There were a few really big

black marketers. I met some of them. Their goal was to

amass something and, diamonds, jewelry were the goal, that

are easily transportable, easily hidden, and equ- of equal

value, and of value no matter where you are. And that way

they would have a stake to start all over. The head of the

local military government, a Major Ryan, now deceased, of

German descent, was, thought that all the black marketers

had their origin in the Landsberg DP camp. And they would

take off, looking for survivors, carrying army blankets with

them. The only kind they had. Ah, it was getting cold. He

felt they were taking the army blankets were going to sell

them, so he slapped them into jail for black marketers and I

would have to fight with him and try to get them out. It

reached a point finally where the feud between the two of us

got to be so great that it was resolved by my battalion

being moved, wholesale, in exchange for another battalion in

the regiment, and he got transferred to another town. They

couldn't remove me, they didn't want to remove me individ

ually cause that would have caused problems which we won't

go into. So those different perceptions, the problem of

sanitation, which was a bugaboo to all our visiting

generals, and the army we're always big on, everything has

to be neat and clean and orderly. All the debris strewn

around on the streets, left over by the Germans, uh, the

people at camp told me when I spoke to them about cleaning

it up, they said, why should we, we didn't leave it. If you

don't like it, get the Germans to clean it up. They

absolutely refused to. I finally got it cleaned up by

slightly illegal, I struck a deal with some friend of mine

who was running a POW cage at Dachau. And uh, they sent a

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lot of prisoners out, under guard, each day, until they

cleaned up the street. Another thing that was unreasonable,

winter was coming, and it was a problem of how do you heat

the camp. And I was told that they had made wonderful

arrangements. They had arranged with the local German

government for the forrestmeister, the forestry man, to set

aside German woods where the camp people would cut the wood.

And they made arrangements for a local agricultural inst-

equipment factory in Landsberg, still there, still

operating, would manufacture pot-bellied stoves. When I

asked how do I get the wood cut, with what, and then how do

I transport it from the woods into the camp. I was only

authorized two two two and a half ton trucks. I was told,

use local initiative. Meaning, we don't know the answer but

you go solve it. Well we solved it. By a number of things.

Then after a while, the people of the camp, we got them to

go out to cut wood, the young people by telling them all

sorts of lies about how they were going to learn how to use

power saws, which they'll use in Palestine, God knows if

they had trees there or not, and uh we promised them an

extra reward of cigarettes, which we got out of the Red

Cross packages for prisoners of war, which we had quite a

bit. And it worked for a while, and then they started to

complain. It was wet out there, they didn't have adequate

clothing, and they made a very unusual statement. They

said, you know, considering what the Germans did, burning

us, the least we can expect the Germans to do is to supply

things for us to burn to keep warm. Is that unreasonable?

I couldn't answer. Finally, given the uh, time limit, I

arranged for to get SS prisoners, we had an SS cage. By

this time all the Verrmachter had been discharged, up near

Bubliegen, run by F company I think it was. But, I can only

have access to them on a strict union scale. I could have

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them for eight hours from the time they left the cage until

they returned. Uh, we made no comment. And in turn, we had

to feed them a noon meal. And uh, to feed them the noon

meal, we brought them into the camp. And they claimed the

people of the camp were insulting them. And we told them,

that's too bad. If you don't want to put up with it, you

stay out in the woods, we can't bring the food to you, but

you can stay out in the woods without food. Solved that

problem. We were always faced with all these, each one of

them nothing earth-shaking, but very meddlesome[?] and

bothersome. The other problem was the housing situation.

The camp was getting to be intolerably crowded. We got

access to a new camp called Wolfhartshausen, which had been

in a big German munitions factory and had a lot of small

houses, suitable, wonderful, for families. And uh, we

wanted to move them there to relieve the crowding. I ran

trucks down, with the people of the camp, go see for

yourself that we're not fooling them. Took all the camp

leaders down. Nobody wanted to move, very few. The idea of

a transport had memories for them they couldn't shake. And

besides, they claimed, Lansdberg was now a city, a

community, they had schools, they formed friendships,

associations, they didn't want to move. Meanwhile, more and

more Jewish Jews were coming in from East Europe, and uh,

again it was a problem. The overcrowding and yet you can't,

where you didn't want to force people to go we knew that

would lead to very undesirable circumstances. Finally I was

told, practically with no notice, that an engineering

brigade would be moved out of Landsberg and the village

turned over to the camp and I could requisition a certain

number of German houses. And there I made a horrible

mistake. Instead of getting the Germans to move the Germans

out of the houses, we did it ourselves. And the people of

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the camp just watched to see, here are Germans being moved

out, they way they had been moved out. And uh, we had told

the Germans they can take anything that could be moved. And

they started to take their furniture and some of the people

of the camp said no, that's not right, they're taking more

than we were allowed to take and they started to stop,

fights broke out, and it was a near riot. Well, I called

out the troops, separated them, closed the camp, moved all

the Jews back into the camp, and I realized that was a

mistake the way I handled it. Fortunately I've never had

another occasion to redo it again so I could do it properly.

