Interview with Mr. Richard Darr

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June 13, 1984

Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League

of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is David Zarkin on June 13, 1984, at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls in the house of Professor Richard Darr. We are doing an interview for the JCRC, ADL Holocaust Oral History Project. Professor Darr, can you tell me what your position was and what unit you were with in the Army, and dates when you were inducted into the Army?

A: I was a sergeant and infantry squad leader in the 65th Infantry Division, 260th Infantry Regiment. I went into the service September the 2nd of 1942, and was discharged April the 4th of 1946.

Q: Tell me about your active tour of duty and where you were stationed and what your duties were, your assignments when you left for overseas.

A: We left for overseas in December of ’44.

Q: And where did you go?

A: We landed at Le Havre, France. And then we went from France to Holland, Luxembourg, Germany and Austria. The hostilities ended for me in Linz, Austria.

Q: And what kind of job did you have in the Army then?

A: I was squad leader.

Q: So tell me about what you saw and what you did then?

A: Our unit began combat south of Metz, during the assault on Metz.

Q: Where is Metz?

A: Roughly, the border between France and Germany. And then for 16 days we were in the basement of a house in Franzlautern, which was a bridgehead across the Saar River from Kaiserslautern. And then after the 16 days in the basement of this house, our division broke through the Siegfried (Line) and into Germany. Things were moving very fast by then. The Siegfried was the German defense line, which they had taken years to build – the bunkers and emplacements – that’s why we were held up for 16 days.

Q: What month and what year was this?

A: This was March, ’45.

Q: So then after you broke through the German defenses, then what happened?

A: Well, we continued east. We didn’t always know where that road leads.

Q: So you were paralleling a road?

A: I don’t recall the exact thing we were doing, except engaging in spasmodic contact with the enemy. By that time, the war was beginning to draw to an end. And a little later on, a month or so, prisoners were coming in by the droves!

Q: German prisoners?

A: Yeah, Germans surrendering. At the concentration camp itself the German troops had left by the time we physically arrived at the camp. There was no combat at the camp itself.

Q: And you don’t know the name of the camp that you liberated?

A: It’s more likely to have been Ohrdruff and Buchenwald, because Mauthausen is in the corner where Czechoslovakia, Austria and Germany meet. My particular unit, my squad and the 1st Battalion of the 260th Infantry Regiment were moving towards the Linz air base. That was south of Linz, whereas Mauthausen is northwest of Linz. Therefore, that’s why I think it was the other two, because I know that I participated in over-running two of the camps. Our division history says we participated in three. Therefore these photos came from one of those two.

Q: Who took the photos?

A: Someone else in the organization. I don’t even recall his name anymore. We used to make fun of him because he was carrying a camera, and we thought that ( there were) more important things to do than carrying cameras. When he was to get the films developed, he asked me if I wanted a set of them and I told him I did. That’s how I came into possession of them.

Q: So what did you see when you got to the camps?

A: Well, I myself, and I think it would be a general rule, had no concept that such places existed! The prisoners knew that we were coming, that is they knew that a military force was defeating the Germans and approaching the camp. They didn’t know it was us, particularly, but they knew it was American troops, or maybe they thought it was British. Their joy was overwhelming. They were hanging on the barbed wire fences, and to the degree that they had any energy, were cheering and just overjoyed to see us! For us – I’m speaking for myself, but I think this is verified in many sources – it was just unbelievable. It was an unbelievable, shocking, sight. Because those who were living looked like living cadavers! The scenes were just horrible! Really bad! And the open pit burial, and (sigh) people stacked, literally stacked like cordwood. And the ones who were – using the term loosely -- the ones who were living were living in rags. And then at one of the camps, I can’t tell you which, we spent the night sleeping on the ground, outside of the camp, right outside the barbed wire. I was sleeping on the ground. We all were, because we were told not to mingle in the camp. There was fear of typhoid – the spreading of typhoid. But the prisoners, of course, were just so overjoyed, and they would hang on the fence and talk to us. Well, only a survivor could tell you what their feelings must have been after all that time. Many of them had waited a long, long time to feel that, in a sense, they were no longer ignored. Somebody had finally recognized their case. Maybe you oughta cut it off, ‘cause I’ll tell you something that maybe you shouldn’t…(gap in tape)

Q: Well, let’s talk about the physical description of the camps. What you can remember about the buildings, how they were laid out and that kind of thing.