The, that housing problem, was really very, in many respects

very touching. I remember one woman came to me once, with

her little son, she stopped me in the camp. I was always

being stopped and asked things. She said she had lost...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#4]

IRVING HEYMONT: That housing situation was a constant

problem as well as the sanitation. Now once I stopped by a

woman in the camp, and by this time my poor German, which I

studied in school, was adequate to get along, and with those

who spoke Yiddish, told me that she had lost her husband,

and I forget how many, fantastic number of family members,

and she and her little son were the only survivors. And she

doesn't want to punish any Germans, all she wanted was a

little apartment where she and her son could live and not in

one of the rooms in the barracks. And would I please take

care of it and have it made available to her, and was she

asking too much, in consideration of what the Germans had to

done to her. It was one of the things that I had to let go.

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The uh, another thing that was very interesting, was my

relation with the Germans. Everybody in Landsberg and

vicinity knew me, who I was. And I don't think anybody

loved me. Every time I'd drive through the town, I can see

people silently stare at me. And uh, I would used to go to

one barber shop to get my hair cut. My driver, who was a

very loyal soul, would come in and he would sit watching the

barber cut my hair, with his carbine in his lap. One time,

we were driving through Landsberg and some kid threw a rock

at me, in the Jeep. We could go faster in the Jeep than he

could run. And I caught him, and a lot of people saw me. I

grabbed him, and put him right in the back of the Jeep and

held on to him, took him into the camp, and I called the

local military government, turned him over to them, the

police came and got him. Uh, I was told later that he was

turned back to his parents and told, if anything like that

happened again, it was a young kid, I'd say he must have

been about ten or eleven, I'm guessing. They would be

punished. I was subsequently told, of course I can't prove

it, that the police had to return to the house later to keep

the parents from beating so severely. The uh, I mentioned

about the riot, I should add, the next day I got calls from

all the army units in the area, what was going on. All

those German civilian employees were staying home. The

rumor was that the uh, I had set one day aside for all the

Jewish DP's to pillage and loot, and they had all gone home

to protect their selves. We were also, another thing that

contributed to my infamy, is that we were ordered for a

knock-down, house-to-house, room-by-room search for hidden

weapons, from high headquarters. I thought it was the most

ridiculous thing. We did do it, I think we collected up

some spears from the time when the Germans were in Africa.

But, I had a note made, in German, which every time they

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entered a house, they handed a copy of the note, which told

them what's gonna happen, and it was signed with my name.

That of course contributed to my popularity. The other big

thing in the camp was the election. I was urged to hold the

election as soon as possible. Finally, we figured it was

time to hold the election. And it involved extensive

negotiations with the camp committee on how to conduct the

election. Uh, their idea was that they run, we decided on

what the structure of the camp administration would be, what

would be elected, that there would be slates. And uh the

percentage of the number of officers would be apportioned as

to the way, how many, how well the slate did, same as the

European system, the system that's used in Israel now. And

of couse, I violently objected. I said absolutely not,

we're going to do it American style. You vote for a

candidate, and the one who gets the most votes wins. And

the men of the battalion really thought that was a wonderful

thing to do, and they all pitched in as best as they

remember how you construct a ballot, ballot boxes, polling

booths, ballots, watchers, and so forth. What amazed me

was, they very, there were three principal parties formed.

One from the east European, the Polish Jews, the other one

from, a lot of them from the Baltic area. And they had

leaflets. How and where they had them printed, I don't

know. How and they hired trucks with little bands parading

through the streets of the camp, I don't, to this very day I

don't know. I made a collection of those leaflets which I

gave to an ins- an ins- an institute in New York, but it was

the most spirited thing I'd ever seen. And we had one

trouble with one man who came in to the booth we had erected

with his wife, and we said you can't do that. You go in and

vote, she goes in and votes after you, or before you. S-

And he took that as a personal offense. He couldn't

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understand why he and his wife couldn't go in and he would

vote with, for her. But it went off and they, I could

report to General Rolf, they now had a democratically

elected camp committee.