A: Well, the buildings were laid out approximately like some military bases in the U.S. The ones that I recall were one-story, wooden structures, narrow, but quite long. I wouldn’t want to guess the length of ‘em. They were longer than they were wide. I recall the ones that we entered, although we weren’t really supposed to enter them, I’m guessing now, but the bunks, rather than being, say, double, two bunks like normal, were at least maybe five bunks, and could’ve been six bunks high. And in some of them, of course, the people couldn’t get out. They were too weak, I guess. And they would be just crowded into these bunks! And the bunks had virtually no headroom, because if you have ‘em five high, and an eight foot or ten foot high ceiling, you couldn’t sit up in the bunks! They were just that crammed together! And in many, many instances, the people in them were probably physically incapable of getting out, and standing up, and greeting us, or greeting even their fellow prisoners who were able to stand up. But many of them, when we approached the camp, or I suppose, when they knew we were approaching – from previous nights, maybe the sound of the shelling was getting closer – here they were, clutching both hands, trying to stand up, to greet us.

Q: Well, what else can you remember about the survivors?

A: Well, I don’t think I have any more words than what many other people have said. There just aren’t that many words, I guess. It was something so unexpected! To see people in that condition. I think most of us – having talked to other guys that were with me – it was just virtually a total shock! We’d never seen humans who were still living in such bad condition. I don’t think there are any real words that can truly express the impression it made on me. And it’s an impression that I’ll never relinquish. I can’t relinquish it. It’s just impossible.

Q: Tell me a little bit more about the physical layout. Were there any railroad tracks there or any trains there?

A: I don’t recall a train being there, but there were railroad tracks, yes. Physically it appeared like an American Army prison in the United States! That is, it had guard towers, and barbed wire fences. I don’t think we knew at that time, although we’ve learned since, that the barbed wire fences were also electrified. I don’t recall any of us knowing that – or mentioning it, at that time.

Q: Did you get a chance to look at any of the other buildings? You talked about the barracks, but like where the officers stayed, or the guards, where they lived, or anything like that?

A: The guards – no. I don’t recall that. Obviously each camp had them, but any specific individual’s observations were pretty limited! First, we weren’t supposed to enter the camp! We did, but in a surreptitious way. We slept outside the camp, right on the ground, the night after capturing of the camp. I’m not sure “capturing” is correct; the Germans had fled. And then we moved on the next morning. There was some social interaction in the sense that some of us, as individuals, took it upon ourselves, in violation of the regulations, and went in the camp with, say, a certain prisoner whom we might have entered into a conversation with, or maybe two or three prisoners, that we might’ve started talking to, through a buddy-buddy association, momentarily. So any individual observations were in a sort of restricted sense. It wasn’t a guided tour! I would imagine if I’d said, “Hey, can I see the officer’s quarters?’ they would have shown me. Why would they not have shown me? But it never occurred to me to ask to see the officer’s quarters, because my relationship was with a particular prisoner – or maybe two or three of his buddies – that were capable of physically moving around fairly well. Most of them were not capable of moving around much. They were physically incapable of doing much of anything! They had no energy, you know.

Q: Well, the ones that you were able to talk to, did they tell you about what went on in the camp?

A: Just in a general way. I can’t remember. Maybe much more occurred at the time – I’m certain it did – than I remember. I can’t remember any specific charges, except that maybe the prisoner might say that Sergeant Schmidt oughta be killed, or make some statement like that, meaning that the German sergeant Schmidt had mistreated them. But I don’t recall having a conversation other than in general terms about it. And of course part of it, remember, was a language barrier. Some of them could speak fairly good English, and I spoke a little German. I’d had two years in college in German, but I wouldn’t say that my German was very good. But by my little bit of crude German, and maybe their little better level of English knowledge, we communicated. And – I’m not certain that it was the safest thing to do – there was a good deal of gift-giving, particularly of food, to the prisoners. We didn’t have much, but we had K-rations at that time. I say in one sense – maybe they knew that they couldn’t eat the food too fast, or too much, because their system wasn’t conditioned to it – so in that sense, maybe we gave them too much food. This was very simple food. You know what a K-ration is.

Q: It’s something common to the military?

A: They came to us in boxes about the size of a Cracker Jack box. And one was breakfast, one was lunch, and one was dinner. And for those who couldn’t read, they were in different colors. I don’t recall the colors now, but breakfast might, for example, be a yellow Cracker Jack box, lunch red, and green supper.

Q: Was it dehydrated?

A: No, it would be like a powdered drink mix, a can of deviled ham, these little cans, you can still buy them in grocery stores, and a package of crackers. Maybe a chocolate bar. A five-cigarette-package of cigarettes. The breakfast one, of course, had canned eggs and powdered coffee, powdered milk. That sort of thing. I’m not certain that dehydrated food existed then, did it? Seems to me that’s probably a post-war phenomenon.

Q: So did they get sick from this? Some of the people in the camp/

A: Well I imagine that if one had been virtually starved for eight months and then got, say, from 20 troopers, the same number of chocolate bars, if they tried to eat all 20 at once, I’m assuming they’d get sick! I don’t recall any getting sick, and maybe it happened after we’d left the next morning. I’m hoping that the person who got the 20 candy bars – this is hypothetical, but I’m certain that some of them did get that many, and cigarettes and everything else – we gave them all we had, you know, which wasn’t much, because K-rations aren’t much – but given the fact that their bodies were not conditioned to eating this kind of food, unless they ate it very slowly, I’m assuming – and remember, I’m no medical specialist – that it would have an adverse effect on them physically. I would think that a person who’d been living in those conditions would have to re-enter the world of gourmet eating in a rather evolutionary way, rather than in an abrupt way. But as I say, I don’t know. But if it is true that they got sick as a result of our generosity, maybe in a way we shouldn’t have opened up our hearts and our – we didn’t have packs, we carried the K-rations in a blanket roll, so they didn’t get many – but for them it would’ve been a lot of food. For us it was nothing, because we had access to all the food we wanted. We could always get more. We gave them all we had!

Q: You indicated that you were only at each camp for about a day then, is that right?

A: That’s right.

Q: And you were at a pretty low level – I mean you were not privileged to the kind of follow-up that was done, after the Army left the camp. Or did you have any idea about…

A: Not until some years later. But this was after hostilities. I mentioned that I had had two years of college at the time I went into the service. Then when I was discharged in ’46, I went back and finished. Got my bachelor’s degree and then returned to military government. But that was in ’48 that I returned.

Q: Military government?

A: Yeah. At first I was on the three-man economic advisory staff to General Clay, at the top level.

Q: Where was that?

A: In Frankfurt. We had an office in Frankfurt, and one in Berlin. And then I asked for a transfer to a lower level, because working at that level I might as well have been at the Pentagon. They weren’t all Americans, obviously, but there were only Americans, French, Russian, and British, and I thought since I was in Germany, that maybe I should know more about the German culture, so I asked for a transfer. Then I was made Deputy Military Governor of Kreiss Viblingen. “Kreiss” is the German word for “county”. Viblingen is right outside Stuttgart. And then after serving a short time as Deputy Military Governor, I was made the Military Governor of Kreiss Vachnon. That’s the second county northwest of Stuttgart. Stuttgart, in a sense, was the “state” capitol, and the counties of Wurttemberg-Baden were accountable to the state capitol of Stuttgart. The governor of Wurttemberg-Baden at that time was a former congressman, Charles La Follette from Indiana. And then I served as military Governor of County Vachnon. And there was a small Jewish D.P. camp – not a concentration camp – in my county. Then it was in ’49 that the functions of military government were shifted to the Department of State from, at that time, the War Department. It changed later to the Department of the Army, and so the personnel would remain the same, but my title, rather than being “Military Governor,” was “Resident Officer.” See, the State Department had, in ’49, begun to take over the governmental administration from the military. But even as Military Governor in ’48 we wore civilian clothes. It could be the specific person might have cherished his military uniforms so much that he continued to wear it – I don’t know of any exceptions, but there might have been – but when I say “we”, other governors were going to the office in what we would wear to the office here: a sport coat, with tie, or a business suit with tie. The title was “Military Governor” and the Germans recognized it. One of the reasons for that was it was part of the de-Nazification program. We felt that it would be psychologically better, in terms of furthering democracy, to wear civilian clothes as part of re-educating the German populace, I guess. And so although the title was “Military Governor”, and the stereotype in one’s head is wearing a uniform, we appeared just like we would have dressed if we were working in Washington.