SWB: Tell me about when and where you got the truckload of

toilet paper.

IRVING HEYMONT: One of the problems was the s- that

contributed was a lack of toilet paper. The uh, well

really, let me cover that briefly, then I'd like to go back

into the mess hall deal. And uh, the local burgermeister,

and the local military government told me that toilet paper

in Germany was at a premium. But I figure somewhere in this

great American U.S. army, if you look around, somewhere,

you'll find whatever it is you need. And the big supply

depot was up in the Antwerp area. So I told my supply

officer, you take a truck, a two-and-a half ton truck, ten

and a half trailer, and you get up there and somewhere

there's a warehouse full of toilet paper, I'm sure of it.

And you come back with a truck and trailer load full. And

if anybody catches you in the act, you tell them I sent you,

you know from nothing, you're merely doing what I, you were

told. He came back. Sure enough, he found a warehouse full

of toilet paper, I don't know how he did it, but he came

back with a full load. And I felt very happy. But the next

day afterwards, after it had been distributed I got really

mad. I looked out and I found the whole camp festooned with

toilet paper, rolled up like crepe, like crepe hangings. I

found out what was the occasion. They knew, and I didn't

know, I heard a few hours later, that Mr. Ben-Gurion was

coming to visit the camp, and they were decorating the camp

for him, with my toilet paper that we went all the way to

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Antwerp to steal. Anyway, Mr. Ben-Gurion arrived, and I met

with him, I told him what our problems were and I said I'll

show you what I consider the best in the camp, and I'll show

you what I consider the worst in the camp and you judge for

yourself. And I'm certainly not going to try to fool you.

Of course, you can talk to people and I can't do as well.

Well we went through the camp, and he spoke to the people of

the camp, and listening to him was quite an experience. I

watched the audience more than I watched him. From the look

of the people, you would think the lord himself had

descended on earth to mingle with the people. I had never

seen anything like it before or since. When he left, uh, he

said to me, he said you know I understand your problems.

And he said, don't think a trip across the Mediterranean

wipes out all of your problems. We have some of those too.

He didn't go into detail, nor did I press him. But the rapt

audience, the way they hung on every word, was really

something to see. But I was so mad to see my toilet paper

being crepe paper.

SWB: You wanted to talk about the mess hall.

IRVING HEYMONT: Oh yes. Another one of my very brilliant

ideas, God was I naive, to try to get, reduce the sanitation

problem, incidentally let me di- distract for a moment. One

of the reasons I found out, many years later, why they

urinated in the halls, defecated, is when I real Primo

Levy's book, about the problem when you had to go out at

night, and the last man had to carry the bucket, and they

could tell by the sound, so to avoid going out with at

night, they'd do it right in the camp in a corner, and that

carried on. Well anyway, to try to reduce the washing of

the dishes in the sinks in the latrines, and flushing it

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down the toilets and everything, I had the idea, we'll have

a community mess hall, a community dining room. And the

problem, we fixed up a, it was a riding hall, and we fixed

that up with tables and chairs and uh, the camp newspaper

advertised for waitresses, and we promised them cigarettes

and other goodies as a reward. The problem came up uh, how

about dishes. And that was quite a problem. But I solved

it in my usual inimitable manner. I turned to my supply

officer, and I said, go get dishes. And we found out where

all the china factories were in Bavaria, and we worked out a

deal where the military government would arrange for the

local, for the uh kreis Landsberg, not the city, to pick up

the tab, if he could get it. He did. How and where I don't

know, I didn't ask. But lo and behold he came back with the

dishware, and we had a gala opening....

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#5]

SWB: Do you want to start?

IRVING HEYMONT: I'll finish up about the uh mess hall. You

tell me when to start.

SWB: Go ahead.

IRVING HEYMONT: Oh my great pride and joy in having finally

seen the mess hall come to fruition tempered after a while,

when I realized [?????] and yes they did eat in the mess

hall, but they also took the food back to their rooms and

cooked and ate there as well. Anyway, I like to think that

it contributed to communal spirit and possibly, eased up a

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little bit on the sanitation problem. One could hope. I

really don't know. Another interesting thing, was the

question of children. The number of children in the camp,

considering the size of the population, was relatively

small. But they were really the pride, the treasure, the

joy, and the attention lavished on them was very obvious.

And they were all in school, run by the people in the camp

themselves. And they started all this before the UNRHA

team, before the AJDC team. An interesting things was, uh,

we were always plagued by all our German employees. Can we

spare some condoms. And God we had lots and lots of

condoms. Got to the point during the actual fighting that

you wouldn't send a patrol out unless they had a condoms and

a pro kit with them. But anyway, nobody in the camp ever

asked me for condoms. And one time I mentioned it to some

members of the camp committee and they looked at me. And

they said, you don't understand, there are six million who

died, we have to do something about it. Nobody wants a

condom, we want children, we have to make up for the six

million. We had visitors all the time. I'm not talking

about all the generals. And they always arranged to come

when it was time to have a noon meal. Because we had an

excellent mess, and I suspected they sometimes came to get a

real good meal, and to find ways to tell me things I should

do, and didn't have time to do or didn't want to do. But

anyway we got quite a few civilian visitors from

organizations in the United States. And uh I got told later

on that I was rude to one of them. And that was Mr. Jacob

Patowski, who I believe was the head of one of the needle

unions, I think the cap and hatmakers, something like that,

I'm not sure. And he was telling me about all the wonderful

things that his union was going to do for the people of the

camp. And I was in a hurry, I had so many other things, I

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said Mr. Patowski, that's all fine, but if you can reach

into your pocket and bring out two dozen needles that will

fit the sewing machines that we have on camp, you'll be the

hero of the week. He didn't take that too well. Another

visitor that I had was Rabbi Abraham Klausner. Now there is

a most unusual man. Uh, in my opinion, never has one man

done so much good yet managed to irritate so many people as

well. He visited me twice. Once he came when Mr. Ben

Gurion came and I had nothing to do with him. He came

another time and I admit, I must admit looking back now,

that I was, that my view was based on a regular army

officer, who was very conscious, of a Jew being in the

regular army, and anything that reflected on one Jew,

reflected on all. And he came in the most outlandish

uniform. Completely out of uniform. I found out later on

that in my opinion, in effect, he had gone absent without

leave from his unit. I'm not denying in any manner all the

wonderful fantastic things that that man did to help the

DP's. But he made a request of me that was illegal, and got

me very enraged, and I said if you, if that's the best way

you could look, and that's all you can ask me for, don't

ever show up here again or I'm gonna punch you in the nose.

Uh, I wrote this in a letter to my wife, which was published

in the uh, reproduced in the book put out by the American

Jewish archives, and uh, Rabbi Klausner read it, and he and

I carried on a very short correspondence, and what he said I

think is worthy is repeating. After this business about

punching him in the nose, all that, he said obviously, what

he was trying to do was to save the Jews of Europe by

bringing them out into the American zone of Germany, from

behind the East Europe. And my goal, apparently, was to try

to make him more comfortable. Looking back, he was right.

He really was right. Looking back, what did I do, I made

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life a little more bearable. That's about the best I could

say for myself. Could I have done more? No. No I

couldn't. I couldn't contribute to their getting out of

Germany, I did a little illegal mailing of letters, before

they had access to a postal system, but looking back, in

truth, he- Klausner was right. I made life a little more

bearable. How much of a contribution that is, I don't know.

It doesn't matter now.

SWB: What did he ask you for...

IRVING HEYMONT: I'd rather not go into that.

SWB: One thing that you mentioned before when you got there

were civilian German women....

IRVING HEYMONT: There were some, and there continued some,

all the time I was there. Uh there were some working in the

camp hospital as nurses. Uh, the other civilian Germans

that were not in the camp but when I uh, it comes back to me

very clearly again. That morning I arrived as I told you,

at Landsberg in the middle of the night, about two or three

in the morning. They told me breakfast was across the

street where the guy in headquarters had a mess hall,

officers' mess. I walked in there, and there were quite a

few young beautiful, German young ladies eating. And I

said, who are they. They said, well they all work for the

battalion headquarters, we inherited them from the battalion

of the 80th division that we relieved. I said, they did no

more, out every one of them. And uh one, a rather

statuesque blonde, uh, I don't know why, but she really was

blonde, not all of them were, came up to me in very close

proximity and said she had been my predecessor's batallion

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commander secretary and she would love to continue in that

capacity. I told her, out. But uh, otherwise there were

no, very few German civilians employed. There were some

nurses, and I think there were one or two maintenance people

with some of the equipment. But otherwise it was all run by

the Jews. And let me just put it this way, they weren't all

angels. Uh, I hate to categorize groups, but one group that

caused us a lot of trouble were the truck drivers. To be

able to drive a truck was a uh very valuable skill, and uh,

many of them were able to survive in the concentration camps

because of skills. And uh some of the more enterprising

souls managed to survive, and they knew how to maneuver.