Q: Well this must have provided you with some new insights and some opportunities, being a Governor and Deputy Governor, after the war. Would you care to share some of what you learned in those positions?

A: The major problem—that is, within the West German economy – that we had was lack of housing, of course. That occupied more of the time of military governors, I would suppose than any other issue. Housing, in the first place, was short. But then there was the continuing influx of people, German citizens, from East Germany and Czechoslovakia, over to West Germany. It took often a great deal of suasion to get the local German – and my county, Vachnon, was a rural county – it took a good deal of suasion, and sometimes the suasion had to be rather overt, in order to get local village governments to allocate space for their own displaced citizens who had come from the east. As the German army moved east into a large portion of the Soviet Union and the Ukraine, particularly, German citizens were permitted to move there and the Ukrainians or whomever – or Czechs – were deprived of their land and Germans took over. And in addition to political people who didn’t want to remain with the East German government, there were a lot of German civilians from that part of Europe, in the upheaval after the war, who were returning, in a sense, to Germany, but now West Germany – the Western Zone – who no longer had a home in that portion, and to find housing for them was extremely difficult.

Q: Well, did you get a chance to learn what became of the people who were in the camps, when you were in the government there?

A: No, I had no administrative responsibility for the small Jewish D.P. camp in my county. However, I had contact with them, in that German authorities were not permitted to try non-Germans for what the Germans may have considered violation of their law. For example, at my level – that is the county level – for misdemeanors, the governor acted as judge. I’ll give you an example. One day two German policemen brought in one of the residents of the Jewish D.P. camp. They had arrested him for selling black market meat. We didn’t permit them to be tried in German courts. So I asked the German policeman something to the effect that, do they raise cattle in the D.P. camp over there? Obviously they didn’t raise cattle. Then I asked him, “Well, you will first have to bring me the German farmer that sold the meat to the D.P. camp inmate, in order to prove that he engaged in selling black market meat.” Because he would have no other source than, obviously, a German farmer. With that, the German police dropped the case. At that time, we felt – and there was plenty of proof – that non-Germans – and they may have been German citizens, but they were Jewish – wouldn’t have gotten a fair trial. And therefore the German police were permitted to arrest and bring to trial German citizens – that is, non-Jewish German citizens, Aryans, so to speak. The American military government, nor the British, nor the French, nor the Soviets, as far as I know, didn’t interfere with that portion of their legal system. But when it was a non-German, or a Jew who was German, they were not permitted to try them. A specific military governor who might have been an attorney, but the military governors only heard misdemeanors, not felonies. There were trained attorneys at the state level, in this case, Stuttgart. I’d go over there maybe every two weeks just to check in and see how things are, and talk to the “Chairman” – or whatever the title of the person was. I didn’t find a lot of propaganda, probably because much of it had been destroyed. Military government, however, had quite extensive records on former Nazi party members, because we did attempt to not have government in the hands of former party members. The political process in Germany was more democratic than it was here, in the sense that there, even the Communist party was on the ballot, and we had outlawed them in our own case here. On the city council of Vachnon, was a Communist party-elected city councilman, which by that time, was impossible in our own democracy. The party had been outlawed here. There wasn’t any “Nazi” propaganda, particularly. And this is only an intuitive feeling, but I felt that former Nazis were certainly “covering” for each other. That is, they tended to look out for each other, which is understandable. At that time, to be a Nazi was obviously not in very good repute, and so it was kept quiet, and one didn’t have occasion to hear them on many unguarded moments. Maybe, I would suppose, that being around the Governor, they would be even more aware of being rather subtle (laughter) about their background. The elections, by that time, ’48 and ’49, were open in Germany. Of course they couldn’t have a Nazi party. As you know, in Germany there’s a multiple party system, much more so than ours. There are a vast number of political parties there.

Q: You went to the Nuremberg trials. What year was that in?

A: This must have been in ’49. A rather close acquaintance was the Military-Governor in Nuremberg, and I just went. I didn’t go to the trials, I just went to the buildings where the trials were. I was impressed! It looked like a high-class American county courthouse. Marble stairways, a rather vast expense. But I wouldn’t know anything about the trials. I would personally visit this friend who was the Governor of Nuremberg, and I was staying at his own house. He took me to the building in which the trials were held, but then we went to many places in Nuremberg. Since he was the Governor, he had access to a castle and all that.

Q: What else do you recall from those years when you were in the government there in Germany?

A: Well. (sigh) You don’t mean in terms of concentration camps?

Q: Well, if there’s anything that relates to that, yeah. Filling in of your knowledge of what went on in the concentration camps, as a result of your having served in the military government. Would you have any insight as to what went on in the concentration camps?

A: Oh I think we’ve all gotten greater insight of what went on just in the course of our general readings. It’s not just any government documents. An ordinary citizen has learned, a good deal since then. There’s Schindler’s List right over there. Have you read it?

Q: No, I haven’t.

A: Okay, you can have it. I’ll give it to you. That’s about those days.

Q: That’s a novel, or is it a…

A: Not a novel.

Q: This is a book that’s out on the market now. By Thomas Kenneally. Thank you very much.

A: I think you’ll find it fascinating. He was one of the few – maybe that’s part of the “blurb” – who made it as easy as he could, not always in an absolute sense very easy, but relatively easy for his inmates, relative to other German commanders. It’s quite a book, Incidentally, he is buried in a Jewish cemetery in Jerusalem, I believe.

Q: In your office on your wall, I see you have a certificate. It says, “The United States Holocaust Memorial Council hereby expresses appreciation to Richard Darr for valiant service during the 1944-45 liberation by Allied Forces of Nazi concentration camps, International Liberators Conference, October 26 through 28, 1981.” And then under that it says, “United States Department of State, Washington, D.C.” And who is it signed by? Maybe you could tell me?

A: It’s Elie Wiesel. He’s Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council.

Q: Maybe you could tell me about how it was that you happened to receive that certificate and where it was at and how you felt about all that.

A: Well it was at Mount Zion synagogue in Saint Paul. It was ’82, then. The International Conference, I take it, occurred in Washington, and then, as I understand it, from the Jewish Community Relations Council in St. Paul, or Minneapolis, these awards were given regionally – that is, throughout the United States – and I received mine. I think it was in April of ’82, or March, in spring of that year, along with four others from Minnesota. Also it was a service at which there were also some survivors participating, a meeting of the liberators and the survivors. I think “liberating” may be too high-sounding a word for us, but nevertheless, that’s what they referred to us as.

Q: And how many were there? Liberators?

A: There was myself and then four from various towns in Minnesota. I don’t recall the communities from which they came. I recall that one was a member of a tank crew, participated in the liberation of one or maybe more. I can’t recall the other three, but I do remember talking to the former tank crew member, but I wouldn’t know his name. The only way I’d know their names is to go back and look in the newspaper. (Laughter) and I don’t suppose they remember my name. And then after the service – the formal portion – my wife and I talked with a family, the wife of whom was a survivor. The husband wasn’t. We had a rather, I guess you couldn’t call it “pleasing”, but an enlightening conversation with them. Maybe 10 or 20 minutes of it. Interesting.

Q: Would you care to recall what was discussed?

A: Well, I felt that I should have felt more humble than she did, but she gave me the impression – well maybe it’s because she was so appreciative, obviously, of having survived – maybe you’d need some sort of personal hero, which I wasn’t, obviously. What she had gone through far surpassed anything that any of us had gone through. And I say that I should have been – relative to her – she shouldn’t have been the humble one, I should have been the humble one. But it was an interesting interchange between the two families. But I mentioned to you personally, earlier, that I think it would be more interesting, and I know I want to do it sometime, to listen to some of the survivors’ stories. Some of them must be not only fascinating, but also horrifying.

Q: Well those are available, through the project.

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