They caused us quite a bit of trouble. They caused uh, once

or twice there was a near strike. The uh, there was that

incident, I'll never forget, the illegal restaurant. I was

told they found a restaurant up in the attic of one of the

barracks run by one of the men of the camp, they even hired

some German waitresses. And of course the camp police broke

it up, and the man was in the camp jail. I suppose I should

have inquired how do they do it, how do they manage to get

away with it, but I just didn't. And I remember the next

day I asked, what happened to the man you put in jail. They

said, oh he died of a heart attack. I don't know. Didn't

pursue. Another incident that I saw, was uh, I came into

the camp one day and near my office, not far from the

entrance, there was a near, almost a small riot, a man being

beaten. Well I waited and pulled my pistol and shoved them

to aside and collared them, found out. They had recognized

him as a kapo from one of the concentration camps. And uh

apparently they considered him a vicious kapo. And they

were getting their revenge. I turned them over to the

military government and what happened to them I don't know.

There were so many things that went on there that I didn't

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know, didn't have time to, and if it didn't cause any loud

uproar, I didn't care to know. I had too many other things

to tend to.

SWB: Tell me about a reunion, people finding each other.

IRVING HEYMONT: Oh yes, uh, oh I saw another incident,

again not far from my office, these two men clasping each

other, crying, and people standing around smiling, and I

asked what's going on. And they told me these two men were,

I don't think, I remember they weren't blood related but

related by marriage, and they were the only two survivors of

both the family groups. And the mere, they were so

overwhelmed that they found somebody. I couldn't help but

be impressed with that. Speaking of reunions, I must tell

you about, if I may, my one claim to having done a truly

good deed.

SWB: We better put another roll in...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#6]

SWB: Okay.

IRVING HEYMONT: Looking back, not only of the uh, my

experience with the DP camp, or fighting in two wars, seeing

two others, living my life, I can only think of really, one

good deed, what I'd consider a really good deed and it

happened in Landsberg. Dr. Gringenouse, Samuel

Gringenhouse, a brilliant man, was the head of the camp

committee. And he approached me, once, and said he had

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managed to locate his son, who must have been about ten or

eleven at that time, and he got out of uh, somewhere in the

east Europe, got certain place, and could he have a jeep to

go fetch his son. I said of course I can't give you a jeep

to go fetch your son. But I'll do this, I arranged for a

jeep and a driver with an extra supply of gasoline, with a

phony set of orders that he should go to, where may be

necessary to do what I told him to do, when he finished

doing that to come back and that he is accompanied by a Dr.

Samuel Gringenhouse. They went and they got his son. And

uh, I imagine he might have managed to get his son anyway,

but anyway, that was my good deed of my life. The son, the

last I knew, was a professor at the Brooklyn Polytech, in

biology and bacteriology. I guess after a while, you look

back on your life and try to figure out what good did you

do. I guess I'm grasping on that one.

SWB: But speaking of that, tell me when you came back about

the changes in the end ... how far had the camp come.

IRVING HEYMONT: The camp, when, by the time I left, the

sanitation problem had not been completely solved by any

means but the camp was cleaner. The camp organization was

stronger because it was a self, a democratically elected

camp committee, no differences. And the people of the camp

had developed their schools, their institutions, a cultural

and social program, whether that, whether I was the c-,

contributing to it or not, I don't know. They may well have

done that even if I had never been there. But in

retrospect, I know it was better than when I arrived. It

may have been passage of time, it may have been some of my

efforts. But the only solution to the real problem was to

get them out of Germany. And that came much later.

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SWB: Tell me about the psychological conditions of the

people in the camp.

IRVING HEYMONT: Well, I don't know. Uh, I think it would

have been a fantastic field to study, and Dr. Leo Srole now

dead, a famous sociologist was part of the AJDC team. And

uh he often commented on some that he saw, but I didn't see

those. I don't doubt that they were there, uh, I've since

met many survivors, and uh most all of them have managed

more or less to live a normal life. Maybe those that didn't

are the ones I haven't met. I just don't know and I can't

truthfully answer. I would have felt there's been a field,

a tremendous field for research, but I was not competent to

judge.

SWB: Um, tell me about the length to which people went to

look for their relatives.

IRVING HEYMONT: Oh, I would say incredible. Incredible.

Uh, I was told many stories of the way people went, sneaked

by borders, uh to get back to look for someone. Going from

camp to camp, looking for someone. Uh, I heard stories of

being thrown into jail for border crossing, getting out, but

nothing apparently stopped people from trying to find survi-

vors, that was one of Rabbi Klausner's greatest

achievements. Setting up a central record of survivors.

That was uh, the biggest motivating factor, the biggest

drive.

SWB: Didn't you, did you violate rules of the army so you

could help people, didn't you go out of your way?

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IRVING HEYMONT: On advice of counsel who are not present, I

refuse to answer that question.

DF:

SWB: Diana is suggesting you tell us the reunion story

again, the two men that met outside your office.

IRVING HEYMONT: Well I saw the, I came into the camp, I had

an office, not only in battalion headquarters but I had an

office in the camp, not far from the gate. And there were

these two men with their arms clasped around each other,

crying, and people standing around smiling, and I thought,

are they brothers, close relatives or something, and I asked

and they told me they were, they were related by marriage,

but they were the only two, the only survivors of very large

families on both sides. And I could understand their depth

of their feeling, because there were people there who were

completely alone in the world, as far as they knew.

SWB: What about, getting back to the question of the

particular plight of Jewish DP's and people in the army. Do

you think that the army understood the plight of the Jewish

DP's as being unable to go back to their countries.

IRVING HEYMONT: Anything I say is my own personal opinion.

First of all, there's no such thing as the army. There are

people in the army. On the whole, I would make the

following generalizations, and like all generalizations,

subject to question. Many of-, some officers, particularly

very high ranking officers, were very understanding and

sympathetic. Some were not. Some uh, knew what had

happened but time had passed now, why can't they behave and

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not cause trouble. Others were downright anti-Semitic, kept

quiet about it. Some not so quiet. Many others said yes,

it's true, and so forth, the new job now is we have to

Germany back on its feet. And for God's sake, do we have to

be bothered with these people, clamoring, making all that

noise, demanding special treatment, forgetting what had been

agreed upon, that they would get special treatment. I don't

know if that answered your question.

SWB: I may be misremembering, but did Rabbi Klausner, did

he steal your gasoline out of your truck.

IRVING HEYMONT: No, never, that's the first I've ever heard

of such a thing. I never stole gasoline, I stole trucks.

Excuse me, I didn't say a word. No, I've never heard of

such as thing.

SWB: Tell me about the stempels...

IRVING HEYMONT: Oh, oh, yeah [laughs]. Uh, you asked the

question if I ever did anything legal or illegal and I

refused to answer it. I still refuse. But I will tell you

that in Germany, you can't anything [???????] unless you

have a stempel. A rubber stamp. And it has to be a round

one. We soon learned, so I had two sta- two rubber stamps

made, two stempels. One said, headquarters, second

battalion, round, second battalion, fifth U.S. Infantry, and

in the middle it said, strictly official. The other one was

the exact same thing but to the very left of the official,

there was a very small U-N. Strictly unofficial. Can I

continue on? We used them quite widely. One time, my

battalion headquarters was in the form of doctors, and it

was in the home of a doctor who was a Nazi, and who also had

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his office there. And the uh, I forget his name now, the uh

head of the hospital in Landsberg told me they need an

instrument case. And I said, well, there's one in my

battalion headquarters, take it, we'll send it to you.

Well, the daughter of the doctor, we allowed to stay in the

house and she supervised with keeping it clean and so forth.

And she was very possessive of her father's property. And

she started to raise a clamor and cry that her father's

property is being taken. And I can't stand a crying women.

So I quickly wrote out a receipt and stamped it with my

strictly unofficial stamp, that quieted her. Nineteen

ninety, nineteen eighty-nine, I'm visiting Landsberg, I'm

sitting in that same house, my old battalion headquarters,

and she is there and I'm telling that story at her expense,

and she said, come with me, this is 44 years later, takes me

back, it is again a doctor's office. Her daughter, her

sister had married a doctor and took over the family prac

tice. There was the instrument cabinet, I said, you got it

back? She said, yes, when the camp closed, I took that

receipt you had given me, I went up there and they gave it

to me. That must have been the only time that I have ever

heard of where any one of my stamps was of any value.

SWB: Thank you very much....

END

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